

Pranab Mukherjee**India intends to take relations with Belarus to a higher trajectory**

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The first official visit of Indian President Pranab Mukherjee to Belarus, scheduled for the first days of June, actually launches a new stage in relations between the two countries. Delhi and Minsk are nowadays finalizing a draft of the joint Roadmap, which, if approved by the heads of the two states, will significantly expand cooperation in virtually all sectors: from industry and IT-sector to education and culture.

On the eve of his arrival in Belarus Pranab Mukherjee gave an interview to BelTA in which His Excellency disclosed the topics to be in the focus of the upcoming high-level talks in Minsk and explained why Belarus and India are genuine partners in the international arena, but not competitors, despite the fact of developing similar trends in their economy and industry sectors.



Mr. President, India today is one of the largest economies in the world, a country with enormous potential and resources. As with any major power, India has its own ambitious plans both at the national level and in the international arena. Could you name the main ones?

India is today believed to be the fastest growing major economy in the world. Our primary goal is to achieve high growth and eliminate poverty. We believe India can grow close to 8.5 to 9 per cent over the next 10-15 years. Growing at 8 per cent will help India double its GDP in 9 years.

India has a large middle class of around 300 million people. This is a huge consumer market which no global business can afford to ignore. India is today one of the preferred FDI destinations in the world given our growth potential, a booming consumer market and skilled workforce.

Our agricultural sector is also strong. We are second in the world in both wheat and rice production. From a country dependent on food imports in the early days of our independence, we are now an exporter of these food commodities.

India is home to largest population of young in the world with over 50 percent of our 1.25 billion people below the age of 25 years. Within a decade, we are going to have the largest population in the working age bracket of 15-59 years, which will be roughly two-third of our population. The above will occur when advanced economies round the globe are likely to face a human resource crunch due to an ageing population. We hope to reap rich dividends from this demographic transition by producing competent and skilled workers in larger numbers.

Do You believe that cooperation with Belarus could be of good help in achieving all your goals?

First of all, I would like to confirm that Belarus is an important international partner to us. India was one of the first countries to establish diplomatic ties with Belarus after its independence in 1991. As you remember, former Prime Minister of India Mr. Rajiv Gandhi visited Minsk in 1985 – it was a part of his visit to the Soviet Union. I am honored to be the first Indian President to visit Belarus.

India, a vast market and economic giant, wishes to see a rapid and significant enhancement of our ties with Belarus. Belarus is the centre of Eurasia; it's a bridge between Europe and Asia. And the development of mutual cooperation will definitely benefit both our peoples. I do hope that the first official visit of Indian President to Belarus will step up our bilateral relationships and we will expand ties in many areas.

President of Belarus H.E. Mr. Lukashenko visited India in 2007. As the Indian Minister of foreign affairs at that

time, I had an opportunity to meet him during that visit and to discuss measures to develop ties between Belarus and India. I therefore hope to carry forward discussions on our bilateral relations now in Minsk. Though we have a broad agenda to discuss, the focus will be on strengthening economic and commercial ties, defence cooperation, science and technology linkages and educational exchanges. We will be releasing a Roadmap for our relations, which will outline the major areas and the way forward to achieve the desired outcomes in each of those areas.

My visit is intended to take our relations with Belarus to a higher trajectory.

Your Excellency, the official Minsk estimates the current bilateral trade rate in 400 million US dollar as low and not sufficient...

I agree that the current level of the trade of around US Dollar 400 million between our two countries is far below potential. We must address this and achieve much higher levels of trade and investment. Enhancing our trade and investment ties will be uppermost on the agenda for my talks with the President of Belarus.

As I mentioned, India and Belarus are finalizing a Roadmap for our relations focusing on economic and commercial cooperation, which will be issued during my visit. President Lukashenko and I will also address a business conference in Minsk, where we will discuss the way forward with business representatives. Sectors such as conventional and small-scale power generation, new and renewable energy, metallurgy and mining, automotive and agricultural engineering, pharmaceuticals, oil and gas, agriculture and food processing have been identified as areas of high potential. We can also expand our links in a range of services such as IT, healthcare, financial services, transport and logistics.

As for the energy sector, India has participated in the reconstruction of power facilities in Belarus.

Yes, we have cooperated successfully in the energy sector. Energy generation and transmission is an area in which India has well recognized expertise and cost competitiveness. These have been amply displayed in case of the BHEL's project in the Grodno power plant. Indian companies are willing to participate in more such projects.

Both India and Belarus are building Russia-designed nuclear power units. Can peaceful atom open a new avenue of cooperation between Belarus and India?

We would be glad to engage in discussions with Belarus on areas of mutual interest related to civil nuclear issues. As you may be aware, India's membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group is under discussion. Belarus has taken a supportive position on this within the NSG, which is deeply appreciated in India.

Potash, IT-technologies and heavy trucks are the pillars in our bilateral economic cooperation, experts say. How do you see the future development in these spheres?

It is true that we import substantial amount of potash fertilizers from Belarus – it's necessary for our food security program. On potash, Indian companies are interested in entering into long-term supply arrangements from Belarus. This will give an assured market to Belarus and a reliable source of supply for India. Our companies would also be open to invest in Potash mines in Belarus, if the terms are commercially viable.

I should mention that agricultural practices in India are changing, and we will require machinery that is produced by Belarusian companies like Gomselmash. It would be useful if Belarusian companies can set up subsidiaries or joint ventures in India to meet the requirements of the huge Indian market.

Indian mining industry is now poised at a new phase of growth. I am confident this will open up opportunities for Belarusian companies, especially if they were to work on a "Make in India" basis, which would be of mutual benefit. It would be worth considering manufacturing of dump trucks in India.

Personally, I do not see any competition between India and Belarus in IT. You may know that India has set up an IT Training Centre in Minsk which has provided high-level training to many Belarusian IT professionals. We believe that our established strengths in this area should spur greater cooperation. Our companies can

co-operate to service international and regional markets.

There are new ideas of cooperation in the areas of energy, technology, education. Our economic relationship is quite diverse and we are working together in many areas. We have excellent cooperation in defense as well as scientific research and development. Indian pharmaceutical companies have gained a foothold in the Belarus market and two Indian companies have opened their offices in Belarus. I am informed that four companies are in discussions with Belarusian partners for setting up joint ventures. The Belarus government has been very supportive. I hope the negotiations will progress and the companies will be able to work out commercially viable models for engagement. This will encourage other Indian companies also to consider entering the Belarusian market.

Does India have a deep interest in the long-term cooperation with a new major integration project - Eurasian Economic Union which was launched on 1 January?

India recognizes the value of regional cooperation in spurring economic growth and development. We are therefore active partners in several regional cooperation initiatives in our region.

We are keen to engage with the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Our negotiations on a Comprehensive Economic Partnership with the EEU are progressing well. We have finalized the terms of reference of the Joint Study Group which will prepare a feasibility study. We have set ourselves an ambitious timeframe to complete the process.

The President of Belarus has repeatedly stressed that Belarus and India are the allies on the international arena, supporting each other in key international organizations. How do you see the role of Belarus in our region and the world? What main current global challenges are of India's concern?

Belarus has played an exemplary role in facilitating a negotiated settlement to recent developments in the Ukraine. The Minsk Declaration and Package of Measures of February 2015 offer the way forward towards a peaceful outcome. India deeply appreciates and welcomes the efforts of President Lukashenko in this regard.

India and Belarus have excellent cooperation in multilateral fora, such as the United Nations. Our countries have similar approaches on several international issues. India will continue to work together with Belarus both bilaterally and in various multilateral organizations, even as we work towards enhancing bilateral political dialogue through regular exchanges of high-level visits and Ministerial interaction.

The primary objective of India's diplomacy is to create the conditions necessary for India's national development and to address the problems of poverty and underdevelopment of our people. In doing so, we seek to build a network of cooperative relationships with all other countries based on mutual interests and shared benefits.

We see ourselves as inheritors of the legacy of Gautama Buddha and Mahatma Gandhi. Our commitment to democracy, peace, rule of law, religious tolerance and non-violence is therefore unshakable.

We are the largest democracy in the world and a founder member of the United Nations as well as the Bretton Woods Institutions. We believe that all disputes internally as well as in the world must be resolved through peaceful means and without resort to force.

India engages vigorously on all international issues concerning security, world trade, economic development, climate change etc. Permit me to add that the biggest threat the world confronts today is terrorism. India opposes terrorism in all its forms and manifestations. We believe terrorism should be dealt with in a comprehensive manner. Segmented and partial approaches adopted by some countries have historically been unsuccessful in countering terrorism. Terrorism recognizes no borders. Addressing this challenge requires comprehensive and coordinated international cooperation as well as a strengthened international legal regime.

Frankly speaking, India believes that international organizations created post World War II are outdated and must be reformed to reflect the realities of the 21st century. We feel we have a legitimate claim to a greater voice and enhanced institutional role in international decision making processes and structures, especially the UN Security Council and International Financial Institutions. Belarus is an important partner in our efforts.

Marta ASTREIKO



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