India-Russia Relations – Changing Nature

Why in news?

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov recently visited India, to make preparations for the upcoming visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin for the annual summit.

What are the highlights?

- On the bilateral front, both sides appeared to make progress on strategic cooperation, cooperation in energy, nuclear and space sectors.
- Also mentioned was the talk on a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).
- Discussions also involved more agreements on military-technical cooperation for the joint production of India-made Russian weapons.
- Mr. Lavrov highlighted that Russia was the only partner supplying India "cutting-edge military technology".
- Neither side referred to the upcoming delivery of the $5 billion S-400 missile defence system directly.
- However, they reaffirmed their commitment to their defence partnership.
- Affirmations included those on avenues for more investment in connectivity.
- This included the International North-South Transport Corridor and the Chennai-Vladivostok Eastern Maritime Corridor.

What were the conflicting areas?

- The areas of divergence over their worldview seemed to emerge during their public remarks.
- India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar made reference to the "rebalanced nature" of international relations.
- Mr. Lavrov's praise of Russia-China ties was clearly not shared by Mr. Jaishankar.
- While India's side referred repeatedly to India's "Indo-Pacific" strategy, Mr. Lavrov preferred the more continental reference to the "Asia-Pacific" region.
- Mr. Lavrov's indirect reference to the Quad as an "Asian NATO" was significant.
- He however said both sides agreed that military alliances in Asia were inadvisable and counterproductive.

- On Afghanistan as well, the Russian push for bringing the Taliban into a power-sharing arrangement in Kabul seemed to be against India's consistent push for a "democratic Afghanistan".
- Besides these, unlike earlier, the visit did not include a meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi.
- The absence of a meeting at the highest level is notable.
- To note, Mr. Modi met with U.S. Special Envoy John Kerry just a day later.
- Also, at his next stop, in Islamabad, Mr. Lavrov was received by Prime Minister Imran Khan and Pakistan Army Chief General Bajwa.
- This was Mr. Lavrov's first visit to Pakistan in 9 years, and was a clear message of deepening ties.
- Unlike in 2012, Mr. Lavrov, this time, said that Russia was ready to strengthen Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts with the supply of "relevant equipment."
- Given these, there is clearly an impression that New Delhi and Moscow are not as much on the same page as they have traditionally been.

What is the way forward?

- India and Russia have successfully addressed divergences between them in the past.
- Nevertheless, even the deep, traditional and "time-tested relations" of the kind they have shared for decades cannot be taken for granted.
- India and Russia should move quickly, if they desire to dispel the notion that those ties are under any strain by the changed reality.

Source: The Hindu

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