

How would you describe the outcome of President Putin visit to India?

We have to see this visit in the context of strategic partnership which India and Russia have since the year 2000. The agreement which was signed during the first visit of President Putin to India, when the two countries also decided to have annual exchange of visits at the level of the Indian prime minister and the Russian president. So since 2000, we have held annual summits alternately between New Delhi and Moscow. And this was the 23rd annual summit.

The nature of relationship between India and Russia is so deep, it has served interests of both our countries and also contributed significantly to larger regional and global peace and stability. It has also contributed to prosperity of our people. This visit was particularly focused on trade and economic ties between the two countries. So I would describe the outcome of the visit as positive for achieving the target of trade that our two leaders set up last year. That is to reach bilateral trade to \$100 billion by the year 2030.

Therefore, this visit was very helpful in putting in place the mechanisms at the level of government to help in that process, as well as in establishing new business ties between companies and corporate houses on the two sides.

Speaking of economic ties, do you think that our countries have overcome the problem of imbalance in mutual trade?

You know, imbalance that we have is something that we have been working to address. I do not think that our trade will become completely balanced, given the fact that much of the resource requirement of India is met by those imports from Russia. But still, our attempt is to increase India's export basket to Russia. In addition to the new items which we can sell in the Russian market, we also address the issues of non-tariff barriers so that the existing agricultural and marine products and fisheries can be exported in bigger volumes to Russia. Plus, we attract investment between two countries and increase that so that it contributes to overall higher economic activities, including exports to Russia. So this is going to be a long process, but some of the agreements signed during the summit and some of the decisions taken prior to the summit will certainly help in addressing the issue of trade imbalance. So for example before the summit the Russian side listed 25 Indian companies for marine product exports to Russia. Also permission was granted for import of potatoes and pomegranates from India into Russia. So we think that these are the steps in the right direction.

Besides, we think that if we have a free trade agreement, it will help bridge the gap, that is, by increasing India's exports to Russia. And for that, the first round of negotiations on free trade agreement between India and the Eurasian Economic Union was held prior to the summit in New Delhi. The idea is that the negotiations with the Eurasian Economic Commission will be accelerated so that we can benefit from the free trade regime as soon as possible, which will be another step in the direction of addressing the trade imbalance.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi mentioned that our countries can reach 100 billion in trade turnover by 2030, do you think it is possible to do it as early as next year?

Well, I wouldn't like to put a timeframe. The target that the leaders have set is 2030. But yes, possibly it could be a year or two before that. Our efforts, including my efforts as India's ambassador to Russia, are directed at doing everything possible to get the business communities to interact with each other, to explore the opportunities that the two countries have.

How far are the negotiations between India and the Eurasian Commission on this free trade agreement?

The negotiations began in the month of November, so the first round has been held. I would say that there is good understanding on both sides about what we want to achieve. And there is political commitment also on both sides to achieve that. So we are looking at the outcome very positively.

India and Russia signed two agreements that paved the way to send Indian professionals to work in Russia. Are there already any agreements between companies for, you know, attracting Indian personnel? And do you think that it could be interesting for Indian professionals in IT-field to work here in Russia?

Absolutely, you know, with its population of 1.5 billion people and expanding education and technical capacity in the country, India has the potential to be actually what they say the skill capital of the world. There have been traditional areas where Indian skilled manpower has gone to, that is, the West and also in the Gulf. So we have all categories of skilled manpower.

Now given the requirement in Russia, we are happy that we have attained this legal document for facilitating work by Indian personnel, employment of Indian personnel. At present, our estimate is something like 70-80 thousand Indian nationals are already working in several areas in Russia. There are a number of companies that have established contacts with Indian counterparties. In fact, this year in June, we had organized a networking session between the recruitment agencies of India and Russia and also several companies of Russia and the Moscow city government. The result of their fruitful interaction has been the hiring of tens of thousands of Indians in a short period of time. They work in the fields of construction, engineering and textile production.

We hope that the more Russian companies learn about the legal aspects of the concluded agreement and about the fact that there is a legal basis for this kind of cooperation, the more Indian manpower and Indian medium-skilled specialists who may be needed here will come to Russia.

What figures can we talk about, in your opinion?

You know, I wouldn't like to put a figure because neither government is involved in recruitment of the manpower. Neither Indian government is directly recruiting for employment abroad, nor Russian government is doing that. It is more left to the industries. We are putting in place the facilitatory mechanism, the legal processes and the legal basis for this mobility to take place. So, given India's population and the fact that, for example, more than 8 million Indians are working in the Gulf region, you can imagine how many people Russia might need.

But I want to emphasize once again, we will not be guided by numbers. We must be guided by the fact that companies provide a safe working environment, as well as ethical working conditions for professionals and their families.

Do you think there will be jobs for Indian IT specialists in Russia?

IT is one of the areas in which we see cooperation expanding. There are new institutions, for example, Sberbank is setting up an IT institution in Bangalore, employing more than 300 people. And I think that we would see highly qualified manpower also looking at the new opportunities in Russia.

I know this is a very sensitive issue, but is India interested in expanding ties with Russia in military or military-technical cooperation? There have been reports that Russia and India are discussing establishing joint ventures with Russian defense companies to produce spare parts for Russian fighter jets and air defense systems, is this true?

So first of all, I won't call this area sensitive because it is very well known that India and Russia have a special and privileged strategic partnership. It is also very well known that we have an intergovernmental commission on military and military-technical cooperation. It is also well known that the two countries have expanded their defense cooperation from procurement of equipment to joint ventures and joint production, I would say even joint design. Brahmos missile project is a very good example of joint design and production, this is a cruise missile system which is today attracting the interest of many countries beyond India and Russia. Hence, our cooperation in the defense sector continues. In 2019, the countries signed an agreement on the production of spare parts for Soviet and Russian-made defense products.

We are working in all these areas, and as India's demands change, our countries continue to cooperate through the intergovernmental commission that I mentioned. So the answer is that this is a continuing area of cooperation which has served the interest of both the countries.

Is this true that India is interested in Russia's fighter jets, SU-57?

Well, I won't comment on a specific equipment, because those discussions take place within the framework of the institution that I mentioned. You know that India is already operating and producing Su-30 aircraft locally. India currently uses the S-400 air defense system. So this is the continuing area of cooperation.

Does India plan to keep importing oil from Russia at the same level it was doing before, even despite the sanctions that are about to kick in?

First, India's policy is to provide energy security for 1.5 billion people. Second, to have a diversified sourcing of the hydrocarbon products. Indian companies buy products from abroad as it is commercially most attractive. So there are may be adjustments depending on the global market conditions. I can't tell you exactly at what level a particular product is being procured or where which company will purchase it.

But are they in any way intimidated by the US sanctions on Russia's oil, Russian oil companies?

The Indian companies have been working in this market and in other markets in the field of energy for decades. They will take the decisions which is in their best commercial interest.

Is India satisfied with the prices Russia has given for its oil? Will India get discounts on oil?

It is obvious that the price is appealing to them. That is why the companies buy crude oil in this market. But I am not aware of the commercial negotiations.

How do you assess cooperation in space exploration between Russia and India?

This is an important area of cooperation like several others. We are satisfied with the level of cooperation we have in astronaut training, spacesuit design and outfitting. We believe that there are prospects for further deepening cooperation in this area, for new projects and new space missions.

This fall a joint Russian-Indian film "Pearls" was released, do our countries plan to create a joint production of TV series, for example?

The field of culture is very important for the development of contacts between people. There are a number of Russian academic institutions and universities that offer the study of Indian languages and India. Indology is of great interest here in Russia. There is a great interest in Indian music, movies, dance, yoga, Ayurveda - the traditional Indian knowledge system. By the way, during President Putin's visit to India, an agreement was signed on holding Days of Culture in both countries. This summer, we successfully hosted a nine-day Indian festival on Manezhnaya Ploshad, which attracted a total of almost 800,000 guests. So this is an expanding area of cooperation.

Besides, during the visit, a memorandum of understanding on information exchange was also signed between Prasar Bharati Media Corporation and five Russian media holdings, including RT, which has launched broadcasting from India. We are ready to expand our cooperation with Russia in the field of culture in general, as well as in the co-production of movies and TV series. We are also inviting movie producers to come and make movies in India, even their own movies, not necessarily co-produced ones.

During the visit of the Russian President, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced measures that would result in a significant increase in tourist exchanges. Henceforth, we will issue free visas for individual tourists and tourist groups. This will be done on a reciprocal basis. I think there will be more people-to-people contacts in the coming months and years.

When this visa program is about to start?

I think very soon. Preparations related to logistics and changes in the system are underway now.

Could it start working by the end of the year or as early as next year?

I think maybe this month, yes.