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## Modi, Putin and the World Order (I)

**A challenging moment and the strong sensitivity**

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A handful of people in Delhi would know that Prime Minister Narendra Modi had a secret plan to take the Chinese President Xi Jinping who visited India in September to see his native town of Vadnagar in Gujarat, an ancient settlement with a history that goes back to 2500 B.C.

This idea came naturally to Modi because Vadnagar, known in history as Anandapura, was twice visited by the great seventh century Chinese scholar Hsuan-Tsang on his loop route to central

India (627 A.D. to 643 A.D.) and the detailed chronicle of his travels devoted an entire chapter on Anandapura, describing the ‘dense’ population of that appendage of the Malava kingdom ruled by the Yadavas of central India, the region’s produce, climate, and literature and laws, its ten Buddhist ‘sangharamas’ with a thousand priests studying the Little Vehicle of the Sammatiya schools, its several tens of Deva temples, and so on.

But Modi’s secret plan was also a reflection of his distilled worldview, rich in political symbolism, insofar as it flagged his devotion to the ‘Asian century’.

Surveying the India-Russia annual summit last week in Delhi between Modi and President Vladimir Putin too, what needs to be taken note of as the most pronounced salient is the Indian leader’s empathy with the latter’s nationalist constituency. The following remarks by Modi conveyed his unreserved support of Russia – and Putin’s decisive leadership of his country, in particular – and, indeed, this has been articulated against the backdrop of the Cold-War like trends in world politics and the concerted Western strategies to ‘isolate’ Russia:

«President Putin is a leader of a great nation with which we have a friendship of unmatched mutual confidence, trust and goodwill. We have a Strategic Partnership that is incomparable in content... The character of global politics and international relations is changing. However, the importance of this relationship and its unique place in India’s foreign policy will not change. In many ways, its significance to both countries will grow further in the future...

«President Putin and I agreed that this is a challenging moment in the world. Our partnership and the strong sensitivity that we have always had for each other’s interests will be a source of strength to both countries...»

Suffice it to say, Putin’s policies, which single-mindedly aim to restore Russia’s prestige and effectiveness on the international stage, hold natural attraction for Modi. The Russian leader has refused to back down in the face of immense pressure from the West and is looking elsewhere in the international community for partnerships, especially with countries such as China and India.

Now, the West had shunned Modi also for over a decade and he too has experienced as a Hindu nationalist the hegemony of western culture and politics in the world order. A common ground between Modi and Putin is easily discernible and possibly definable, and the excellent personal chemistry between them needs no further explanation. They understand each other’s visions for their respective countries and for the world order.

In fact, the appalling insensitivity of Washington’s advice to Modi not to do ‘business’ with Russia would only have reminded him of the not-too-distant past between 2002 and 2013 when he too was ostracized by the US. No wonder, Modi sees that Russia’s travails as a passing phenomenon out of which the country will emerge even stronger.

But then, there is more to it than shared perceptions regarding the West’s opportunistic policies. The point is, Modi has made the ‘modernization’ of India to be his mission, which literally involves dragging India into the 21st century through an expansion of economic ties with foreign partners. He is intensely conscious as a national leader that he cannot afford to fail in this

mission, and a renewed mandate to rule India depends critically on his success in generating jobs for young Indians in their hundreds of millions, in raising the standard of living for the common people and enabling social mobility. Simply put, raising India's international standing, especially in Asia, is integral to his domestic agenda.

This is exactly where Russia's search for new partnerships internationally and its keenness to energize the Asian partnerships dovetail with India's need for lasting mutually beneficial economic ties without political strings attached.

Russia is truly well-placed to be one of India's key partners in the Modi era. For one thing, Russia is not prescriptive – unlike the United States – and Modi's comfort level will be high in strengthening the partnership with Russia.

Second, unlike the US, which strives to make India a 'lynchpin' in its Asian strategies, Russia is happy enough if only India retains its 'strategic autonomy' (like Russia too aspires to) on the world stage, which per se helps shift the locus of the world order and the international system toward 'polycentrism' and democratization based on shared interests of all countries.

Third, stemming from the above, Modi's 'Make in India' project provides a gateway for the advancement of the India-Russia partnership. To be sure, Modi was visibly elated that Russia understands and is supportive of the impulses driving his vision of the Make in India.

Finally, what emerges is that both India and Russia are willingly conceding to each other the space for each other to maneuver in the current volatile international environments, which of course require constant adjustments and fine-tuning.

Many Indian pundits played up Russia's growing proximity with Pakistan of late and its unprecedented closeness to China in the 'New Cold War' environment as causing concern to India. A former top official in the Indian foreign-policy establishment wrote, «How much Russia will henceforth need to factor in China's interests in formulating its policies in our region will need careful assessment... In addition to our [Indian] concerns about Russian defence material and technologies supplied to China finding their way into Pakistan, we will now be facing the prospect of direct arms sales to Pakistan.»

However, there is no shred of evidence that Modi subscribes to any such knee-jerk reaction regarding Russian diplomatic moves in the South Asian region or the Asia-Pacific. Broadly, neither India nor Russia is viewing the paradigm of regional security in zero sum terms – as regards India's expanding ties with the US or Russia's unprecedented level of cooperation with China and the warming up of its contacts with Pakistan.

Clearly, Modi has nailed pragmatism firmly to the mast of his ship as its leitmotif. And there is remarkable similarity here with Putin's own outlook and temperament as a statesman. Modi is a pragmatist par excellence who is keenly looking for opportunities to extract the best that he can get out of relations with the West and the 'East' (including both Russia and China).

The stereotyped mindset of the Indian pundit may take time to absorb this while estimating that

these are 'testing times' for India-Russia relations, but the significance of Putin's visit has been noted alright in the West. A Deutsche Welle commentary concluded, «None of this [outcome of Putin's visit] bodes particularly well for US President Barack Obama's visit to India next month. The West needs to sit up and take notice. A reinvigorated relationship between New Delhi and Moscow, an alliance of the needy, may have a greater impact on the so-called 'Asian century' than many had thought possible just a few months ago».