

Delhi visit

Stakes high in meeting that benefits Kremlin

Hannah Ellis-Petersen
Pjotr Sauer

The world order looked materially different when Vladimir Putin last set foot in India, almost exactly four years ago. That visit - lasting just five hours due to the Covid pandemic - saw the Russian president and the Indian prime minister, Narendra Modi, discuss economic and military cooperation and reaffirm their special relationship.

Three months later, Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine would turn him into a global pariah, isolating Russia and restricting Putin's international travel.

The previous visit was also several years before Donald Trump was re-elected for a second term as US president and upended years of closely nurtured US-India relations with inflammatory rhetoric and some of the world's most punishing import tariffs, throwing Delhi into a tailspin.

Against this turbulent geopolitical backdrop, analysts emphasised the significance of Putin travelling to India yesterday to meet Modi, both as a symbol of the enduring relationship between the countries and as a message that neither would be cowed by pressure from the White House.

The summit comes at a critical juncture for both countries. Putin arrives in Delhi after rejecting the latest Ukraine peace proposal put forward by the US, confident that recent advances by Russian forces on the battlefield have strengthened his hand.

Petr Topychkanov, a Moscow-based senior researcher at the Stockholm International Peace

Research Institute, said that for Russia, "the importance of this visit lies primarily in the fact that it is happening at all".

He said: "It will signal that Russia is returning to something resembling normal international relations. Russia is no longer anxious about the risks of political isolation."

For India, there are even greater stakes at play. According to Aparna Pande, the director of the future of India and south Asia initiative at the Hudson Institute, Delhi is grappling with its most unfavourable geopolitical climate in years, thanks to "a semi-isolationist America, a weaker Russia and a very powerful China".

India's relationship with Russia goes back to the cold war and has remained a deep one ever since, with Russia continuing to be India's biggest defence supplier. It is an alliance that was long tolerated by western governments, even after Putin's actions in Ukraine, but Trump's return to the White House has signalled a different approach.

Over the past three years, the US and Europe turned a blind eye as India became one of the largest buyers of cheap Russian oil, despite sanctions in the west. But after the US president's peacemaking efforts in Ukraine failed earlier this year, Trump began to accuse India of bankrolling Russia's invasion.

In Delhi, which has pursued a multi-alignment foreign policy since independence and reacts poorly to any outside interference, the perceived attempts by Trump to coerce it were met with outrage, resulting in the worst decline in US-India relations in years.

In response, Pande said, India had returned to its default mode of "hedging" in its unorthodox alliances, "signalling to the US it has multiple options and waiting to see where everything will fall".

Yet India has other priorities in its engagement with Russia, namely the superpower on its febrile north and north-eastern border. "From the Indian side ... the real reason that relationship is important is geography," said Pande. "China remains the greatest threat to India for the foreseeable future, and since the Soviet Union, India has always relied on Russia as a continental balancer."

The increasingly close partnership between Moscow and Beijing has prompted India to try to move away from its dependence on Russia, particularly on defence. For decades, about 70% of Indian defence purchases came from Russia but in the past four years this has reduced to less than 40%.

While arms and plane sales will probably be a key part of today's talks, Pande said: "India will try to strike a balance: keep purchasing enough Russian weapons to retain the alliance, but not be so dependent that if Russia cut off supplies under China's pressure, India would be left hanging."



▲ Vladimir Putin with Narendra Modi together in Delhi yesterday