

NATIONAL

India is deeply engaged with Russia in expanding our economic and trade ties: Indian Ambassador Venkatesh Varma

Dinakar Peri

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Moscow and New Delhi are also looking at ideas for expanding cooperation in our common area of interest, Central Asia, says Indian Ambassador in Russia D.B. Venkatesh Varma



Amid unprecedented developments in the region, India and Russia have a series of engagements lined up in the next few months leading up to the summit between the two leaders. In an exclusive interview to The Hindu, Indian Ambassador in Russia D.B. Venkatesh Varma delved into the entire gamut of cooperation – defence, upcoming maiden 2+2 dialogue, summit and the focus areas, S-400 deal, Afghanistan, space and nuclear cooperation.

There was an Indian pavilion at the International Army 2021 expo in Moscow and the Secretary of Defence Production was here. How has been the response, showcasing our products to Russia and the world?

I am very glad that you are visiting Moscow to attend the International Army Games. You would have seen the impressive India Pavilion at the Army Games exhibition, where we showcased not just what inventory is available with our armed forces but also the great strides we are making in 'Make in India' in the defence sector. It is a pity that there is not a single media organization from India which is represented in Moscow on a permanent basis. So even though your visit is short and focused on the International Army Games, you are welcome.

We have an active agenda of cooperation in the defence field. Defence Secretary visited Moscow for the Moscow International Security Conference. Our Naval Chief, Admiral Karambir Singh attended the 325th anniversary of the Russian Navy and met his Russian counterpart. It also coincided with the visit of *INS Tabar* for naval exercises with the Russian Navy as part of INDRA-NAVY 2021.

We had 250 troops from the First Mechanized Regiment taking part in the INDRA-ARMY 2021 in Volgograd. We expect another 200 strong battalion from 3 Nagas to come for ZAPAD exercises in Russia in September. Peace Mission, again in September 2021, another 200 strong battalion from Sikh LI will be participating.

So, our engagement with Russia in terms of exercises is deepening and we, in fact, are looking at expanding format of exercises to make them more complex, more sophisticated -for exchange of experiences with regard to real time combat situations, including mobilization of forces and their transportation across long distances, instant exercises, the impact of cyber, and the huge impact of drone technology on modern warfare etc.

We are also looking at ideas for expanding India-Russia cooperation in our common area of interest, which is Central Asia; possibility of supplementing bilateral exercises with trilateral and multilateral ones – we are in discussion with the Russian side.

With regard to Russian engagement with the 'Make in India' program, let us first recall that Brahmos program is the first example of a 'Make in India' program that has produced a product that is of the highest global standards. Our services have acquired a Brahmos variant; we are also actively looking at exports to third countries.

Amongst the ongoing projects, which are at advanced stages of discussion or finalization, we expect the delivery of S-400 systems later this year; the manufacture of two frigates of Project 1135.6 in Kaliningrad, in parallel with the production of 3rd and 4th units of the same frigates at the Goa shipyard. As you must have seen, the Goa Shipyard was very well represented in the Army Games exhibition.

That said, we also have two important projects on the anvil. First, which is pretty close to finalization is the production of AK-203 advanced assault Kalashnikov rifle which will be produced by an India-Russia joint venture in Uttar Pradesh, which when completed will be a 100% Indian product, for we envisage 100% indigenization, for equipping more than 700,000 of our troops and paramilitary forces.

Once the huge Indian market has been satisfied, we may also look at opportunities of converting this joint venture for third country exports. We are also in advanced stages of discussion for Kamov-226 which is yet another instance of a 'Make in India' programme.

We are pleased that Russia is responding positively to our suggestion that key servicing facilities, such as servicing of Russian-origin engines, aircraft, and other equipment be established in India. We are also implementing the Inter-Governmental Agreement signed in 2019 for creating joint ventures for the manufacture of spare parts of Russian-origin equipment in India for our Armed Forces. Some RFPs have been issued and we intend to take these forward. We have also invited our Russian partners to partake of the opportunities in the two defence corridors - in Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.

Visit of Defence Minister Gen Sergei Shoigu to India is expected towards the later part of this year; he will co-chair along with our Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, the next meeting of the Inter-Governmental Commission. We also expect the signing of the Reciprocal Exchange of Logistics Agreement (RELOS) and a Navy-to-Navy cooperation MoU. We are also looking at how we can cooperate in using India as a production base for exporting to third countries of Russian-origin equipment and services. This too will add to the Make in India programme.

With regard to ongoing projects, we are getting additional T-90s for the Army; additional top-up numbers of the Sukhoi-30 MKIs and the MiG-29s for our Air Force. Ongoing cooperation in other areas including high technology areas of long term strategic importance is continuing; not only continuing, it is deepening.

We envisage a new mechanism - the 2+2 mechanism at Ministerial level to hold its first meeting in Delhi perhaps during the visit of General Shoigu later this year. We also envisage a preparatory meeting at the level of Foreign Secretary and Defence Secretary on our side, and their Russian counterparts in Moscow, prior to the Ministerial meeting.

There are regular but key conversations between our National Security Advisors, the last one taking place in Dushanbe. That said, our defence cooperation is very ably handled by the two Defence Ministers - Rajnath Singh and General Shoigu in line with President Putin and Prime Minister Modi's strategic guidance for the long-term development of our relations. Russia will remain a key defence partner for India for decades to come.

We have the Summit later this year, which did not happen because of COVID last year. As you just mentioned, there is a large canvas of cooperation

underway, so when do we expect the Summit to happen and what will be the focus areas at the highest level between the two leaders?

India and Russia, as part of their special and privileged strategic partnership, have a practice of annual bilateral Summits; the last one occurred during

Prime Minister's visit to Vladivostok in 2019. We didn't have a Summit in 2020 because of the Covid situation. During the conversation on Aug 24 Prime Minister Modi reiterated his invitation to President Putin for the next annual bilateral summit in India. President Putin accepted our Prime Minister's invitation. Dates are yet to be fixed, but we can expect the Summit to take place perhaps towards the end of this year subject to the COVID situation.

Prior to the Summit level meeting, we expect two important Joint Commissions, the Joint Commission on Economic and Trade Cooperation, co-Chaired by Deputy Prime Minister Borisov on the Russian side and the External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar on the Indian side and the Defence Joint Commission which will be co-chaired by Raksha Mantri and Defence Minister Shoigu.

The Summit, of course, is always an opportunity to review progress being made since the last Summit and set new benchmarks. There is a very strong bilateral agenda. India is deeply engaged with Russia in expanding our economic and trade ties, linked to specific needs, be it coking coal for our growing steel industry or fertilizers for our expanding agriculture sector. Prime Minister has announced an export target of 400 billion dollars.

We expect India-Russia trade to increase and contribute its part to the overall achievement of India's national trade objectives. India is deeply engaged with the Russian Far East for economic, commercial and geopolitical reasons. PM announced a 1 billion dollar credit line for India's business participation in Russia's Far East. This is making progress.

We also intend to deepen our energy cooperation which is already very substantial. Both sides are considering major investments in each other's' energy sectors. We are expecting the visit in the next couple of weeks of Hardeep Singh Puri, our new Minister for Petroleum and Natural Gas. This visit will give us an opportunity to advance our discussions on Indian investments in major projects such as Vostok Oil, which is one of the largest energy projects in the world, Arctic LNG and petrochemical sector in Russia as well as discuss Russian investments in the very attractive Indian energy sector.

We are interested in expanding and deepening our cooperation with Russia in Science and Technology. There is a proposal to establish a separate Joint Commission on Science and Technology Cooperation which would encompass high technology areas such as artificial intelligence, cyber, quantum, nano, bio-advances etc. Hydrogen economy is something that we would be focusing on. This is also a connecting link to the common challenge that we face in terms of adapting our economies to the imperatives of climate change. Cooperation

in production of new vaccines, building on our cooperation on Sputnik V is another promising area.

You mentioned about the delivery of S-400 systems later this year as per schedule and that brings to question the possible US sanctions under CAATSA since they are technically triggered by the deliveries. So what are the conversations and steps to address the issue of sanctions?

I don't wish to go into details; all I can say is that the S-400 missile contract was signed in 2018 between India and Russia. This contract is under implementation. It is on schedule. And we expect the deliveries to take place as per what is mentioned in the contract.

In pursuance of the expected delivery schedule, we are also undertaking training of Indian Air Force personnel who will be responsible for operating the S400 systems. There are specific defence and national security considerations that led India to conclude the contract for the supply of S-400 systems. All I can say is that this contract will be implemented. We will do what we have to do and necessary for India to preserve and protect its national security interests. Under Prime Minister Modi's leadership there can be no doubt about India's determination to pursue our specific national security interests.

On Afghanistan all assessments went wrong and the developments are of deep concern both for India as well as Russia for various reasons. What is the conversation with Russia given the close cooperation between the two in the past?

The most authoritative conversation between India and Russia happened between Prime Minister Modi and President Putin yesterday (Aug 24) – a telephonic conversation lasting more than 45 minutes. This was initiated by President Putin to brief PM Modi on Russia's perspective on the ongoing developments in Afghanistan and to seek our Prime Minister's views on how India and Russia could work together in addressing this common challenge.

The fast changing developments in Afghanistan have, of course, taken everyone by surprise – unexpected as to their speed, as well as their consequences. Having said this, it is imperative that India and Russia adapt their policies, whatever their policies were in the past. What happened in the past? We were perhaps travelling along the same road but not necessarily in the same lane.

While a number of countries in the region and beyond are affected by the Afghan developments, India and Russia are in essence, affected even more due to the rise of Islamic fundamentalist and radical groups and the sanctuary that could be claimed by terror groups – their impact on our security interests- both for India and Russia and the impact on normal inter-state relations especially with respect to Central Asia, while also taking into account the additional threats emanating from drug trafficking, organized crime and

the flow of refugees. This could potentially upend the very foundations of interstate relations in the broader region.

Both leaders agreed to set up a mechanism that would provide for quality conversations between India and Russia that would be action oriented, to align our interests in such a way that our security interests bilaterally, and our interests with regard to third countries, especially the Central Asian countries would be protected and preserved.

The quality of conversation was of exceptional trust and confidence. India and Russia are standing together at a moment of deep crisis in the international system but as old trusted friends, we are reinvesting in our cooperation to address common challenges. It is important to learn lessons from the past and to draw confidence from our past cooperation.

But every situation is sui generis in its own way and therefore what is important is for India and Russia to adapt to new realities, step up their cooperation and to insulate and protect their national interests from the instability that is expected to radiate out of Afghanistan for some time to come. This cannot stand. It must be reversed. As we belong to this region, unlike extra regional powers, India and Russia will need to work together even more than before. This is vital for protecting India's continental security interests.

Indian Air Force Pilots were trained in Russia for the ambitious Gaganyaan Mission and there is strong nuclear cooperation as well. Can you please update on where it is and what is happening on that front?

Well, Space and nuclear power continue to be two important pillars of our cooperation with Russia. In March this year, we completed a year-long program of training of four, very smart young IAF officers in the Russian Space Academy. Having completed their training, they returned home. India-Russia Cooperation in the space field, on Gaganyaan would continue in certain other aspects. Russia is helping us with the design of view ports and life support systems. We also expect our astronauts to return to Russia for very specific tasks. The space suits are being stitched in Russia and they will be coming here to Moscow to undertake individual-wise tailoring measurements. So this will be a happy occasion when we will see our astronauts back in Moscow though for a brief time.

But when our astronauts, Gagannauts as they are called, travel into space, they will be on board an Indian spacecraft, largely using Indian technology and Indian training. They will fly on a space voyage uplifted by the good wishes and prayers of millions of our people but also taken forward on the wings of Indo-Russian friendship.

On the nuclear front, we have a huge project for construction of 6 nuclear reactors in Kudankulam (KK). KK3 and KK4 are progressing well. KK5 - we have had the first pour of concrete. KK1 and KK2 are now producing at full capacity. Some technical glitches that occurred in the last two years have been sorted out. Our cooperation with respect to nuclear technology is a huge contribution to our energy security. But in each of these KK

projects, the amount of indigenization and technologies that are used in India is increasing; this has created a new confidence about India's nuclear technology and capabilities and the Russian side is very keen to work with India not just in the Roppur nuclear power project in Bangladesh but in other projects as well, especially in third country markets. India and Russia have the potential of designing a nuclear reactor specifically for developing countries and this too is a very promising area of cooperation.

Has the site been identified for the next one?

Both sides are still in technical discussions.

You are going to move from Moscow very soon. During your tenure here, there have been multiple highlights at the highest levels in the Embassy here. What is your toughest moment and also one moment you would say was the biggest in furthering the friendship between the two countries.

To sign off from Moscow at the end of my diplomatic career is, of course, a great privilege and an honour, largely on account of the fact that I have walked in the footsteps of some of the great stalwarts of Indian diplomacy, who steered this relationship to great heights. I have stood on the shoulders of the giants of the past.

The transformation in the India-Russia relationship in the last couple of years can be described as a quiet revolution. We have the traditional pillars of defence, nuclear, energy and space. These have been supplemented by India's engagement in economic, trade, science & technology sectors and inter-regional cooperation. We are engaging with Russia in areas which were unthinkable in the past. Prime Minister's Act Far East policy is a revolutionary step of huge geopolitical significance.

New drivers in our bilateral relations and new formats for geopolitical engagement shows a new maturity in our relations. India and Russia relations are not counted in months or years; they are counted in terms of decades. So I hope that what we have put in place will come to fruition not just in the short term, but in the medium or long term. The most important aspect of our partnership, of course, is the extraordinary level of trust that exists between PM Modi and President Putin, we have seen a number of recent examples - trust at the leadership level, one that is translated into policy and action of far reaching significance. It is the best blessing that any Ambassador can hope for.

Taking a longer view, my three decades in the diplomatic service coincided with the third quarter of India's 75 years of Independence. Russia has stood by us on many occasions along this journey. So has India. India has crossed many hurdles - be it breaking the chains of nuclear apartheid that bound our hands and feet together - we have today an expanding civilian nuclear programme and a robust nuclear deterrent, or in developing comprehensive national capacities for independent thought and action on critical issues of

war and peace – genuine strategic autonomy, the twin brother of Atmanirbhar Bharat in other words.

India has come a long way, despite all the hurdles and distractions, and is well poised in the next 25 years, as we reach the centenary of our Independence to securing its rightful place amongst the great powers of the world. Through this rise, our friendship with Russia will grow stronger. The best is yet to come.

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