

India among top five friends: Russia poll

Beijing Seen As Moscow's Top Ally

New Delhi: Despite a significant cooling of ties between traditional strategic partners Russia and India, New Delhi can still count itself as one of the top five "friends" of Moscow. And for all the talk about Russia moving towards Pakistan, an annual opinion poll by one of Moscow's most respected think tanks shows Islamabad does not yet cross Russian consciousness.

The Levada Center, the only non-governmental pollster in Russia and labelled a "foreign agent" by Kremlin in 2016, is distinguished by the comprehensive Russian opinion polls it publishes. In the 2017 poll, which was out this year, Russians identified Belarus as their country's top ally, followed by China, Kazakhstan, Syria and India.

While Indians may feel reassured that the "*druzhba-dosti*" relationship remains intact, it is equally interest-



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ing that China is seen as Russia's top ally. At the government level, Russia in China's embrace is a common sight but this poll makes it clear that this has percolated to the popular level too. The declining ties between India and Russia received a fresh lease of life after an informal summit between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Vladimir Putin weeks ago, where the two leaders spent a lot of time together to reaffirm strategic convergence of the two nations.

Identifying the top ene-

mies of Russia, the poll picks on the US, specifically President Donald Trump for the top spot, with Ukraine, Latvia, Lithuania and Germany occupying the big 'foes' spaces. Afghanistan remains a designated enemy, though the Russian system is now reputed to be working closely with the Taliban. Interestingly, the average Russian identified radical Islamism and Islamic extremism as an important threat/enemy. They consider Trump, Ukraine, Europe, Islamic State terror group and radical Islam and corruption to be the greatest threats to Russia.

Fewer Russians identify themselves as European, but want Russia to effect some sort of rapprochement with the West. President Trump has already signalled that he wants a Singapore-style summit with Putin soon, despatching his NSA John Bolton, a well-known Russia sceptic, to Kremlin to prepare for the visit.

Russian foreign policy priorities, according to the poll, should first concentrate on Russia's own security, followed by a desire shared by almost half of those polled for Russia to regain its former influence in the world.