

[India and its relationship with Russia \(https://kommersant.ru/theme/379\)](https://kommersant.ru/theme/379)

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## "A revolution is taking place in Russian-Indian relations"

**Indian Ambassador to the Russian Federation Bala Venkatesh Varma gave a farewell interview to Kommersant**

Indian Ambassador to the Russian Federation **Bala Venkatesh Varma**, who is completing a three-year business trip to the Russian Federation, summed up the results of his work and told Kommersant correspondent **Sergei Strokan** about new trends in Russian-Indian relations.



Photo: Anatoly Zhdanov, Kommersant

### "Act in the Far East": a new growth strategy

**- Mr. Ambassador, your three-year stay in Moscow coincided with a number of significant events in Russian-Indian relations. Which ones were the most important?**

- It was a period of radical changes both in bilateral relations and in our interaction in resolving international issues. The defining events were President Putin's visit to India in October 2018, which took place just a month after I became ambassador to Moscow, and Prime Minister Modi's visit to

Vladivostok in September 2019. Let me remind you that then Narendra Modi was the main guest of the Eastern Economic Forum, which also hosted the annual Russian-Indian summit.

Despite the fact that in the past year and a half our interaction has been complicated by the coronavirus pandemic, we have managed to maintain high-level contacts. The personal trust between the two leaders was further strengthened. Meetings of foreign ministers, defense ministers, energy ministers and national security advisers took place. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the Indian Minister of Defense took part in the parade on Red Square, dedicated to the 75th anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War.

In August this year, President Putin attended a special UN Security Council meeting on maritime security chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. And in 2019, President Putin awarded Prime Minister Modi with the highest Russian civilian award - the Order of the Holy Apostle Andrew the First-Called, which was a great honor for Narendra Modi and for India.

During my stay in Moscow, such traditional areas of Indian-Russian cooperation as defense, nuclear energy, space and the energy sector have been further strengthened. However, we have also expanded our partnerships - new directions have appeared in them. I would say that over the past three years, our particularly privileged strategic partnership has become even stronger and more diversified. The picture of interaction today is very different from what it was three or four years ago. Now it is based on a new trajectory of growth and expansion of interaction. This cannot but cause satisfaction. This would not have been possible without the support from Delhi, as well as without the powerful support that I received here in Moscow, and for which I express my gratitude and gratitude.

**- Could you tell us more about the new trends, since you were one of their architects?**

- Ambassadors are not architects, they are instruments of politics. The biggest change in the past three years has been in the way India looks at Russia.

Prime Minister Modi's visit to Vladivostok in 2019 served as an impetus for the formation of a new Indian policy "Act in the Far East", which prioritizes interregional cooperation.

For the first time, India announced the opening of a \$ 1 billion concessional credit line to expand the participation of Indian businesses in the development of Russia, especially in the Far East.

We are promoting the development of the Chennai-Vladivostok sea corridor. It will complement the North-South corridor through Iran. We are also taking part in the development of the Northern Sea Route, including in the Arctic zone, on which India and Russia are holding special consultations.

That is, India's participation in various parts of the large Eurasian continent is in the interests of Russia, as well as India itself. We have discovered new areas of interaction, the impact of which will be measured not in months or years, but in decades. It is with these time categories that we must measure our strategic partnership.

In the field of defense, we have concluded a very important contract for the Russian S-400 air defense systems, the first deliveries under which this year are being carried out according to the schedule.

I cannot fail to mention the joint production of four Project 1135.6 frigates, the production in India of the world's most advanced AK-203 assault rifle with 100% localization, additional supplies of the Su-30 MKI and MiG-29, as well as additional supplies of Mango ammunition and the small air defense system. radius of action.

Russian-Indian military exercises have become larger and more diverse.

The level of relations between India and Russia in the defense industry in all areas has grown exponentially. In fact, over these three years, Russia has regained its first place in the list of defense partners. Russia interacts with India on the most advanced defense technologies, which it does not do with any other country in the world.

In the same way, we are developing major energy projects. Vostok Oil will definitely make India a part of one of the largest energy projects in the world.

India's potential investment in Arctic LNG-2 and Russia's investment in the Paradip cracking plant will open up a new area of cooperation in the petrochemical industry.

The new task force on gas will attract Russia as the main partner, including in the field of hydrogen energy, which is important in the context of climate change.

We intend to increase the import of Russian oil to India, which is now only 1%. Indian Oil Minister Hardeep Puri, who visited Russia in September, announced that we intend to increase Russian oil imports to 3%, 4% or 5% over the next five years.

During the coronavirus pandemic, our cooperation continued. Air traffic was maintained.

One of the main areas of cooperation was the production of the Russian vaccine Sputnik V in India.

We have also entered into an agreement for the long-term supply of coking coal for the Indian steel industry. We are awaiting the signing of a similar agreement for the supply of fertilizers. We will soon take our cooperation in the field of science and technology to a new level through the establishment of a new Joint Commission.

Cooperation in the field of training qualified personnel is also gaining momentum. MDL is cooperating with the Zvezda shipyard in the construction of new ships for the Northern Sea Route. We have also expanded our embassy, which is already one of the largest Indian embassies abroad, to pursue new areas of cooperation with Russia. We have a new space office, a new energy office, and I am pleased to announce that a new tourist office will open soon in Moscow.

**- The old idea of Russian-Indian relations as a political colossus on clay economic feet is no longer relevant?**

- Today the focus is on the development of new areas of cooperation in pharmaceuticals, ceramics, the chemical industry, high-tech industries, robotics, and Internet banking.

We are also looking at new Russian investments in India's rail sector. We are awaiting the signing of a new intergovernmental agreement in the field of shipping. And most importantly, Russia is a highly coveted partner in India's Do-in-India defense program, which is now guaranteed to pave the way for further strengthening the already existing and historically very successful relationship.

In general, I would say that a revolution is taking place in our relations at the strategic, political, economic, trade and high-tech levels, as well as in the interaction between people.

**- You call it a revolution?**

- Yes, this is a revolution in terms of all the ambition of goals and the use of new tools to achieve them.

We are also expanding our contacts with regions where Buddhism is widespread. Recently, a delegation of experts on Buddhism came to us, which visited Kalmykia, Buryatia and Tuva . This will further strengthen the relationship between the peoples of India and Russia. Yoga and Ayurveda are also very popular in Russia. Some of the Indian wrestlers who won medals at the Tokyo Olympics have trained in Russia. Our astronauts, who will fly into space in 2023 aboard an Indian spacecraft, received basic training in Russia - another enduring symbol of our friendship.

**- What do you expect from the upcoming Russian-Indian summit, which did not take place last year?**

- Russia and India have developed a well-established practice of holding annual bilateral summits, which has been going on for almost two decades.

But, unfortunately, due to the coronavirus pandemic, we were unable to hold the summit in 2020. We proceed from the assumption, and both sides are actively discussing this, that President Putin will be able to visit India by the end of this year. In addition, we also expect that Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu will visit India to participate in the Intergovernmental Commission on Defense, presumably on its sidelines the first ministerial meeting in the 2 + 2 format (with the participation of the defense ministers and foreign ministers of the two countries will take place. - "**b**" ).

Also, a meeting of the Joint Economic Commission is to be held in India. So we have a very tight schedule of meetings in preparation for the bilateral summit. I believe that the summit between President Putin and Prime Minister Modi will be very productive and inclusive. We already have a number of important agreements ready for signing or at the final stage of approval.

**"India has always worked independently and will continue to do so."**

**- Sometimes we do not fully understand each other. It is believed that India is leaving the United States, turning away from Russia.**

- The relationship between India and Russia has a unique strength that has repeatedly shown that it follows its own logic and is immune to pressure from third countries. In addition, India is too big a country to be pulled in one direction or another.

India stands on its own feet, thinks with its own head and pursues its own interests.

Both countries believe in the principle of multipolarity. As our Foreign Minister Dr. Subramaniam Jaishankar said in his speech at IMEMO in July this year, the principle of a multipolar world is a legitimate desire for flexibility without a desire for exclusivity.

India and Russia are pursuing similar strategies to strengthen the multipolar system. We are interested in the broadest possible participation so that each pole can contribute to the general equilibrium and strategic stability of the multipolar system. Multipolarity is not just a slogan; it requires concrete action.

As for our relations with the United States, they have strengthened even more in recent years. Similar to our strategic partnership with Russia, which is special and privileged, we also have a strategic partnership with the United States. There are very powerful incentives for this relationship. But there is no internal contradiction in our relationship with the United States and in our relationship with Russia. In our view, each relationship has its own merits, and further strengthening of India's relationship with the United States, along with the strengthening of our relationship with Russia, actually increases the strength and credibility of the multipolar system.

**- Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that the creation of the QUAD and AUKUS alliances erodes security in the Asia-Pacific region. But India is a member of QUAD, and many in Moscow are puzzled.**

- Striving for multipolarity during a colossal geopolitical shake-up requires the establishment of new partnerships. India seeks an open architecture of international relations based on multipolarity not only in the world, but also in Asia, where no country can impose its will through domination or military force. For this reason, we are looking for new ways of cooperation.

India is a member of QUAD. Recently, a QUAD summit was held in Washington, which was attended by Prime Minister Modi. India agreed to cooperate in certain areas that are pressing global problems. These include the fight against the COVID pandemic, new infrastructure, new technologies, climate change and a new generation of youth cooperation. These trends show that QUAD is not an alliance or quasi-alliance. India views QUAD differently. India has always worked independently and will continue to do so. Just as we seek to establish partnerships with QUAD, we are seeking similar partnerships with the BRICS and SCO.

We also strove for partnerships, no matter how complex they may seem, within the RIC (Russia-India-China). India will use its capabilities wherever they are, in accordance with the requirements of its own security and its foreign policy interests.

And let me stress once again: in the pursuit of these opportunities, we see no contradictions with our long-standing strategic partnership with Russia.

### **China changes the status quo**

**- Another topical issue is relations with China. Moscow is increasingly saying that the United States is dragging India into an anti-Chinese game. How does this happen?**

- India is too big a country for any other country to be drawn into anything, into any policy that does not meet its own interests.

At the same time, let me say that the exacerbation of the situation on the India-China demarcation line in Ladakh, which has remained very difficult since last summer, was caused by China's unilateral attempts to change the status quo and the violation of the bilateral agreement on maintaining peace and tranquility on the Indian border and China.

We would like to resolve these difficulties in our bilateral relations through dialogue. The 13th round of negotiations among the corps commanders took place quite recently, on October 10. Not so long ago, a meeting of foreign ministers was held in Dushanbe. We want to move forward and resolve this issue in such a way as to ensure both the withdrawal of troops and the de-escalation of tensions. We are committed to resolving these differences peacefully and bilaterally through dialogue.

We expect the Chinese side to take into account the overall perspective of our bilateral relations and work to resolve outstanding issues as soon as possible in accordance with our bilateral agreements. We interact with China on a bilateral basis, as well as on various platforms, including Russia-India-China. The next meeting at the level of foreign ministers is likely to be held in the format of a videoconference.

In addition, interaction with China is carried out within the UN Security Council, of which India is a member, as well as in the G20, BRICS and SCO.

**- If you compare what the situation was like when you arrived in Moscow with what is happening today, has China become more persistent in changing the status quo?**

- It is difficult to deny that such a perception of Chinese politics exists not only in the context of India-China relations, but also in a broader sense.

But I must note that the Russian side has shown significant understanding of the problems facing India, and I must express my gratitude to the Russian Ministry of Defense for the regular supply of weapons to India. They continued even in the most intense months and weeks of this protracted standoff in Ladakh between the troops of India and China, which has continued since mid-2020.

### **Afghanistan - a story of broken promises**

**- Another hot topic is Afghanistan. Initially, Delhi did not share Moscow's hopes that the Taliban (banned in Russia) would not allow international terrorists to use the territory of Afghanistan.**

- India shares the concern of the world community about the current crisis situation in Afghanistan, above all about the humanitarian crisis. How we got to this crisis situation is, of course, a matter of analysis and introspection. The Doha process (negotiations on Afghanistan in Doha - "**Kommersant**"), in which India did not participate, or the "Troika Plus" process (the "expanded troika on Afghanistan" includes Russia, the United States, China and Pakistan. - "**Kommersant**"), in which India was not allowed to participate, pursued certain goals, which in reality turned out to be very different from what was originally intended.



This crisis was caused by the collapse of the Ghani government, as well as the rapid withdrawal of US and NATO forces from Afghanistan, and in particular from Kabul.

I believe that India and Russia may have taken different paths - I repeat, we did not participate in the Doha and Troika Plus processes, but we are moving in the same direction.

The situation in Afghanistan creates the same problems for us: instability, drug trafficking, the threat of terrorism, as well as the spread of instability to Central Asia. In August, President Putin discussed this with Prime Minister Modi. Shortly thereafter, Russian National Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev visited India and held extensive talks with Indian National Security Adviser Ajit Doval. Subsequently, we held a series of meetings between India and Russia, not all of which were public.

This is because both sides recognize that the challenge posed by the current situation in Afghanistan affects India and Russia, probably more than any other group of countries. India will take part in the Moscow format meeting on October 20.

We are also cooperating at the level of our National Security Councils, and in November India will host a high-level meeting of the region's national security councils on Afghanistan.

**- The Taliban leaders promised Moscow that they would destroy international terrorists on the territory of Afghanistan. Will they be able to deliver on this promise?**

“Unfortunately, in the past few months we have become convinced that Afghanistan is a story of unfulfilled promises. Let's wait and see if the Taliban break their word or back it up with action.