

# President Putin's Visit to India Will be a Moment of Reckoning for Both Countries

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*The Russian leader's upcoming trip to India places the prerogative for deciding the future course of their strategic partnership squarely in his host's lap.*

President Putin will visit India later this week to participate in the annual India-Russia Summit, though this year's event is the most significant in recent memory. Both Great Powers have enjoyed a decades-long strategic partnership with one another, but the nature of their relations has notably changed with time. It used to be as rock-solid as the Chinese-Pakistani one still is, but it weakened after the end of the Old Cold War and subsequent dissolution of the USSR. Almost concurrently with one another, Russia and India began reaching out to their partner's respective rival for reasons that had nothing to do with openly offending the other but nevertheless inadvertently contributed to the growing distrust between them.

## The Roots Of Distrust

Some Indians view Russia's relations with China through a "zero-sum" perspective that leads them to conclude that the strategic balance is shifting against them in Eurasia, especially because of Moscow's membership in the New Silk Road, the flagship project of which runs through Pakistani-administered territory that New Delhi claims as its own. Even though Russia isn't participating in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), some Indians suspect that their decades-old partner has decided to replace them with China in forging a game-changing strategic partnership that has increasingly defined the geostrategic gravity of the New Cold War.

Likewise, some Russians are very uncomfortable with India's relations with the US because they fear that they'll destabilize Eurasia by unnecessarily inviting America to meddle in regional affairs on New Delhi's behalf. As proof of this, these voices point to the game-changing Logistics Exchange Memorandum Of Agreement (LEMOA) that the two sides signed two years ago and the recently concluded Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) that altogether turn India into the US' de-facto military ally, made all the more substantive by India's designation as the US' only "Major Defense Partner" and America's increasing shipment of arms to the South Asian state.

## Explaining The Pivots

In defense of Russia's relations with China, Moscow realized right after the end of the Old Cold War that it had to prioritize the resolution of its lingering border disputes with Beijing, which eventually grew into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) that India itself ultimately joined. It's only natural that these neighboring Great Powers would combine their

strategic synergies to energize the New Silk Road vision of connecting Western and Eastern Eurasia via Russian territory, which became all the more urgent of an impetus for Russia following the unofficial onset of the New Cold War in 2014 after the US and its EU allies imposed sanctions on Moscow.

From the Indian side of things, the country was already reformulating its relations with the US since the 1980s, but this process was jumpstarted in the early 2000s under the Bush Administration and eventually evolved into the fast-moving strategic partnership that it is today under the premiership of Narendra Modi, whose ultra-nationalist BJP believes that India must contribute to “containing” China. Apart from traditional geostrategic reasons stemming from their 1962 border war and subsequent suspicions of one another, India is fearful that a surge in Chinese imports would collapse its domestic industries in the event that the country joined the New Silk Road, hence one of the reasons why it’s so firmly opposed to it.

### **The Symbolism Of The S-400 Deal**

The resultant state of affairs is that Russian-Indian relations came to be influenced by the shadow that China and the US are casting over their strategic partnership, but it should be noted that while China doesn’t attempt to pressure Russia to downgrade its relations with India, the US is threatening to sanction India if it goes forward with its planned S-400 purchase from Russia. Beijing’s official stance is that its Eurasian BRICS partners should work closely together with one another and not invite any third parties to meddle in their affairs, even if they enter into disagreements with one another. Washington, however, tacitly wants to tear the Eurasian BRICS trilateral apart and would love to see India isolate itself from Russia and China.

This contextual background makes the S-400s more than just a prospective military transaction and transforms New Delhi’s decision about their purchase into a moment of reckoning for the Russian-Indian Strategic Partnership. It’s indeed possible that the US might waive its sanctions against India if it goes through with this deal because of recently passed legislation in the National Defense Authorization Act of 2019 that provides for this option if the President deems India to have contributed to America’s strategic interests and/or to have reduced its overall purchase of Russian weaponry, but it can’t be known for certain whether it’ll actually do so, meaning that India is undoubtedly taking a risk if it goes through with this deal.

### **To Sanction Or Not To Sanction?**

Therein lays the greater significance of President Putin’s trip to India later this week because some media reports claimed that Modi will finally commit to this purchase once and for all, although no official confirmation of this has emerged thus far. If this does in fact happen, however, then it would prove that India still desires to continue its so-called “multi-alignment” policy of attempting to “balance” between rival Great Powers in order to indefinitely remain the object of their competition, which it hopes to leverage to its benefit. Should the deal fall through, though, then it would signify that India’s “multi-alignment” gamble has failed because it counterproductively turned the country into an American “vassal” instead of strengthened its strategic independence.

Another factor to be considered is whether the US will actually sanction India if it commits to

the S-400 deal with Russia. Imposing economic punishments on it could ruin decades' worth of progress in trying to groom India into becoming the US' chief partner in an Asian-wide anti-Chinese "containment" coalition, while waiving the sanctions could signal weakness and a lack of resolve on America's part. That said, if the agreement is signed, then America might actually not sanction India at all because the S-400s could unintentionally further its regional policy if New Delhi puts them to use against China and/or Pakistan, as is expected. Moreover, India might have hinted that it'll drastically decrease its consumption of Iranian resources in exchange for an S-400 sanctions waiver.

## Concluding Thoughts

It remains to be seen how all of this plays out, but there's no question that the future contours of the Russian-Indian Strategic Partnership will be shaped during President Putin's upcoming trip to India later this week. Modi has to decide whether to sign the S-400 deal during that time or not; doing so would take their ties further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and show that India's policy of "multi-alignment" has been mildly successful, while delaying or outright cancelling the agreement would ruin their relationship. This week is therefore a moment of reckoning for both countries and will also importantly clarify India's general geostrategic alignment in the New Cold War.

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