



Modi's personal touch to India-Russia relations

The one-day visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Sochi on May 21 heralded a new beginning as far as the question of India-Russia relations is concerned. It can be termed as a new initiative because the visit of Modi to Russia took place when the relation was slightly strained. This can be partly attributed to Russian policymakers' ambivalent policy on giving sophisticated weapons to Pakistan (known for sponsoring cross-border terrorism) and keeping mum on Chinese aggressive policy towards India. The third issue is Moscow's engagement with Taliban which certainly created jittery among the policymakers in New Delhi. The fourth concern is low level of bilateral economic relations between these two countries which certainly provide opportunity to introspect why after so many years the mutual economic relations are not on a higher pedestal.

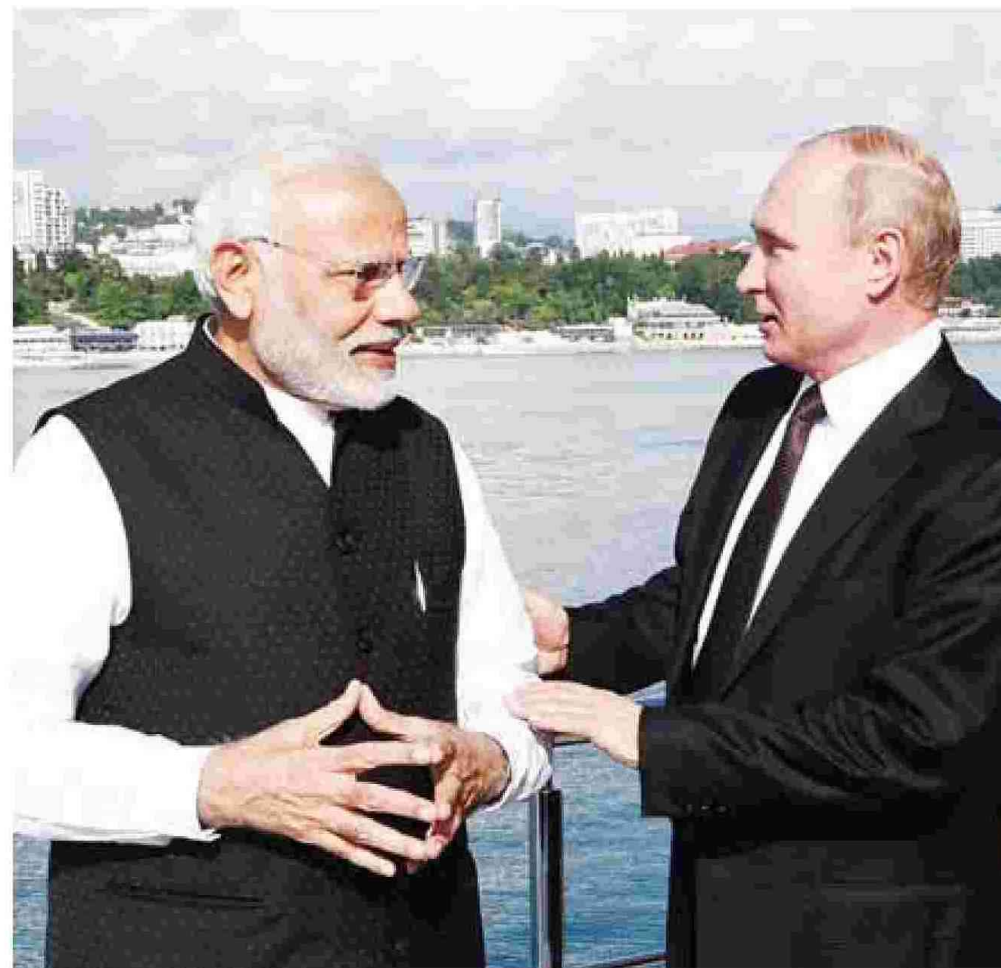
Another interesting aspect that needs to be discerned here is that the PM visited China and held a similar informal interaction with Chinese President Xi Jinping last month at Wuhan. The two successive visits of Modi in a short span of one month are a reflection of "spirit of multipolarity", which India is espousing since long. The two visits silenced many critics who are quite vociferous in stating that India is following the footsteps of the United States.

Modi's intention to add a new substance to the gloomy bilateral relations between India and Russia can be evident from the fact that before leaving to Sochi, Modi on his personal twitter account (as quoted on the PMO website) stated "the talks with President Putin will further strengthen the Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership between India and Russia". One interesting inference can be concluded from the twitter message that Modi intended to give the informal relationship to a new "strategic level" between these two civilisational powers.

The issue of fight against terrorism and extremism figured prominently in the Sochi informal meeting between Modi and Putin. The Informal Summit Declaration stated "determination to combat terrorism in all its forms and manifestations." The Declaration

relating to Afghanistan assumes significance against the backdrop of resurgence of radical activities by Taliban as well as ISIS. One may recall here that a few days back the radical Taliban forces took Indians working in Afghanistan hostage. It is an undeniable fact that since the breakup of the Soviet Union, radicals from Afghanistan played a direct or indirect role in inciting terrorist activities in the Northern Caucasus region. Despite greater bonhomie between India and Russia in fight against radicalism, in recent years, Moscow is showing sign soft-peddalling both the dreaded Taliban and its ideological mentor, i.e, Pakistan. The most intriguing aspect of Russian engagement with Taliban came to light when just after signing the Sochi Informal Summit declaration with India, Russia sent a feeler to Taliban leadership for negotiation as reported in newspapers. Similarly as reported in news reports, China after snubbing Pakistan (for harbouring terrorist activities) last month is providing backdoor support to Hafeez Saeed. This double-standard of both Russia and China is an impediment to a cohesive fight against radical and terrorist forces.

The second issue which cropped up during Modi's interaction with Putin is to maintain strategic equilibrium both at the regional as well as at the global levels. Both the leaders agreed to contribute to the ushering of a "new multipolar world". In this regard, a specific mention was made to underline the significance of "India-Pacific Region". One may add here that this part of the world is emerging as a major "strategic fulcrum" of global geopolitics because of its strategic location. It also acts as a major global "trade and energy corridor". All the major global powers the USA, China, Japan, South Korea, along with these two civilisational powers, are taking keen interest in dominating this region. It is in this context, the India-Russian cooperation can act as a hedge against expansionist policy of other external power which may have a spillover-effect on the security of both the countries directly or indirectly. One may add here that the "multipolarity" which the informal declaration touched upon



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi

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can be inferred in the context of limiting the role of Washington and China (both having ambitious strategic goals) in the India-Pacific region.

The core issue which got affected following US sanctions on Russia is supply of Defense equipment. It should be underlined that since Soviet times, India used to get bulk of military supplies and heavily depended on Moscow. Because of additional sanctions the Trump Administration imposed on Russia for the Crimean crisis ("CAATSA Section 231(d) Defence and Intelligence sectors of

the Government of the Russian Federation") in October 2017, India is facing the problem in getting Defence equipment. When Indian Defence Minister Nirmla Sitharaman visited Moscow last month, both the sides agreed to expedite the deal relating to "S-400 air defence missile systems". However, no concrete result has been achieved till now. Though Washington is mooting exemption to New Delhi from CAATSA for purchase of missile defence system, they have not done anything in this direction. Without mentioning this Defense deal, the Sochi

Declaration stated "the significance of long-standing partnership in the military, security and nuclear energy fields and welcomed the ongoing cooperation in these areas."

Another critical area that got full attention in the Informal Declaration at Sochi was cooperation in the field of energy cooperation. Since the signing of the Sakhalin deal, India has signed deals in the Siberian, Far East and Arctic regions of Russia. As per the OVL website, India has three major stakes at "Imperial Energy, Vankor as well Sakhalin-1 projects". Rosneft is also thinking of entering into the oil market of India. The informal Declaration has also appreciated the "long-term agreement between Gazprom and GAIL", which can be a game changer as far as energy cooperation is concerned as the Declaration mentioned that through this deal it will bring substantial amount of "LNG" to India.

What is worrisome in India-Russia relations is that the economic cooperation has not reached its potentiality. One may add a footnote here that while India's economic cooperation with the EU, the US and China is growing, that with Russia is quite stagnant. In this regard, the operationalisation of the International North South Transport Corridor Project (INSTC) will facilitate greater economic cooperation between the two countries. Along with INSTC, Russia should take initiative for inclusion of India in the Eurasian Economic Union. It is a known fact that with India's support, Russia can balance Chinese penetration in the Russian energy sector.

The informal meeting between Modi and Putin can be remembered for one thing that both the leaders gave personal touch to strengthen the bilateral relationship between the two countries.

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