

# Pankaj Saran: India intends to intensify cooperation with Russia's Far East

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India's Ambassador to Russia talked to TASS about Russia-India diplomatic relations celebrating their 70th anniversary, current development of bilateral ties and plans to develop the Russian Far East

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**India's Ambassador to Russia Pankaj Saran**

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India's Ambassador to Russia began the conversation by conveying his deepest condolences on the demise of Russia's Ambassador to India [Alexander Kadakin](#) on the 26<sup>th</sup> of January 2017:

- His passing away is a huge personal and professional loss to me, and all my colleagues. Ambassador Kadakin devoted his career of many decades to the strengthening of India-Russia relations, and building bridges of understanding between our two countries. He was one of Russia's foremost experts on India. He was widely respected in India. We deeply mourn his loss, and pray for his eternal peace.

***- Today also happens to be Republic Day. Could you explain to Russians why this date is so crucial for Indians?***

This was the day on which the Constitution of India came into effect, on the 26<sup>th</sup> of January 1950. This is significant because the Constitution was adopted at a very difficult time, soon after our independence. And since then the Constitution has stood the test of time. It has strengthened us as a country. It has strengthened our democracy and strengthened our federation. During this period India has been able to defy all the sceptics who thought that India would not succeed because they felt that India was too poor, it was illiterate, it was not a country which was ready to govern itself. Today we are a much stronger country than we were in 1950. And the basic principles of the Constitution have been preserved.

***- This year India celebrates the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Independence. But several months before India became independent the Soviet Union had established diplomatic relations with India. Thus, this year we celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of establishment of Russia-India diplomatic relations too. Which events will take place in both India and Russia?***

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- This is a very historic and significant year for both our countries. Diplomatic relations between India and Russia were established on the 13<sup>th</sup> of April 1947 which is actually before India became independent on 15th August, 1947. We have an ambitious plan and a roadmap that we have finalized for the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary. This includes high-level visits, special receptions, cultural events, release of postage stamps, thematic exhibitions, release of a collection of memoirs of Russian and Indian diplomats and other activities. We will hold bilateral conferences and round tables to discuss our relationship. We plan interactions between the heads of the regions of Russia and the Chief

Ministers of the States of India. The objective is to increase interaction between the regions of Russia and the States of India. We hope to participate actively in the International Economic Forum in St. Petersburg, Sochi and Vladivostok. We want to take the celebrations to all parts of the country, not just in Moscow. And similarly the Russian government has plans to celebrate it in India.

***- Despite our traditionally cordial relations, for years Russia-India bilateral trade stands at less than \$10 billion. What is the main reason for that? How can we solve this problem?***

- The low level of trade is not at all reflective of the strength of the Indian economy or of the Russian economy. The first reason for this is the lack of adequate knowledge about each other's markets. The second is insufficient business-to-business exchanges between the two countries. What we find is that both countries are looking at other markets. The third reason is that the trade basket is narrow and we need to expand and diversify it. Finally, we have a problem of lack of adequate connectivity that means lack of good transportation routes between India and Russia. We are working on a new Double-Taxation Avoidance Agreement, a new Bilateral Investment Treaty, on establishment of a "Green Corridor" between India and Russia and we are trying to increase trade in services, for example in the spheres of tourism and information technology. And of course, we expect to interact more with [the Eurasian Economic Union](#).

***- At which stage are the consultations on a free trade agreement between the Eurasian Economic Union and India?***

- We are making good progress. India formed a Joint Study Group with the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015. The group was supposed to examine the feasibility of the Eurasian Economic Union and India entering into negotiations for a Free Trade Agreement. Last year the Study Group finalized a Joint Report and it was submitted to the Indian government and the Eurasian Economic Commission. From the Indian side, we have finalized the internal procedures for entering into negotiations with the Eurasian Economic Union. We are hopeful that this year we will be able to start negotiations.

***- Which role will the 'North-South' transport corridor play in increasing trade connectivity between Russia and India?***

- It will contribute to enhancement and expansion of trade. This is a very significant and very important initiative together with Russia, Iran and Azerbaijan. It will reduce transportation time by almost half from the current route which goes up to St. Petersburg. We have already had some test runs

on this corridor. To make the corridor attractive for exporters and importers, we need to construct railway lines and to simplify customs procedures. We are currently focused on establishing a common customs protocol. Our main objective is to operationalize this corridor as soon as we can.

***- Despite the fact that India and Russia are time-tested friends, people-to-people contacts are still weak. Moreover, there is a lack of adequate information on Russia in Indian media as well as information on India in Russian media. In this regard, which forms of cooperation between Indian and Russian media should be developed?***

- We need to have much more interaction between the media of India and Russia. That is a lot that is happening in our countries which our people need to be aware of. I am hoping that this year we will be able to take some new initiatives to promote media exchanges. And one of the ideas we have in mind is to organize a Media Round Table between India and Russia.

Last year we signed a Youth Exchange program with Russia. For the first time fifty Russian youth went to India last year. We are hoping for the first-ever Indian youth delegation also to come to Russia this year. In addition, we want to build bridges between the universities, to hold more international bilateral conferences, to promote the study of Indology and Indian languages in Russia.

***- Are there plans of establishing a joint Russia-India university like the joint Russia-China University in Shenzhen?***

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- In 2015 we started a new initiative which has proved to be successful. That is the constitution of a Network of Indian and Russian universities. On the Russian side, it is led by the Tomsk State University, and on the Indian side it is led by the Indian Institute of Technology in Mumbai. The first meeting was held last year in Mumbai and the second meeting is to be held in Russia this year. Over the last two years the Network has grown. This way we hope to increase exchanges of scholars, students, prepare scientific papers and research projects.

***- Russia's economic priority is development of its Far East. Does India intend to increase its economics presence in this region? Is India going***

***to participate in the projects relevant to development of the Russian Far East?***

- In the Joint Communiqué of the last India-Russia summit in Goa in October 2016 for the first time there was a specific reference to the initiatives taken by Russia for the development of its Far East. The Joint Communiqué said that India and Russia will work together to enhance mutual investment and other economic cooperation in the Far East. So this decision has been taken at the political level. Subsequent to this, we have been in touch with the Russian Ministry for the Development of the Far East. They have informed us about the various policies and initiatives that exist today. We are hoping that we will be able to increase our participation in the Eastern Economic Forum. In addition, we are planning some high-level visits between India and Russia focused exclusively on the Far East region. And there are some concrete projects being discussed already between India and Russia which are located in the Far East.