

## **Putin in Delhi: Western Misreadings and the Affirmation of Indian Foreign Policy Independence**

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President Vladimir Putin's visit<sup>1</sup> to India on 4 and 5 Dec 2025, underscored the ongoing evolution of a significant bilateral partnership defined by national interests and long-term strategic considerations. The meeting, held amid a shifting global environment, emphasised New Delhi's consistent diplomatic approach, which is grounded in autonomy, resilience, and a nuanced understanding of the international landscape.

### **The Broader Context: Unacknowledged Shifts**

The timing of the visit was notable. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine<sup>2</sup> remains unresolved, and sanctions imposed on Moscow have not achieved their intended impact on Russia's internal political dynamics. Concurrently, Donald Trump's return to the U.S. presidency has introduced a more transactional approach to global diplomacy, as demonstrated by Washington's imposition of steep tariffs<sup>3</sup> on Indian goods in response to India's energy trade with Russia.

India's position in Asia continues to be shaped by China's growing assertiveness<sup>4</sup> and shifts in the regional security environment. Amidst these developments, India's trade with Russia has expanded considerably. In FY 2024-25, the two countries registered a record bilateral volume of USD 68.7 bn<sup>5</sup>, led by energy flows. This shift reflects a pragmatic reordering of priorities rather than ideological convergence.

Policymakers in several Western capitals continue to assume that alignment can be secured through pressure or incentives. India's decision to strengthen engagement with Russia demonstrates a deliberate pursuit of national interests on its own terms.

### **Outcomes Beyond Optics**

This visit marked President Putin's first trip to India since early 2022.<sup>6</sup> Although public attention focused on the optics, the substantive agreements and discussions defined the visit's significance. The agenda encompassed cooperation in defense logistics, financial transactions, energy supply chains, and infrastructure connectivity, highlighting areas where practical outcomes take precedence over symbolic gestures.

### **External Reactions: Cautious, Calculated, and Constrained**

Washington issued carefully crafted statements<sup>7</sup> reiterating familiar themes, urging India to promote peace and stability while referencing international norms. Internally, there was acknowledgment that India's decisions are guided by national priorities rather than external pressure. Despite the imposition of tariffs, the lack of secondary sanctions indicated a threshold that major powers are presently unwilling to cross in their dealings with India.

European responses<sup>8</sup>, though more critical in tone, did not translate into concrete policy actions. Governments expressed disapproval through official statements, yet refrained from implementing substantive measures. This reflects the reality that India's economic significance and geopolitical influence in Asia render direct confrontation an unattractive option.

### **India's Calculated Benefits**

The engagement yielded results that contribute directly to India's core policy goals across energy, defence, finance, and global connectivity.

### **Securing Energy Access and Macroeconomic Gains**

Purchasing Russian oil at favourable rates has helped India manage inflation, improve its trade balance, and protect households from global price volatility. Estimated annual savings range between USD 3 and 5 bn.<sup>9</sup> These benefits extend beyond fiscal calculations, providing room for domestic policy stability and shielding the economy during periods of global disruption.

### **Sustaining Military Readiness Without Restrictions**

India relies on a broad spectrum of Russian-origin platforms within its armed forces. Securing spare parts, maintenance agreements, and upgrade pathways remains critical. The Reciprocal Exchange of Logistics Agreement signed at the summit grants access to Russian facilities in multiple regions, thereby, expanding the operational reach of Indian forces.

Discussions regarding systems such as the S-500 air defense<sup>10</sup> platform indicate ongoing openness to advanced technology transfers. In contrast to certain Western partners, Moscow has historically imposed fewer political conditions, enabling India to enhance its capabilities while preserving strategic autonomy.

### **Building Parallel Financial Mechanisms**

A key outcome of the visit was the further institutionalisation of currency-based trade<sup>11</sup>. With most transactions now settled in rupees and rubbles and the adoption of a clearing hub Gujarat International Finance Tec-City, India is actively reducing its exposure to global financial systems susceptible to extraterritorial controls. This transition is pragmatic and gradual, reflecting a long-term strategy to minimise disruption risk.

### **Investing in Arctic Access and Maritime Alternatives**

India's collaboration with Russia in the Arctic<sup>12</sup>, encompassing shipbuilding and access to strategic ports, demonstrates proactive planning. As climate change transforms maritime routes, early engagement positions India to capitalise on emerging logistics corridors and mitigates reliance on traditional sea lanes where competition and vulnerability are increasing.

## **Balancing Dynamics in Eurasia**

India's sustained engagement with Moscow helps prevent regional power dynamics from favouring any single actor. By supporting Russia's diversification away from Beijing while maintaining its own relationships with both, India contributes to a more balanced Eurasian environment. This approach reflects calibrated positioning informed by long-term strategic assessments rather than alliance politics.

## **Persistent Gaps in External Perception**

Foreign analyses frequently characterise Indian diplomacy using legacy terms such as "non-alignment" or "hedging".<sup>13</sup> These labels do not adequately reflect the complexity and deliberation underlying India's policy decisions. India cultivates relationships across a wide spectrum, each tailored to specific objectives rather than driven by ideological or bloc-based considerations.

India's relationships with the United States, Russia, Europe, and key Asian partners evolve according to context and mutual benefit. The focus remains on functional cooperation, realistic expectations, and sustained engagement.

## **A Mature Foreign Policy for a Multipolar Era**

The Russian president's visit reinforces India's overarching approach to international affairs: engaging where interests align, managing differences constructively, and maintaining independent decision-making. This framework is shaped by a clear understanding of India's priorities and responsibilities, rather than by reactions to external actors.

As global institutions adapt to a more pluralistic environment, India is increasingly recognised for its capacity to navigate complexity without aligning rigidly with any single bloc. Contemporary influence derives from policy coherence, robust partnerships, and the ability to withstand external pressures while safeguarding national interests.

The recent summit reflects that trajectory. India advanced its objectives without disruption, expanded areas of cooperation, and remained consistent with its broader foreign policy outlook. In doing so, it continues to chart a path that others may increasingly find instructive.

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<sup>14</sup> "India-Russia Joint Statement following the 22nd Annual Summit", *Ministry of External Affairs*, 05 Dec 2025, accessed 12 Dec 2025, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/40410>

<sup>2</sup> "The Russia–Ukraine Conflict and Sanctions: An Assessment of the Economic and Political Impacts", *Observer Research Foundation*, March 2023, accessed 12 Dec 2025

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<https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-russia-ukraine-conflict-and-sanctions-an-assessment-of-the-economic-and-political-impacts>

<sup>3</sup> Nikhil Inamdar, "Trump's 50% Tariff on India Kicks in as Modi Urges Self-Reliance," *BBC News*, 27 Aug 2025, accessed 12 Dec 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c5ykn158go>

<sup>4</sup> Ishita Maity and Sumant Kumar, "Shifting Power Between China's Assertiveness and India's Recalibration", *Cogent Social Sciences* 11, no. 1 (2025): Article 2566299, accessed on 12 Dec 2025 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23311886.2025.2566299>

<sup>5</sup> Embassy of India, Moscow, "Brief on India-Russia Economic Relations", *Ministry of External Affairs*, accessed on 12 Dec 2025, <https://indianembassy-moscow.gov.in/overview.php>

<sup>6</sup> Suhasini Haidar, "What Did Putin's Visit to India Achieve? | Explained", *The Hindu*, 07 Dec 2025, accessed 12 Dec 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/what-did-putins-visit-to-india-achieve-explained/article70366725.ece>

<sup>7</sup> Chandrajit Mitra, "As Putin Visits India, US Seeks Stronger Ties in Fortifying Indo-Pacific", *NDTV*, 05 Dec 2025, accessed 12 Dec 2025, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/us-national-security-strategy-report-us-stronger-ties-indo-pacific-vladimir-putin-in-india-9755484>

<sup>8</sup> "Why India is upset with European envoys' take on Putin's visit", *Firstpost*, 03 Dec 2025, accessed 12 Dec 2025, <https://www.firstpost.com/explainers/india-uk-european-envoys-article-russia-ukraine-war-vladimir-putin-india-visit-13956262.html>

<sup>9</sup> Sushim Mukul, "How much did India gain from Russian oil? Numbers beyond the noise", *India Today*, 02 Sep 2025, accessed 12 Dec 2025, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/india-russian-oil-imports-savings-17-billion-dollars-us-trump-tariffs-trade-war-economy-data-explained-2780603-2025-09-02>

<sup>10</sup> "India Targets Su-57 Stealth Jets and S-500 Shield in High-Stakes Defence Talks with Russia", *Defence Security Asia*, 01 Dec 2025, accessed 12 Dec 2025, <https://defencesecurityasia.com/en/india-su57-s500-russia-defence-talks/>

<sup>11</sup> "Russia and India To Discuss Linking National Payment Systems, Putin To Visit Delhi December 4/5", 29 Nov 2025, accessed 12 Dec 2025, <https://russiaspivottoasia.com/russia-and-india-to-discuss-linking-national-payment-systems-putin-to-visit-delhi-december-4-5>

<sup>12</sup> Jacob Koshy, "India, Russia Agree on Arctic and Nuclear Cooperation", *The Hindu*, 05 Dec 2025, accessed 12 Dec 2025 <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-russia-agree-on-arctic-and-nuclear-cooperation/article70362384.ece>

<sup>13</sup> Txell Reguant, "Can India's Strategic Autonomy Be Considered Hedging?", *Universidad de Navarra*, 21 Feb 2025, accessed on 12 Dec 2025, <https://www.unav.edu/web/global-affairs/can-india-s-strategic-autonomy-be-considered-hedging->

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