

The Defence Dimension of President Putin's Visit to India

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Introduction

Russian President Vladimir Putin travelled on a state visit to New Delhi on 04-05 Dec for the 23rd annual summit meeting between India and Russia. Since the first annual summit in 2000, the meetings have continued annually, without a break, except for the two years when the COVID-19 pandemic put a worldwide hold on travel.

The recent summit focused on solidifying economic ties, including the 'Uninterrupted' shipment of Russian oil and the 'Rupee-Rouble' trade settlements. The two countries agreed on an economic cooperation programme until 2030, aiming for a bilateral trade target of USD 100 bn. Russia assured uninterrupted shipments of fuel, reinforcing its role as a reliable energy supplier, despite Western efforts to curb this trade.

A major outcome was the signing of a 'Labour Mobility Agreement', enabling skilled Indian workers to take up jobs in Russia. Moscow expects a shortage of three million workers by the decade's end, making this agreement economically and strategically important. The rhetoric alluded to the strength of the bilateral relationship; and the visit was full of symbolism as well as substance.

Agreements were signed across diverse sectors, including nuclear energy, space, critical minerals, healthcare, tourism (free e-visas for Russian nationals), and the development of transport corridors like the International North-South Transport Corridor.¹

As is invariably the case, when Indian policymakers meet their Russian counterparts, major areas of strategic concern are discussed, namely defence purchases, nuclear power generation, and space technology. These, to quote former Ambassador Pankaj Saran, "Are all areas of long-standing cooperation built over generations". He goes on to state that "Russia has been a generous partner in all these areas with much less strings attached than the West".²

Historical Ties

Close ties between India and Russia trace their lineage to the strong bond between India and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, which was then manifested in the seminal Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, signed in 1971 by then-Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and then-Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet Leonid Brezhnev.

During President Putin's first state visit to India in Oct 2000, both countries signed a 'Declaration on the India-Russia Strategic Partnership', imbuing their ties with a qualitatively new character. This introduced enhanced levels of cooperation in almost all areas, including political, security, defence, trade and economy, science and technology, culture, and people-to-people ties. This treaty overrode the 2001 Agreement, redefining the whole mechanism of the partnership.

A decade later, in Dec 2010, during the visit of the Russian President to India, the strategic partnership was elevated to the level of 'Special and Privileged' strategic partnership. In Dec 2021, a new dimension was added to the bilateral cooperation with the first 2+2 dialogue (featuring Foreign and Defence Ministers of both countries) taking place alongside the summit-level talks between the Indian Prime Minister and the Russian President.

This year, India and Russia are celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Declaration on Strategic Partnership.

Defence Ties

India remains the world's biggest buyer of Russian defence equipment, accounting for 30-40 per cent of Russia's annual defence exports. Apart from the purchase of new weapon systems, India maintains a huge inventory of Russian equipment—tanks, infantry combat vehicles, anti-aircraft systems, artillery guns, fighter and transport aircraft, attack helicopters, utility helicopters, ships, and submarines—spanning all three services. These include platforms such as T-90 tanks, Sukhoi-30MKI aircraft, and frontline warships such as the frigate INS Tushil and INS Tamal, two of which have been built in a Russian shipyard in Kaliningrad. Another two are earmarked to be built in India, in partnership with the Kaliningrad yard.³

Some weapon systems are produced in India as part of licensed productions such as infantry combat vehicles and joint production, including the AK 203 Assault Rifle. Russia remains an important source of defence equipment, spare parts,

engines, and components for defence platforms that are being assembled and produced in India. There is also a large amount of ammunition imported for these weapon systems. Hence, serviceability of legacy equipment with Russian support remains an operational imperative for India, even as it shifts to indigenisation.

India's relationship with Russia is unique as the countries share technology. For example, the sequential lease of two Akula-class, nuclear-powered, attack submarines (better known as Ship Submersible Nuclear or SSNs) was used for finalising the design of India's SSNs and for training the first sets of crews to operate them.

The BrahMos, the mainstay of India's missile force, is an example of joint development and production which demonstrated its capability during Operation Sindoor and is now being exported.

Amongst the contemporary state-of-the-art equipment currently under delivery is the S-400 Air Defense Missile System, which is considered to be one of the world's most lethal air defence missile systems. It has a range of 400 kms and can process up to 80 targets simultaneously. Three squadrons of the S-400 system, which were delivered before Operation Sindoor, shot down several Pakistani fighter jets during the warfare; and the delivery of two squadrons still remains.⁴

India went ahead with buying the S-400, even at the risk of being hit with sanctions by the United States (US) government. The US introduced the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act in 2017 to discourage countries from buying the S-400 system.

When asked in a television interview about the possibility of the US administration blocking the supply of these ultra-high-performance weapons systems to the Indian military, President Putin said, "Both India and the world recognise that New Delhi cannot continue to be treated the way it was treated 77 years ago. It is a major global player, not a British colony, and everyone must accept this reality".⁵

India is also understood to have expressed interest in upgrading the Indian Air Force's fleet of 272 strong Sukhoi 30MKI. There was also speculation regarding the purchase of SU-57 aircraft, but no deal was inked during the visit.

As per reports, a previously negotiated deal for India to lease a nuclear-powered attack submarine from Russia, valued at approximately USD 2 bn, was reportedly finalised around the time of the visit, with delivery expected within two years. This specific deal was not a part of the main summit announcements but was a significant development concurrent with the visit.

However, the anticipated announcements on major defence deals did not take place. India has not concluded any major defence deals with Russia since the Ukraine conflict in 2022. There have been delays in the delivery of several platforms and spare parts, as Moscow has prioritised its own defence needs. This is a trend that predates the war in Ukraine as India strengthens its domestic production.

Reciprocal Exchange of Logistic Support (RELOS)

A military logistics-sharing pact, RELOS was signed on 18 Feb 2025. It was ratified by Russian Parliament a day ahead of the visit. The agreement will facilitate mutual access to ports and military facilities for exercises and support during operations and expand India's maritime footprint and ambitions, extending its presence from the Indian Ocean to the Arctic.

RELOS is a bilateral logistics pact that outlines procedures for dispatching military units, conducting port calls, using airspace and airfields, and providing logistical support during missions, joint exercises, and humanitarian or disaster-related operations. RELOS significantly extends India's strategic reach, particularly for the Indian Navy, by granting access to Russian naval ports along the Northern Sea Route from Vladivostok to Murmansk.⁶

By creating a logistics network that spans the Arctic to the Indian Ocean, the pact strengthens interoperability between both the armed forces. It boosts India's operational reach and logistical resilience, while Russia receives reciprocal access to Indian naval bases in the Indian Ocean Region.

For the Indian Navy, which operates many Russian-origin platforms, access to Russian ports for maintenance is operationally vital. Allowing both countries to locate forces in each other's territory for limited periods is an extremely important agreement.

Incidentally, India signed its first logistics pact, Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement with the US in 2016, France in 2018, Australia and Japan in 2020, and is currently in discussions with Oman and Philippines.

The Joint Statement: Reaffirms Atmanirbharta

The Joint Statement following the summit condemned terrorist attacks in India and Russia, including the Pahalgam attack in Jammu and Kashmir and the Crocus City Hall attack in Moscow.

Military and Military-Technical Cooperation (M&MTC) has been a pillar of the special and privileged strategic partnership between India and Russia, which has grown from strength to strength through several decades of joint efforts and fruitful cooperation, steered by the India-Russia Inter-Governmental Commission on M&MTC.⁷

Further, the partnership is reorienting to joint research and development, co-development, and co-production of advanced defence technology and systems in view of India's quest for self-reliance. This shift is important for future platforms, which include the next generation of fighters, aircraft and marine engines, and missiles.⁸

Both sides agreed to encourage joint manufacturing in India of spare parts, components, aggregates, and other products for maintenance of Russian-origin arms and defence equipment under the 'Make-in-India' program through transfer of technology and setting up of joint ventures for meeting the needs of the Indian Armed Forces as well as subsequent export to mutually friendly third-world countries.⁹

Conclusion

While the Russia-India defence ties remain vital, the Ukraine war and shifting geopolitics, including Russia's interactions with China, are challenging the partnership. But ultimately, the visit demonstrated the depth and resilience of the India-Russia special and privileged strategic partnership, which both sides stressed to be rooted in mutual trust and respect for each other's national interests.

The absence of a big-ticket defence deal does not limit Russia's role. It will continue to be one of the most important players for India's defence needs. Long-

standing defence cooperation with Russia was reaffirmed with discussions on new contracts for submarines and fighter jets and joint production initiatives, despite US's pressure to diversify.

The discussions and agreements laid a strong foundation for future cooperation that moves beyond a traditional buyer-seller dynamic; towards a more integrated defence-industrial partnership.

Putin's visit was significant for defence ties because it shifted the focus from direct arms purchases to joint development, production, and maintenance of military equipment, aligning with India's *Atmanirbhar Bharat* (Self-reliant India) initiative.

The central message conveys that India maintains strategic autonomy and has multiple foreign policy options, while reengineering its relationship with Russia.

Endnotes

¹ Prabhu Dayal, "Putin's Visit Delivers a Big Message: India Has Options, Russia Is Not Isolated", *Daily Sun*, 06 Dec 2025, accessed 09 Dec 2025, <https://www.daily-sun.com/editorial/844486>

² Pankaj Saran, "The Real Story of the India-Russia Summit", *The Hindu*, 08 Dec 2025, accessed 09 Dec 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/the-real-story-of-the-india-russia-summit/article70373182.ece>

³ Ajai Shukla, "Putin and Modi Affirm Russia-India Defense Relations", *The Diplomat*, 09 Dec 2025, accessed 09 Dec 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/12/putin-and-moscow-affirm-russia-india-defense-relations/>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "Modi's India Shows It Cannot Be Treated as Colony—Putin", *TASS*, 04 Dec 2025, accessed 09 Dec 2025, <https://tass.com/politics/2053485>

⁶ Dayal, "Putin's Visit Delivers a Big Message"

⁷ "Joint Statement Following the 23rd India - Russia Annual Summit", *PIB*, 2025, accessed 09 Dec 2025, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2199494®=3&lang=1>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

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