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[www.afgazad.com](http://www.afgazad.com)

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## India savors Russian friendship

By M K Bhadrakumar  
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The morning after can be as significant as the day before. What strikes the eye are two developments, in Moscow and Delhi, the morning after Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin left the Indian capital on Friday after an eventful working visit.

There is no country outside Russia where Putin is widely admired as a statesman as in India. He strikes chords in the Indian psyche that are difficult to explain except in the totality of what has come to be known as "Putinism" and his historic role in Russia's resurgence.

During Putin's visit, Russia stitched up multi-billion dollar contracts in the military and civil nuclear sectors. The list of contracts and agreements is truly impressive:

- \$1.5 billion deal for the supply of 29 additional MiG-29 Fulcrum D-based fighter aircraft.
- An agreement to sign a contract on the joint development of a new fifth-generation fighter.
- A revised deal of \$2.3 billion on the upgraded *Admiral Gorshkov* aircraft carrier with a displacement capacity of 45,000 tons, a maximum speed of 32 knots (59 kilometers per hour) and a range of 13,500 nautical miles (25,000 kilometers) at a cruising speed of 18 knots.
- Deals to establish a joint venture to produce navigation equipment for GPS (global positioning system) and its Russian equivalent Glonass, and the use of Glonass signal for military use by India.
- An array of agreements for the construction of up to 16 nuclear power plants in India worth tens of billions of dollars at the very least.

## **Priority lies with US ties**

However, life moves on. No sooner than Putin returned to Moscow, than the Kremlin announced that US President Barack Obama had phoned his Russian counterpart Dmitry Medvedev to discuss the "final stages of preparation" of the new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty and they agreed that "it is now possible to talk about specific dates" for initialing the agreement.

The Kremlin is eager to start the "reset" of Russia-US ties and may well drop its demand that any new arms reduction deal should be linked to the US's missile plans in Central Europe.

In Delhi, too, the government has mooted a new legislation on Monday whose unstated purpose - some say, sole purpose - is to enable the US nuclear industry to secure multi-billion dollars worth business in the Indian market.

The US-Russia-India triangle offers a great study of paradoxes. Russia and India are advocates of a democratized international system, which they hope to influence. Neither is a satiated power, while both see a window of opportunity in the emerging polycentric world order.

Yet both estimate that the US's pre-eminence as the sole superpower is not under any serious challenge, and neither has any doubt that its equations with Washington shall remain its foreign policy priority.

Putin's successful visit to Delhi needs to be seen in perspective. India and Russia drifted apart in the 1990s and both went through transformative periods that saw the birth of new elites and economic models and societal changes.

## **Delhi, Moscow and AfPak**

Indian opinion today is supportive of the rising curve of the country's post-Cold War strategic partnership with the US. Russia has a constituency of cold warriors, but it is a dwindling tribe and meanwhile, Moscow's aspiration too is to retain its privileged status as Washington's interlocutor on issues of global strategic balance.

Therefore, when the Indian leadership expresses its desire to Putin for an intensification of consultations with the Kremlin regarding the Afghan problem, Delhi's intentions are quite pragmatic. Delhi does not seek strategic defiance of the US in Afghanistan and it knows that for Russia, Afghanistan is not only about al-Qaeda and Taliban but is also related to its search for a new era of "post-Euro-Atlanticism".

An al-Qaeda problem may or may not appear in North Caucasus and Russia would be worried if Afghanistan once again becomes a revolving door for international terrorism. But India's concerns are tangible, very specific and are primarily related to its adversarial relationship with Pakistan.

Moscow can help by alleviating Delhi's near-total diplomatic isolation over the Afghan problem

and putting the brakes on a Taliban takeover in Kabul that is fine-tuned by Pakistan. By virtue of its role as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, Russia has a say in any Afghan settlement.

Putin suggested while in Delhi that Indians' view of Pakistan as a state sponsoring terrorism needs to be mellowed. From the Russian perspective, Pakistan is a key player in the great game in Central Asia. Moscow (and Beijing) will remain wary of driving Pakistan into isolation as a client state of the US.

Ideally speaking, Delhi should gain from Russian or Chinese efforts to moderate Pakistan's adversarial mindset, but Delhi depends almost entirely today on the US. Curiously, India's dependency on the US is only helping to strengthen Pakistan's geopolitical positioning.

Islamabad estimates that the US regional strategies in Afghanistan can work only with its cooperation and it expects in return that Washington accommodate its aspirations as a regional power.

The Obama administration on one hand needs to get Pakistan on board as a key regional ally, since without Islamabad, plans for the stabilization of Afghanistan and the enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) will get nowhere. But on the other, Washington still needs to string India along.

So far, the US has heavily counted on the fact that Delhi has not explored other options than going along with it, given India's disputes with China and its atrophied ties with Russia. But if a fine comb is run through Putin's visit to Delhi, a sense of frustration is discernible in the Indian mind about the US's regional policies.

### **Delhi feels let down**

Afghanistan is a thorn in the flesh. The Indian elites feel let down. Arguably, even the boisterous American lobby in the Indian elites would feel embarrassed as their prognosis of the US and India living happily ever after comes unstuck in the face of icy cold geopolitical realities.

The Indian government cooperated with the US to an astonishing degree by dovetailing their Afghan policy with the US's AfPak objectives; by "breaking down walls and bureaucratic obstacles between the two countries' intelligence and investigating agencies" - to quote American expert Lisa Curtis of Heritage Foundation in a recent US Congressional testimony and supporting a US/NATO military presence in the region. India also scrupulously avoided any sort of coordination with other regional countries such as Russia, Iran or China lest that might irritate Washington.

Nonetheless, the Obama administration is gearing up to engage the Taliban in league with the Pakistani military. That was not the impression the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh got during his "state visit" to Washington last November. The US officials may explain that the Indians have a fixation about the Taliban and Pakistani military. But the Indians simply do not see any significant shift in the Pakistani military's mindset towards jihadi groups operating in the

region.

Nor does Delhi believe that the Taliban are capable of power-sharing or independent of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence. In the Indian perception, Taliban and the Pakistan-based terrorist groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) are birds of the same feather and they will flock together.

Washington has viewed LeT primarily through an India-Pakistan lens and calculated that the group did not pose a direct threat to US interests. To quote Curtis, "The US officials have shied away from pressuring Pakistan on the LeT in the interest of garnering Pakistani cooperation against targets the US believed were more critical to immediate US objectives."

Over and above, Obama shows no sign of a rethink on the US's embargo on the transfer of "dual-use technology" to India. While India no longer takes to Cold War-era rhetoric to air its differences with the US, there is disquiet in Delhi about the US's military assistance to Pakistan.

Against this backdrop, Delhi's move to revive ties with Moscow stands out. Delhi cannot hope to source from anywhere else the advanced military technology that the Russians willingly offer - the global navigation satellite system, aircraft carrier, nuclear-powered attack submarine, state-of-the-art missiles and fighter aircraft.

Ironically, the nuclear deal India signed with the US in 2008 lies unimplemented due to Obama's reluctance to transfer "dual-use technology" to India, but it provided just the international non-proliferation framework Moscow needed to boost cooperation with Delhi on a range of sensitive areas such as reprocessing technology, joint thorium fuel cycle nuclear power projects and fast-neutron reactors.

In short, the Indian leadership has returned to a precept that it ignored; namely, that with a world power like Russia, it is not possible to cooperate except on the basis of special relations. However, the realization is yet to dawn on the elites in Delhi that an optimal foreign policy vis-a-vis the US will still continue to elude India in the absence of a profound dialogue with China on regional security.