
India and Russia: The Evolving Contours of A New Strategic Relationship

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“The strategic relationship between India and Russia has served not only in the long term national interest of both countries but also effectively contributed to stability and security in Asia, and world in General”



Introduction:

During the cold war years India and Russia enjoyed a close strategic relationship which reached its peak with the signing of Treaty of peace and friendship and cooperation 1971 between India and Soviet Union. When India emerged as an independent country in 1947, U.S. tried to woo India to its side in the evolving cold war bipolar world. But India was just casting off the yoke of colonialism and had deep suspicion of the Anglo-American policies in the post-World War II international politics. Moreover, the US was allergic to the display of socialistic inclinations of the top leadership in India led by the inimitable Jawaharlal Nehru which almost inevitably drew

India closer to the erstwhile USSR and China. Nehru's flirting with China ended with the Chinese attack on India in 1962; however, the relationship with USSR picked up especially since the mid-1960s and brought the two countries so close to each other that John Foster Dulles would look at it with suspicion and comments that: "Soviet Communism exercises a strong influence through the interim Hindu Government"¹

Since India gained Independence, the relationship between India and the then USSR was so close that at times, India was labeled as an ally of Soviet Union in spite of its emphasis on non-alignment. Some of the points that can be highlighted about the relationship between the two countries are:

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INDIA AND RUSSIA: THE EVOLVING CONTOURS OF A
NEW STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIP

India- Russia Strategic cooperation has been good as long as Russia gave primacy to its Indian Relationship.

India- Russia strategic relationship reached its highest point when China stood excluded from Russian Foreign policy priorities.

India-Russia strategic relationship was good as long as China figured in Russian threat perceptions. This was when China engaged in Quasi- Strategic alliance with USA.

In International Relations there are contextual imperatives that prompt forging of strategic relationship or undoing them. This also applies to Indo- Russia Strategic relationship.²

The relationship underwent a sea change after the collapse of USSR and change in geopolitical scenario. When Soviet Union disintegrated, Indian defense industry had to desperately look in all possible directions to find alternative sources of supply and establish defense and strategic cooperation with countries hitherto ignored from strategic point of view. It established Diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992, and also developed Strategic and Defense relations with France.

However with passing of time there was improvement in overall economic situation of Russia and the bonhomie which existed during Soviet times came back to reestablish the spirit of friendship that characterized their relationship during the cold war days. During Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's visit to Indian in December 2008, both the sides agreed "to elevate their strategic partnership to a qualitatively higher level and to promote and further their ties of friendship, cooperation, mutual understanding, trust and confidence in each other." There are various facets of this relationship which need detailed study and analysis.

Defense Cooperation:

Cooperation in the field of defense happens to be the core of India-Russia bilateral ties. With independence of India, India's defense establishment looked toward USSR for development of its military hardware and technology and hence majority of Indian Defense infrastructure as well as equipment is of Soviet origin. The Soviet scientists were strong in all branches of science and technology except in the upcoming field of micro-electronics, micro-miniaturizing and software that goes with it.

India's military dependence on Russia was total since 1965 in terms of supply and even joint-production of military hardware for all the three arms of its armed forces. The existing inventories of Russian equipment and the large scale orders currently contracted or under discussion are well-known and stand well-documented in a number of publications.

There are certain points which can be highlighted regarding defense co-operation between the two countries over the last 60 Years.

After 30 years of reliance on Soviet/Russian hardware, India finds itself in a position where its armed forces are critically dependent on Russian equipment and spares in all the three wings of the Indian forces, viz., Army (75%), Air- Force (80%) and Navy (85%).³

The 10-year Indo-Russian Agreement upto 2010 on military technical co-operation which includes advanced weapons system is worth \$ 15 billion.⁴

Estimates show that over 800 defense production facilities are kept in operation by Indian Defense Contracts.⁵

Russian military industrial complex will be hard-pressed to survive without India as a reliable client.⁶

India is a major source of hard currency (through sale of weapons and defence equipments) for Russia which is yet to consolidate its economy.⁷

Negative Fallout

The overwhelming Indian military dependence on Russia has its negative fall-out which can be described as follows:

India's defence purchases from Russia are no longer made in rupee but in hard currency.

Russian spare parts are now sold at higher rates (viz. over 300-500% hike as compared to earlier years).

In the early 1990s when India-Russia relations dipped temporarily, spare parts for Indian Weapon system were virtually stopped affecting India's military readiness.

India's over-reliance on Russian weapons system has been one of the main reasons for the slow progress of India's indigenous weapons industry.

Russia has been coercive during critical situations with regard to supply of defence equipment.

Quality of Russian weapons system in recent past has been poor and defective compared to other international suppliers. This has created disquiet in India's Military circles. Some reports indicate that as high as 80% of Russian Systems are found defective in performance. In the past, the then Indian Defence Minister, George Fernandes had to raise this point officially during his recent visit to Moscow.⁸

Areas of Defence Co-operation since the Post-Cold War

Since the end of cold war India's relations with different countries in the field of defence underwent some changes. India searched for new partners like France and Israel. However, the cooperation with Russia remained in spite of several new tensions and irritants.

Admiral Gorskov (INS Vikramaditya Deal)

The first major area of co-operation in the field of defence with Russia was the willingness of Indian Navy to purchase the 45,000 tone aircraft

carrier, Admiral Gorskov. It is a modified Kiev class aircraft carrier of the Russian Navy, originally named Baku which was sold to India for conversion into a STOBAR (Short Take Off But Arrested Recovery) carrier to be named INS Vikramaditya. The deal was signed between the two countries on January 20, 2004 after nearly a decade of negotiations. There has been lot of controversy over the buying of this carrier, and several experts were against this deal.

There were many irritants in purchase of Admiral Gorskov. There has been a delay of nearly almost six years on account of refurbishment of the aircraft carrier and now priced at double the costs projected at the contractual stage (from 1.5 billion to 3.4 billion US Dollars).

Similarly construction and delivery of three Talwar class 'Stealth' frigates (modified Krivak III class frigates) ordered at a total cost of nearly one and half billion rupees at a shipyard in Kalingrad, is hit by delays. Reasons other than simple production problems are being talked about, i.e., Russian attitude, the experience and expertise of the Russian technocrats and other similar concerns. There are hints that

there is more to it than what meets the eye and that resources are being diverted elsewhere. An enormous delay in the MIG -21 upgradation and “major weakness” in performance and reliability of engines and systems is being identified as yet another area of Russian mal-performance.⁹

After much deliberation in early 2008, Russia agreed to supply India Admiral Gorshkov but not earlier than 2012 and the cost would be more than the agreed cost of 1.5 bn dollars, India will pay probably more than twice of the original price, which is now estimated at 3.4 billion USD. Russian arguments are that Admiral Gorshkov would be more sophisticated than it was before as it would include:

- * Addition of a new Arrestor gear for the planes.
- * Build a new ski jump for the MIG 29 planes.
- * Install new boilers in the engine room.
- * Lay cables, estimates at 2,400 km.¹⁰

Nuclear Submarine

The Gorshkov deal was in fact only part of a package that included the

lease of two 971 Shakula- B or Akhula Class Nuclear Submarines and several strategic TU-22 (NATO Destination ‘Backfire’) bombers.¹¹ This submarine deal was not without irritants too. There were reports that Russians had earlier (in 1991 under Gorbachev) backed out of the Nuclear Submarine deal with India under pressure from USA.¹²

The issue is in the news again. Citing Russian soilders, Vladimr Radyuhin wrote in the daily newspaper *The Hindu* (December 7, 2005) that the lease of nuclear propelled submarines to India was in the pipeline. Under \$ 1.8 billion contract for a ten year lease, the Russian side had resumed the deal which was frozen in the 1990’s. Subsequently, in October, 2005, 200 Indian Naval officers started a training centre at Sosnoviji Bar near St. Petersburg.¹³

The Indian Navy is likely to commission the INS Chakra, the 12,000 tonne Akula- II class nuclear powered attack submarine, from the far eastern Russian port of Vladivostok in August 2009. The submarine, which is being built at a shipyard in Komsomolsk on Amur, marks the fruition of a \$650 million (Rs 2,600 Crore) deal signed by the NDA government almost four and

half years ago, which said that India would finance the construction of an unfinished Russian Nuclear submarine hull and then lease it for 10 years. The impending acquisition of the Chakra is likely to give India the long awaited third leg of the nuclear triad— the others being air and land-based nuclear delivery platforms— widely regarded as the most survivable mode of launching nuclear weapons.

India- Russia Collaboration in Weapons Development

Throughout the cold war years, India and erstwhile USSR worked in close co-operation in the defence sector and even worked jointly in the field of weapons development and production. Since the collapse of USSR the relationship has failed to regain the importance it had earlier.

During the Soviet days USSR defence expenditure was large and so at that time they could finance production in large scale. However, at present, Russia is not in a position to finance the production of weapons on a large scale. It has offered to conduct “Joint Development and Production of Weapons Systems” with India, which has no doubt been appreciated and welcomed by India.¹⁴

From the mid-1990's, this has become the *leit motif* of Indo- Russian dialogue. Russian Defence minister Sergei Ivanov captured this mood earlier when he said, “We are prepared to transfer high technology to India in Strategic tie-up based on a new pattern of defense cooperation. From the Indian perspectives, joint development and production of major weapons systems offers a significant advantage, vis-à-vis earlier licensed production which only taught us to assemble kits and sub-assemblies but not design and manufacture of components”¹⁵.

Major Joint Development and Production Projects:

Another area of cooperation between Russia and India happens to be joint development and production of weapons. Since its inception of cooperation in the field of defence the two countries have undertaken various defence projects.

5th Generation Fighter Aircraft:

For many years both Russia and India have been considering joint development of the 5th Generation Multi-role fighter and transport aircraft. The Intention was reiterated during the December 2005 visit of Indian Prime minister Man Mohan

Singh to Russia. The Russian Government has already selected the Sukhoi aviation firm for the purpose and likewise allocated funds. However, the size of the Sukhoi aircraft does not find much favour with Indians.¹⁶

RIA Novosti (January 18, 2006) in one of its news reports argued that "Moscow should develop both a light engine plane and a heavy fighter. Russia needs a heavy duty fighter and its weaponry and electronics have always been bulky". The Sukhoi-developed 5th Generation fighter would be a heavy aircraft. Furthermore, India and France might help Russia become popular in international market. A competition is going on between Sukhoi and MIG Aviation firms in Russia. MIG proposes to build a lighter aircraft.¹⁷

During the visit of Pranab Mukherjee, the then Defence Minister, to Moscow, a joint commission on military technical co-operation was established which highlighted that some of the major programmes considered for progressing between the two countries in view of joint partnership were "the development and production of 5th generation aircraft and procurement of three major figures. On the joint development and production of multi role

transport aircraft, it was decided that India and Russia will have equal participation and work share keeping in view the financial and economic viability of the project".¹⁸

Formal protocol was signed by the Defence Ministers of the two countries on the outcome of the meeting of the 5th India-Russia Inter Governmental Commission on Military Technical Cooperation. Two separate protocols were also signed by the heads of the working Group on Military Technical Co-operation and Ship Building, Aviation and Land Systems. These Working groups had detailed deliberations on defence cooperation activities between the two countries.¹⁹

The sixth Inter-Governmental Commission meeting witnessed the strategic depth of India-Russia defence relations which were widened to encompass non-defence strategic areas such as Information Technology and space research. In his remarks, the present Indian Defence Minister Shri AK Anthony said that Indo-Russian Defense cooperation is interdependent and mutually beneficial. He said this had graduated from a single buyer-seller relationship to joint research, development and production. Referring to the Indo-Russian joint venture *Brahmos*, Shri Anthony said

that India would like to have more such joint efforts in the years to come. He also indicated that both countries were in an advanced stage of negotiations in the joint development and production of multi-role transport aircraft and fifth generation fighter aircraft. Shri Anthony emphasized that Russia was the only country with whom India had an institutionalized mechanism at the level of defence ministers to monitor military technical cooperation.

Medium Transport Aircraft Development Programme:

The development of MTA has been assigned greater urgency in India. MTA negotiations between two countries began in late 1990's and in 2000 the \$700 million project became part of 10-year India-Russian Military Technical Cooperation Programme. The investment shared between the two came to light as Russians wanted 19.5 tonnes of carrying capacity while the Indians were satisfied with 14-16 tonnes. Russia wanted to develop PS-12 engine to power the aircraft at the cost of \$3-4 billion. The Indians are inclined to use French or U.S. Engines.²⁰ Recent reports suggest that both the sides are close to agreement to resolve the issue. The cargo carrying capacity of the MTA will be 20 tonnes, but the Indian MTA's will be

powered by Snecma Moteurs CFM 56-7 turbo fans. Solutions for the glass cockpits will be considered from the French firm, Thales. IAF will acquire 45 and the Russian side 60 Units.²¹

Co-operation in Space – Glonass:

Co-operation in space research happens to be one of the most important fields of cooperation between India and Russia. This co-operation has been on the rise in recent years.

During President Putin's visit to India in December 2004, an agreement was signed between Roskonov and ISRO on joint use of the Soviet era Global Navigational Satellite System (Glonass) by making it fully functional by joint efforts, including of new Russian satellites from Indian launch-pads with the help of Indian vehicles. The deal will reduce India's dependence on the US GPS (Global Positioning System), which may be denied in times of conflict.²²

During Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's December 2005 visit, an agreement was signed on measures to protect technology during long term cooperation in Joint

Development, operation and use of the Glonass for peaceful purpose.²³ Vladimir Radyuhin, however, opines that GLONASS shall be used by both the countries for civil as well as military purposes.²⁴

India and Russia have also had dialogue on the possibility of co-operation, including missions to the moon and Mars. General Anatory Perinov, Head of federal Space Agency, Russia, met Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) chairman G. Madhavan Nair on the sidelines on the 58th International Astronautical Congress (IAC) in 2007.²⁵ In the meanwhile, India has launched its lunar mission "Chandrayan I".

Under the Indo-Russia joint project CORONAS- PHOTON, the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research is likely to supply low energy gamma-ray telescopes for a Russian spacecraft that would be launched to study solar physics.²⁶

Discussions have also been held to explore the possibility of India launching the Russian GLONASS- M satellites from its GSLV platforms and join Russia in developing the next generation Glonass-K satellites for the Russian Global Navigational Systems.²⁷

Future Perspectives:

A more holistic view needs to be taken in many areas of cooperation between India and Russia in future. Even in the realm of military cooperation, it is imperative for upgrading the military cooperation to a much broader "Defence cooperation" at strategic level. This argument arises from two major aspects of bilateral relationship that is indisputable. Firstly, relations between India and Russia have stood the test of time. They have come out stronger after negotiating many a challenge. Second, particularly after the treaty of peace and Friendship of 1971, Russia has increasingly treated India as an important strategic partner.²⁸

As the much touted world order is evolving, various developments at the international level warrant both countries to chart out a broader comprehensive course in their bilateral relations. A few global, regional and strategic issues that warrant such reorientation on the part of India's thinking are highlighted as follows:

- a)Development of Security Doctrines.
- b)Dealing with terrorism and insurgency.

- c) Relations with Central and West Asian Regions.
- d) Cooperation in the field of cyber and space technologies.

Development of Doctrines

Ever since India emerged as independent nation, both India and Russia have had a fairly healthy relationship based on mutual interest and understanding. They have pledged to cooperate in the joint development of aircraft, ships, submarines and space-based navigational systems.

While these are indeed welcome developments and will further consolidate Military Technical Cooperation, it is important that future requirements of weapons systems and platforms must be derived from respective doctrines. In the case of Indo-Russia military cooperation, dealing with common threats to peace and stability within the region in particular and world in general offer good common ground for development of doctrines.²⁹

The Problems of Terrorism and Insurgency

Terrorism is now considered as major threat across the world.

Terrorism is in fact a new form of warfare which does not respect International boundaries. And similarly both Russia and India are facing problems of terrorism, insurgency as well as drug trafficking. Hence, both countries should cooperate in developing strategies and technologies for fighting insurgency and terrorism. Technology could assist security forces engaged in fighting terrorist organizations; anti-IED (Impoverished explosive devise) systems is a case in point. This needs to encapsulate in a comprehensive and well-articulated counter-terrorism doctrine. Both countries should expand the military technical cooperation further to include preparation of conceptual framework for such a doctrine.³⁰

Another common problem for both the countries is that of insurgency. Like terrorism, its conduct differs from region to region. There should be enhanced cooperation in counter insurgency operations to assist the respective security forces to assist the respective security forces to improve methods, tactics and techniques in dealing with the problem.³¹

Various working groups has been held between the two countries to combat International Terrorism. The

two sides have shared concern regarding terrorism and emphasized the importance of actions by all states to deny safe heaven to terrorists. They have stressed the necessity of taking more efficient measures on preventing the propagation of terrorism, including in the cyberspace. The importance of Broader Dialogue among cultures and civilizations to counter divisiveness, on which terrorists thrive, has also been underlined in their dialogue.

In this context two sides have called for unconditional implementation of the UNSC Resolution 1624 on fighting incitement of terrorism. They have also condemned terrorism in all forms and manifestations and reiterated their commitment to further strengthen counter-Terrorism cooperation. The two sides have agreed to enhance cooperation in the international fora, especially in suppressing WMD terrorism. Both the sides have noted that the early entry into force of the international convention on suppression of acts of Nuclear Terrorism (ICSANT) would fight this objective.³²

The most recent joint-statement which came out during President Medvedev's visit to India after

Mumbai terrorist attacks in December 2008 has emphasized on joint cooperation to fight the menace of terrorism.

Both Sides also expressed concern that narco-business is becoming more fused with terrorist and extremist activities, which made "it urgent to intensify joint efforts to address global threat in the framework of the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the Russian Federation on cooperation to combat illicit trafficking in narcotics, psychotropic substances and their precursors signed in Moscow on 12 November 2007."

Space and Cyber Space

Space and cyber-space are the new frontiers of national security. India and Russia have been cooperating with each other in the field of space technologies for many years. India is opposed to weaponisation of space. Indian space programme is primarily designed for development purposes. Indian satellites perform metrological functions considered to be very important for the agricultural sector that is a major component of our economy. If such satellites are threatened with destruction, it will affect food production and, hence

India's food security. It is, therefore, axiomatic that both countries need to go beyond the current project to work more emphatically towards common security and peace in the region.

Central and West Asian Region

These two regions are very important not only for peace and stability but also from political and economic point of view. There are large reserves of oil and gas in these regions which make them important for India's energy security. Russia has considerable influence in Central Asia. Russia itself is emerging as a major source of oil and gas; therefore, it would be able to influence the world energy economics in times to come. India has taken note of Russia's energy potential as one of the strengths of Russia's national strategy and should endeavour to establish partnership in the energy sector instead of merely looking at a buyer seller relationship.

India has shared its concern over the growing Terrorism and Religious extremism in Central Asian region. In a statement issued at the end of Summit level talks between the two leaders in Moscow in November 2001, both sides had expressed deep

concern over the threat to the security and stability in Central Asia posed by international terrorism and religious extremism. Both sides agreed that 'Regional Cooperation can play an important role in stabilization of situation in Central Asian region.

Hence with the tacit approval of Russia, India has expanded its presence in the region in the shape of providing military assistance and training to the armed forces in the Central Asian States (CAS). India has opened a military base in Farkhov, Tajikistan.³³

The other important aspects of Central and West Asian regions from military and defense perspective that need close cooperation between our two countries relate to India's possible role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. These examples are cited only to emphasize how a broad-based, deep and wide relationship can be framed in the future.³⁴

Conclusion

Since the end of cold war and change in geo-political realities India had to find different partners in the areas of strategic cooperation. India found Israel to be a suitable partner

in the area of cooperation in defence. France is another country with whom India has entered into a cooperative relationship, especially in the field of defence. However, traditionally, and even now, Russia has been India's natural ally in the field of cooperation in defence and in post-cold war period Russia has made vitally important contribution in the development of India's defence potential.

At a time when other countries were not willing to share their weapon technology, Russia was the lone country which offered access to its sophisticated weapons and advanced technologies. In the post-USSR days and during the difficult transition period, arms-purchases by India and China helped the Russian Military Industrial Complex (MIC) to tide over the crisis and survive. As a major arms supplier to both India and China, Russia favoured triangular cooperation between Russia, China and India. However, this is an irritant from India's point of view, as the boundary dispute with China is yet to be resolved. Russia's continued arms supply to China and Transfer of Russian technology to Pakistan from China add to Delhi's worries. However, at the present juncture, if India-Russia relationship suffers a setback, it may make Russia even more dependent on China.

It would be rather foolhardy to say that any country can be fully self-reliant in defence-related technology. It is considered opinion of the Indian Strategic community that the country must be self-reliant in areas where technology denial regimes are imposed, like nuclear and missile technologies.

In other areas, India may search for overseas partners for instance Israel, France and even Russia. Joint development and production of new weapons systems may emerge as a very promising area in the continued Indo-Russian relationship. It may provide continuity and stability to existing ties. India should search for overseas partners in the field of Avionics and other electronic systems (Israel, France and other countries). Competition among suppliers may indeed be good and has already produced beneficial results. In the pursuit of its enlightened national interests, it is to be expected that India would seek to leverage its position as major defence buyer, and so would Russia as a supplier.

In the 21st century geo-political scenario, all the major actors are engaging each other. India's ties with Russia will continue to be driven by not only common strategic and geopolitical interests but also shared interests in the defence sector.

INDIA AND RUSSIA:THE EVOLVING CONTOURS OF A
NEW STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIP

They would, however, need to adjust sectors if they want to sustain a policies wherever necessary for robust relationship in the new global enhancing mutual gains in vital environment. ■

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INDIA AND RUSSIA:THE EVOLVING CONTOURS OF A
NEW STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIP

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INDIA AND RUSSIA:THE EVOLVING CONTOURS OF A
NEW STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIP

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