Putin’s Visit to India: A Summit Born in Defiance, Arriving in Constraint

December 8, 2025



Russian President Vladimir Putin will visit India on 4 December for the India-Russia summit, marking one of his rare bilateral foreign trips since the onset of the Ukraine war. Putin has travelled sparingly over the past three years, making this visit stand out in both diplomatic and political terms.

But the summit is anchored in a paradox. When the summit was announced, India’s external environment was sharply confrontational. The United States had imposed steep additional tariffs, reaching up to 50%, linked to India’s continued purchases of Russian oil. Senior US officials, including Peter Navarro, were issuing pointed public criticisms of Indian trade practices, while India–US trade negotiations had been suspended for a month. This abrasive phase was politically sharpened by President Donald Trump’s parallel overtures towards Pakistan.

It was in this climate that India recalibrated its diplomatic signalling. Optics in Tianjin SCO Summit were carefully curated. The emphasis on India-China engagement and the highly publicised warmth with Moscow—symbolised by the Modi—Putin images—were intended signals rather than spontaneous gestures. The message was clear that pressure from Washington would not corner India. This posture was reinforced when Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman publicly stated that India would increase its purchases of Russian oil. It strengthened the perception that India was prepared to absorb Western displeasure to protect both its energy security and its strategic autonomy.

Within this context, the announcement of a Putin-Modi summit suited both sides. For Moscow, it was a means of politically anchoring India's oil purchases. The visit's symbolism was further amplified by the fact that Putin rarely travels abroad, making any foreign trip a significant political investment. For India, the summit served as leverage like a reminder to Washington that tariff pressure and political rebukes had consequences.

Yet by November, the original logic has been inverted. India has sharply cut back Russian oil imports. Trade negotiations with the US have resumed with notably positive language. India has secured a one-year agreement with the United States to import approximately 2.2 million tonnes of LPG – marking the first structured US-LPG supply deal and covering around 10% of India's annual LPG requirements. New Delhi has framed this shift as a commercial adjustment rather than a political rupture. Firms such as Reliance citesanctions exposure, insurance limits, and financial risk as the drivers. Even Russian analysts increasingly reflect this view, describing Indian conglomerates as globalised entities forced to manage sanctions risk rather than as political defectors. From Moscow's vantage point, this is not the outcome originally envisaged. The visit, conceived as a symbol of continuity and

even expansion in the energy partnership, now arrives under the shadow of retrenchment. And yet, the summit has not been cancelled. It suggests both sides recognise that the India–Russia relationship still has functional utility beyond energy. It also points to an ongoing effort on both sides to identify new offsets that can compensate for the weakening of the oil pillar.

Defence Still Central, But Within Tight Western Constraints

For India, Russia's continuing relevance lies primarily in defence. Moscow remains a key supplier of engines, missiles, radars, and spares across large segments of India's military inventory. Yet this is also where New Delhi now encounters its sharpest constraints. India is simultaneously negotiating major trade agreements with both the United States and the European Union. The US track has revived after a prolonged freeze. On the European side, the political and economic stakes are equally high. India's Republic Day (26 January 2026) guests include the heads of the European Commission and the European Council, and negotiations toward a comprehensive India–EU free trade agreement are entering a sensitive phase. European signalling has already hardened. A rare joint editorial by three European ambassadors recently underscored expectations that Indian policy must reflect European strategic interests. Against this backdrop, New Delhi has little incentive to announce any major defence or security deal with Russia that could be read as a deliberate deepening of military dependence.

Security and defence will still dominate the rhetoric of the visit. But expectations of transformational outcomes are low. Incremental steps are more likely: discussions on radars and sensors, replenishment of munitions stocks especially S-400 interceptors and sustainment support for Russian-origin platforms already in service. Committees and working groups on

future systems may be announced, but these will largely be symbolic and exploratory rather than indicative of new strategic direction. The deeper defence interdependence that once defined the relationship now faces firm economic and diplomatic ceilings. Civilian nuclear cooperation, particularly small modular reactors, may also feature. There has likewise been talk of Indian participation in a urea fertiliser plant in Russia. Yet these proposals remain ambiguous. Similar initiatives have surfaced before during phases when India sought to signal diversification under external pressure. Historically, such announcements have rarely matured into durable economic anchors.

Mobility as the New Offset and the New Liability

The most consequential and controversial file emerging ahead of the visit is mobility. India's External Affairs Minister has recently underscored the growing importance New Delhi assigns to labour mobility agreements. Russia, for its part, is facing a deepening labour crisis. War mobilisation and demographic pressures have produced a shortfall estimated at roughly 2.6 million. To keep its industrial lines running, Russia is reportedlypaying domestic workers sharply higher wages while simultaneously importing labour from Central and East Africa and from North Korea under extremely harsh conditions.

For India, large-scale overseas employment remains an attractive release valve for domestic job pressures. Mobility agreements with partners such as Israel and Taiwan reflect this trend. A similar arrangement with Russia would, in theory, suit both sides. Russia would gain manpower for its industrial base. India would find a new destination for surplus labour. In this sense, mobility mirrors the earlier oil relationship. Where Russia previously relied on India as a revenue anchor for its energy exports, it now sees India as a

potential solution to its manpower deficit.

Yet the political and reputational risks here are acute. Much of Russia's industrial mobilisation today is linked, directly or indirectly, to sustaining its war economy. If Indian workers are deployed into Russian factories producing missiles, tanks, and munitions, the optics in Europe will be stark. European capitals, having successfully pressed India to draw down Russian oil purchases on the argument that energy revenues were helping finance the war, will inevitably ask whether India is now enabling the same war effort through manpower instead. This becomes harder to reconcile with India's simultaneous pursuit of a deep trade agreement with the European Union. The optics of finalising an FTA with Europe while exporting labour to Russian defence-linked industries will be politically uncomfortable for both sides. While mobility may not trigger the same level of blowback as oil did, it still risks cutting directly against the narrative India has carefully cultivated since 2022—that it is not complicit in sustaining Russia's military campaign.

There are also serious humanitarian and domestic implications. Indian workers sent to Russia are widely expected to face lower wages and harsher conditions than their Russian counterparts. Additionally, Indians have already been drawn into frontline roles in Ukraine through opaque recruitment channels, with fatalities reported. Against that background, a large-scale mobility agreement would expose New Delhi to political and moral liabilities it cannot fully control.

Taken together, the visit appears less like a moment of strategic convergence and more like a careful exercise in managing divergence. The summit was conceived as a signal of defiance at a moment when India felt targeted by Washington. It is now unfolding under the discipline of economic pragmatism, Western re-engagement, and reputational risk management. Defence cooperation will continue, but within

narrower limits. Energy will be managed in decline, not expansion. Mobility may emerge as the most tangible outcome, but it also carries the greatest political cost. In that sense, the visit will not so much reveal the strength of the India–Russia partnership as define its boundaries in a world where India’s economic and strategic centre of gravity is steadily broadening westward.