

INDIA AND RUSSIA – REVIVING COOPERATION AND COLLABORATION A PARADIGM CHANGE IN SOUTH - EAST ASIA’S POLITICS

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Abstract

The relationship between India and Russia dates back to the 1950's. Both the countries shared a strong cultural bond..... from cinemas to circuses and so on. Since the signing of the "*Indo-Russia Strategic Partnership Declaration*" in October 2000, Indo-Russia relations have seen an increased cooperation in almost all areas of bilateral relations, including political, security, defence, trade and economy, science and technology, and culture

Though the non – alignment policy of India during the Cold War was initially an impediment to our bilateral relation but gradually India and the Soviet Union developed a strong strategic, military, economic and diplomatic relationship. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russia inherited its close ties with India, resulting in the two countries sharing a special strategic relationship.

However, relations have taken a severe turn in the last few years. The biggest reason for this is Russia's close ties with China and Pakistan, which have caused many geopolitical issues for India over the years. The Chinese offensive in the border areas of eastern Ladakh marked a turning point in India - China relations, also demonstrating that Russia could contribute to easing tensions with China.

In addition to traditional areas of cooperation such as weapons, hydrocarbons, nuclear energy, and diamonds, new areas of economic engagement are likely to emerge – mining, agro-industrial and technology, including robotics, nanotech, and biotech etc. India's footprint is set to expand in the Russian Far East and the Arctic. Connectivity projects can also get a boost. To counter terrorism India and Russia are working to bridge the gap between Afghanistan and both countries have called for early finalization of the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism.

In addition, Russia supports India's candidature for permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG).

Russia has been one of the largest arms exporters to India. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, which tracks the global arms trade, India has imported arms worth US\$ 35 billion from Russia in the last 20 years. Russia will remain a major defence partner for India for decades to come.

Keywords: Defence, global, superpower, agreement, bipolar, multilateral system, UNSC, compatibility, security.

Indo - Russian friendship is achieving new heights in the recent past. Recently, the Russian Premier *Vladimir Putin's* visit to India was a great success. During this, the 19th Annual Summit was held between the two countries in New Delhi on 4th & 5th October, 2018. A total of *EIGHT Agreements*¹ were signed between the two countries including the developing of *S - 400 missile system*. Apart from this, there was mutual agreement on nuclear energy cooperation, tourism, participation in '*Gaganyaan Mission*' and the promotion of trade between the two countries. After the *S - 400 defence deal*, the defence cooperation of both the countries has escalated to a new strength. With this, on the one hand India's security system will be strengthened, whereas on the other hand, the reaction of India's neighbouring countries including global superpowers like America and China will also see a far-reaching consequence of this agreement.

Recently, the much awaited S - 400 defence agreement between India and Russia has been signed at Hyderabad House. The two countries signed the agreement after three rounds of talks between Prime Minister Modi and President Putin in New Delhi. This agreement of more than 5 billion dollars is a milestone in increasing India's defence capability.

This defence relationship between the two countries can be seen in the context of the deepening of Indo - Russian relations since 1960s, when the politics of the Cold War almost divided the world into two factions. Later the Soviet Union broke up and gradually the global political geography transformed from bipolar to multilateral system but in this changing global scenario one thing never changed and that was the defence relations between India & Russia. It is to be known that Russia alone contributes to 68 % of India's entire defence imports.

Significantly, in the years immediately following Indian independence, the Soviet Union strongly opposed India's policy of non-alignment. But the Indo - Russia relationship improved significantly after Stalin's regime, and thereafter the Soviet Union was seen as a major ally of India. The Soviet Union assisted India in many projects. Diplomatic relations between the two countries was further strengthened when the *First Secretary of the Communist Party, Nikita Khrushchev* visited India in 1955. Khrushchev supported India on the claim of Kashmir and Goa at that time. Goa was at that time under Portuguese possession. After that the Soviet Union continued to maintain friendly relations with India on several occasions in international forums. On the 22nd June, 1962, the Soviet Union supported India on the Kashmir issue using its veto power in the United Nations Security Council. In fact, Ireland had presented a resolution in the Security Council regarding the Kashmir issue, which was supported by the USA, France, Britain, China, Chile and Venezuela besides Ireland. A conspiracy of the western countries against India was behind this proposal. Its purpose was to snatch Kashmir from India and give it to Pakistan. But USSR proved to be a faithful friend of India at that time and vetoed this proposal at the Security Council of the UN. Even before this, in 1961, the Soviet had used its veto in favour of India on the Goa issue.

In the 1962 war, China hoped that Russia would help it in the Indo-China war, but Russia did not support anyone in this war. By 1960, the situation became such that Russia started financially helping India more than China. The Soviet Union first provided two *Il - 14 transport aircrafts* to India in 1955. Then in 1960, twenty-four *Il - 14s* were sold to India in. In 1961, Russia agreed to purchase equipment, including ten *Mi-14* helicopters, eight *An-12* transport aircraft, six jet engines, and sixteen *Mi-4s* helicopters. It may be mentioned that prior to Indo-Soviet defence relations, India was completely dependent on its former rulers for all its military equipment. The *MiG-21* deal was indeed a matter of deep trouble for the British, as they feared the breakdown of the Indo-British military cooperation arrangement.

After the Indo-China war of 1962, the Indian government realized the need to strengthen its defence system with more modern warfare equipment. During this period, for the first time India reached out to the US for defence assistance. But due to the world politics that was divided among factions, it had to return empty handed. The only major arms exporting country that helped India in these circumstances in the 60's and 70's was the Soviet Union, and India was completely dependent on the Soviet Union for its defence requirements. Since then, Russia has remained one of the most important suppliers of defence equipment to India.

In 1971, East Pakistan broke away from Pakistan and India helped in the formation of Bangladesh. During this, India also signed the *Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation*, which is said to be India's first escape from the policy of non-alignment. This inclination of India towards Soviet became the immediate cause of US-China closeness. China has always been a factor in influencing relations between India and Russia. The threat of China had brought India and Russia closer to each other, but after the end of the Cold War, the equations of relations between Russia and China have changed. Russia's approach to China has become somewhat flexible due to the resolution of border disputes between Russia and China, expanding economic and trade ties, and China's large-scale import of Russian weapons and defence technology. Relations between Russia and China continued to grow closer in relation to strategic interests. India, China and Russia are standing together on platforms like BRICS and S.C.O. India needs to adjust to the new and positive relations between Russia and China.

Although the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991, it continued to play its role as the most important supplier of defence equipment to India. Over the time, the relationship between the two countries became more and more intense, instead of being restricted between a buyer and a seller. These included joint research and development contracts in addition to defence agreements. In 1997 Russia and India signed a ten-year agreement for military-technical cooperation that included the production of weapons, the marketing of weapons and military technologies. A joint naval exercise between India and Russia was conducted in the Sea of Japan (East Sea) in

2007 and a joint air exercise was conducted in Russia in September 2007. The first-ever tri-services exercise – ‘INDRA 2017’ took place in Vladivostok from October 19 – 29 in 2017. From December 13-16, the bilateral Russian-Indian naval exercise ‘Indra 2018’ was held in the Bay of Bengal.

From the 8th to the 19th of December 2019, India and Russia conducted a joint tri-services exercise called ‘INDRA 2019’ at Babina, Pune, and Goa. Representatives from the Indian Armed Forces and the Russian Federation’s Eastern Command took part in the exercises, which aimed to increase field, marine, and flight skills as well as improve collaboration between both nations. From the 1st to 13th of August, 2021, India and Russia conducted the 12th edition of joint military exercise ‘INDRA – 21’ in Volgograd, Russia.

In 1998, a joint venture was established as BrahMos Aerospace between India's *Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO)* and Russia's Federal State Unitary Enterprise - *NPO Mashinostroyeniya (NPOM)*. BrahMos is a cruise missile that can be launched onto targets from aircraft, ship or land. Several trials of BrahMos have been conducted since 2004. After that in the year 2016, both the countries entered into an agreement to make a new generation of *BrahMos* with higher missile range. In 2012, when President Putin visited India, the two countries signed a defence agreement for the production of 42 new Sukhoi aircraft. This was part of the consignment of 230 Sukhoi aircrafts, already ordered to Russia. Apart from these, India has procured several other military hardware from Russia including *Akula-II nuclear submarine* and *INS Vikramaditya, INS Chakra, T-70 and T-90 tanks*.

This deal was done during the Indo - Russian 19th annual summit in the year 2018, after which the United States warned India not to enter into a defence deal with Russia. This was expected to affect New Delhi's cooperation and relations with Washington, but later the US softened its stand on this deal. Previously, the US had imposed strict defence restrictions on Russia, according to which it was prohibited to enter into any kind of defence deal with Russia. Ahead of Putin's visit to India, US President Trump issued a warning stating that the defence deal went against the US Defence Trade Sanctions Act (Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act - CAATSA), which restricts defence purchases from Russia, Iran and North Korea. Although India was in constant talks with the US administration for exemption from this ban, but till the commencement of the deal, there was no clear indication from the US that it would exempt this agreement. It is to be known that, President Trump announced the inclusion of China under this ban, as it started the delivery of Su-35 fighter jets and S-400 systems from Russia.

On this defence deal between India and Russia, the US has given a strict response saying that “*Russia's defence agreement with India has been done with the aim of enabling its global partners. Its goal is not to increase the military power of a country or to put any country under pressure. If these defence deals are not misused, then defence sanctions can be relaxed for vulnerable countries like India.*” At the same time, the US said that there is no harm in easing the CAATSA defence sanctions in terms of pre-determined defence agreements and defence equipment of purchased weapons.

The S - 400 defence system is very important for India. This will make it impossible for the army of enemy countries to enter the Indian airspace. With the help of this Russia's most advanced defence system, India will not only protect its land and sky, but will also be able to give a befitting reply to the nuclear attack of neighbouring hostile countries. India will be able to destroy 36 nuclear powered ballistic missiles of neighbouring hostile countries by targeting them simultaneously. This air defence system has a range of 400 kilometres will have the ability to track any target coming from afar. Experts claim that the S-400 system is capable of shooting down fifth-generation state-of-the-art American F-35 fighter jets as well. Similarly, China has also tested its 5th generation fighter plane J-20A. Along with this, Pakistan is also working on Project AZF to develop 5th generation fighter planes with the help of China, which is a serious concern for India. In such a situation, it is necessary for India to make its security system impenetrable. With the induction of the S-400 system in the Indian Army, the security system of the army will become very strong.

There have been two rounds of talks between the US and India in the past, in which India has signed a third basic agreement - *Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA)* with the United States Of America. India says that its relations with Russia will go a long way. Also, India's defence deal with Russia is a part of India's strategic autonomy.

A total of eight agreements have been signed by both the countries including cooperation on India's ambitious human space mission project *Gaganyaan*. An important MoU was signed between the *Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO)* and the *Federal Space Agency of Russia 'Roskomos'*, which included joint activities in the field of manned space program *Gaganyaan*. Both the countries retaliated that they are committed to each other to cooperate in the fight against terrorism. Along with this, a target was set to take the joint trade between the

two countries to US\$ 30 billion by the year 2020. India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj visited Russia, with a target to increase trade between India and Russia to US\$ 50 billion by the year 2025. India largely exports drugs, iron, steel, clothing, tea, coffee and tobacco to Russia while Russia exports defence materials, nuclear energy materials, electronics machines, steel and diamonds to India. Russia has contributed a lot in the industrialization of India. Russia's technical and economic help has played a big role in the development of India. Russia has helped India in setting factories at Bokaro, Bhilai and Visakhapatnam, Bhakra Nagal Hydroelectric Dam, Durgapur Plant, Thermal Power Station at Neyveli, Power Plant at Cobra, Antibiotics Plant at Rishikesh and Hyderabad Pharmaceutical Plant. Russia also assisted in the establishment of the Indian Institute of Technology in Mumbai, and the Research Institute of Petroleum Industry in Dehradun and Ahmedabad. Russia is an important partner of India in the peaceful use of nuclear energy. Russia considers India a country with advanced nuclear energy technology with a flawless nuclear non-proliferation record. Russia has played a big role in the construction of India's Kudankulam nuclear power plant and other plants. In December 2014, the two countries also signed a Strategic Vision to enhance cooperation in the field of nuclear energy. Under this agreement, India is working closely with Russia for the construction of the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant in Bangladesh. In 2017, the two countries signed an agreement to set up the last two units of the Kudankulam nuclear plant in Tamil Nadu.

Russia has also continuously helped India in space science. There have been more than 4 decades of cooperation in the field of space between India and Russia. In 2015, the launch of India's first satellite *Aryabhata*, completed its 40th anniversary; the launch vehicle of this satellite was *Russia's Soyuz*. In 1984, Wing Commander Rakesh Sharma went to space in Russia's *Soyuz-T-11 Special Shuttle*. With this he became the first Indian to go to space. In 2007, the two countries signed an agreement to increase space cooperation. From launching India's first mission in space to the *Chandrayaan Mission*, Russia has always supported India.

Cultural cooperation is one aspect that has further strengthened India-Russian relations. There are more than 30000 people of Indian community living in Russia. There are more than 500 Indian businessmen living in Russia. The cultural exchange between the two countries has also increased significantly over the years. Bollywood films have already been popular in Russia, but lately it has registered a more rapid growth.

Significantly, the Indo - Russia annual summits has paved way for a new dimension to the strategic partnership between the two countries. Earlier the External Affairs Minister of India Smt. Sushma Swaraj went to Russia to participate in *India - Russia Inter-Governmental Commission on Technical Economic Cooperation (IRIGC – TEC)*, which worked towards preparing for Putin's upcoming visit to India. During the meeting, India and Russia had set a target of two-way investment of US\$ 50 billion by the year 2025.

Thus India and Russia have friendly and cooperative relations for the last seven decades. The 19th annual '*Indo - Russia Conference*' was more important than before. After this conference, one can expect that both the countries will work together on a realistic basis in the rapidly developing world's *Geo-Political* scenario. An evaluation of Russia's foreign policy reveals that the strategic closeness between Russia and China is increasing. Therefore, keeping this reality in mind, India should proceed with its relations with Russia. At the same time, India cannot take the risk of jeopardizing its mutual agreements with all other countries including the US. Therefore, India will have to prepare a measured and balanced international policy keeping in mind the long-term interests of the nation.

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