

# INDIA-RUSSIA STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP: A FRAMEWORK OF 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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## ABSTRACT

*Economic clout, military might and national interests dictate the terms of a global order dominated by realism. Despite such a context, India-Russia share a special partnership based on trust, mutual respect and cooperation. A stronger strategic partnership is evident due to the shared objectives and common policy perspective. Of late, however, the seemingly impregnable partnership has undergone turbulence and with the new opportunities emerging for each, the strategic space for bilateral cooperation and manoeuvre has seemingly shrunk. In this regard, three major pillars of Indo-Russia relationship namely, defence, energy, economy and trade have been analysed vis-à-vis their significance in Moscow-New Delhi relations. This article has reviewed the strategic partnership between the two countries in the light of the recent developments in the aforementioned determinants for understanding the dynamics of their strategic partnership. Additionally, present realities require both nations incorporate their private sectors in a renewed bilateral regime. Such a paradigm, synergising public-private strengths shall revitalize the strategic partnership and add to salience of both nations in the global arena. Lastly, prospects for private sector have been put forth for further strengthening the partnership and deepening the India-Russia's strategic commonalities.*

**Keywords-** *Strategic partnership, defence, energy, bilateral, India, Russia*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The increasing admiration for nationalism and geopolitics has re-introduced a realist perspective in the world where particularism has overshadowed universalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The great power cooperation and other interstate traditional mechanisms contributed to the solution-seeking for diverse foreign and security policy challenges among the nations. This notion has further played an impetus to reinforce the realist thinking in the international relations. The common practice noticeable in the current state is an ad hoc relation among nations giving emphasis to security that primacies national interest at centre of one's identity within the international system (Romaniuk & Francis, 2018). The realist world order dictated by a nation's economic clout, its military might and national interest primarily helps defining its relation shared with others. Despite such a context, India and Russia share a healthy and evolving relations and their strategic partnership dates back to the time when the world played bi-polar politics. The term "strategic partnership" persisted even in the era of post-cold war and has dominated realpolitik and matters concerning the same. India and Russia share an uncommon history, diplomatic memories, expectations and also a common foundation at the diplomatic level that has influenced their relations for decades. The partnership by its true nature thrives upon deep trust, mutual respect and understanding of each other's national interest. A collaborative vision on global and regional issue further tied India and Russia closely and the bonhomie shared by the two countries has pushed the bilateral relationship to grow and develop.

The recent developments have changed the course of international environment and brought shifts in India-Russia's policy perspective. India is emerging as an Asian power; its policies have become even more inclusive than before. As India develops a closer relationship with the other major powers, Russia in pursuits of its national interests had developed closer relations with Indian adversaries like Pakistan and China. The Russian foreign policy in South Asia reflects a closer move towards that of Soviet Union in 1960s when it mediated between India and Pakistan in 1966 at the Tashkent summit. However, in its South Asia policy, the primacy of India for Russia would continue. As a pole in a multipolar world, both India and Russia have the potential to emerge as players of consequence (Joshi & Sharma, 2017) while they help each other in maintaining a

favourable balance of power in Asia. The multilateral and bilateral ties are strong while there looks mutual understanding over the differences in regional context. It is both the government's policy prerogative to further engage and nurture their age old partnership (Jha&Prabhakar, 2010). This article has studied important drivers of India and Russia's strategic relations and has reviewed the relations between the two countries in the light of the recent developments in 3 major determinants namely Defence, energy and Trade and economy for understanding the dynamics of this relationship. Lastly, prospects for private sector have been put forth for further strengthening the partnership.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The article is conceptualized by qualitative method of social science while using both theoretical and empirical approach in making the analysis further consulting the views, debates and discussions of various authors and experts on the said field. All the materials used in this study are from secondary sources ranging from journals, newspapers, online scientific cites and academic discussions. The analysis additionally includes review of government reports and interviews of the Indian ambassadors and policy experts.

## 3. MAPPING INDO-RUSSIA STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

The India Russia relations have always been guided by the shared mutual respect, understanding and trust. The 1971 Friendship and cooperation became the guiding principle for the mutual partnership and followed the outlined doctrine of mutual relations, respect for each other's sovereignty and interest, good neighbourliness and peaceful co-existence (The First Post, 2018)The Declaration on Strategic Partnership between the Republic of India and the Russian Federation in 2000 took the bilateral relations to a whole new level. It is now characterized by coordinated approaches towards ensuring international peace and security, addressing major global and regional issues, as well as close cooperation in economic, cultural, educational and other areas. This partnership was further elevated to the level of a Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership on 2010 (MEA,2017). Even in terms of geopolitics, the existing vulnerability in the neighbourhood make it necessary for India to prioritise its defence needs and thus strengthening the military bi-lateral relations with Russia further. Following are the major drivers that are responsible for forging a stronger strategic relation between the two.

### 3.1 Defence Industrial Complex

India and Russia share a military partnership for decades now and defence cooperation has been accorded the most prominent status traditionally and had begun as early as 1962 (Marantz,1994). While in the Indo-China war of 1962, USSR did not pick sides but its judicious neutrality led to strong objections from China. After the historical defeat of India at the War of 1962, India decided to work on re-structuring its defence and military (The Indian Express, 1996). Since India's technological and scientific knowledge was at its initial stage along with a weaker infrastructure, USSR had to play a vital role giving a kick start to the Indian MIC. The Soviets delivered helicopters, transport and the MiG-21 jet fighters. The construction of production facilities for military hardware was undertaken at Nasik, Koraput and Hyderabad. The India and Pakistan rift in 1965 led to an imposition of armed embargo on both the nations of weaponry imports and exports. This further gave USSR a space to fill in and thus become the principle weapon supplier along with military equipment's. Throughout the period from 1965 to 1969, the USSR accounted for 80 per cent of India's imports of military hardware (Singh,2000). And although over the following years, that proportion has been gradually decreasing (in 1970-74, it was 70 per cent, and in 1975-79 – 57 per cent), the Soviet Union remained the main supplier of defence technology and equipment to India until the time of its dissolution. The dominance of Russian military equipment's was far noticeable in Indian defence arsenals. Its army, navy and the Air Force were nearly 80 to 85 per cent geared by Soviet and Russian made hardware. Thus, when the USSR disintegrated, its negative impact was visible in the two countries bilateral business in defence Industrial Complex. The Indian armed forces were further affected by the sharp cut in the supplies of defence equipment's. Spare parts were rare to find after 1991 creating more difficulties. The signing of the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation (1993) between the Russian Federation and the Republic of India reflected upon the vitality of their cooperation especially in the field of defence, as the center of their bi-lateral negotiations. The treaty consist a long term military programme and technical cooperation till the year 2010 when it was adopted. In the year 2000, an agreement was reached between two countries on the creation of an Inter-governmental Commission on Military-Technical

Cooperation; inter-governmental accords were signed on the purchase and production in India of cutting-edge Russian tanks, armoured vehicles and fighter aircraft under Russian licenses that includes the transfer of the Admiral Gorshkov aircraft-carrier to India (Shaumyan,2010). In 2004 the final accord for Admiral Gorshkov was signed and it was worth 1.5 billion dollars. The Indian government further made investments of a stipulated amount of \$974 million for the modernization and also for refurbishments of Admiral Gorshkov aircraft carrier. Monetary arrangements were also made for delivery of 16 MiG-29K multirole carrier-based fighters of worth \$530 million and Ka-31 and K-27 maritime reconnaissance helicopters. The main institutional mechanism in the said sector is conducted by the India-Russia Inter Governmental Commission on Military Technical Cooperation (IRIGC-MTC) co-chaired by both the officials. This has helped the India-Russia relationship evolve from a simple buyer and seller to a new framework of joint productions and research and development. Within the framework of the 7<sup>th</sup> session of the IRIGC-MTC an intergovernmental agreement was concluded that dealt with joint development of advanced multi-functional fighter aircraft of the fifth generation. Also, the co-production of India-Russian airframe components for the assembly of Su-30 MKI and their Installation on Su-30 MK aircraft of Russian manufacturing was facilitated by the same inter-governmental agreement signed. The licenced production of Su-30, T-90 tanks and the Brahmos Missile system are a few instances where the cooperation is visibly strong between the nations. This is also because there is mutual beneficial and profit earning side that drives the relationship further. For India, the Russian equipment's are reliable and easy to obtain with flexible pro-India policies whereas for Russia, India is a trusted friend and provides an easy market for its military end products. Mr. A.K. Antony, India's former Defence Minister, in his statement regarding the brahmos missiles and fifth generation fighter aircraft stated that Moscow and New Delhi's joint partnership clearly has a strategic dimension to it.

In 2018, India has inked a historic deal agreement of approx. USD 5.43 billion with Russia that let India procure S-400 Triumf surface to air missile defence system, one of the most powerful missile defence system in the world(The Outlook, 2018). The deal ignited warning from USA for ignoring American CAATSA act imposed on Russia. Additionally, under PM Narendra Singh Modi's much touted 'Make in India' initiative, a number of projects are undertaken for co-manufacturing by Indo-Russia and 200 Kamov Ka-226 and 1000 units of T-90 Bhisma to be manufactured under this umbrella initiative. Akula – II, the nuclear powered attack submarines are to be leashed with a prospect of buying once the lease expires. India has ordered and awaits delivery of Tu-22M3 bombers, Upgraded MiG 29, mil Mi-17, Ilyushin II-76. Most promisingly, the defence relationship has begun to move towards a more cooperative relationship involving joint research, design, and production, beyond the age old beyond the buyer-seller model. But in recent times, with India opting for indigenization of defence by focusing on manufacturing and with the inclusion of its private sector on defence production, resulted in reduced arms imports from Russia. Also, India's import diversification in defence industrials has further contributed to the cause.

### 3.2 Energy Security

India has been an energy deficient nation for a while now and Russia's energy reserves need a market and the increasingly strategic area of Indo-Russia relations is further driven by their interdependence on energy requirement. Russia, so far has been instrumental in assisting India with its oil needs and offering flexible rates at even below the market prices whenever India has faced an oil crisis, especially in 2005 when the oil touched \$50 a barrel (Alexander, 2005).

The Indo-Russia energy cooperation, especially in the field of hydrocarbons has continued to evolve despite of the 1990's changing geopolitics in the transition period (Pant, 2017). Both the sides consented on implementing prospective joint projects in the field of renewal energy sources. Promisingly for Russia, Indian needs for oil and gas are great and ever-growing, while Russia's own economy shows no signs of moving away from its hydrocarbon dependency. There is also a strong push from the Indian side visible, with the TAPI joint project which is supposed to be opened in 2019 yet contingent on the regional situation given the regional dynamics and insecurities in the current energy transport routes. The TAPI can be further instrumental in ironing out the differences and work together under a framework of cooperation (MEA Report, 2019). Huge investments seen from the Indian side made in projects like the Sakhalin-1 and Sakhalin-II by the Indian company ONGC Videsh Ltd. Recently, the Indian companies like Indian Oil Corporation Limited (IOCL), Bharat Petroleum Resources Limited (BPRL) has also made huge investments in Russian oil and Gas sector. This includes acquisitions of stakes in Russia's Vankorneft, Taas-Yuryakh, among others (Kundu,2016).

In terms of Nuclear energy, India's priority still evolves since independence and currently the nuclear power programme is expected to reach 20,000 MW in nuclear capacity by 2020 (Fosco,2011). Even in the field of

nuclear, Russia and India have a long shared history of cooperation and with India's growing demand for nuclear fuel that is only expected to increase with the coming years; Russian assistance is largely appreciated at the Indian fronts. As per the 1998 nuclear cooperation deal, which later on was ratified with updates and extended, Russia has forged an agreement with India in 2002 for constructing two nuclear reactors at Kudankulam, Tamil Nadu (The World Nuclear News, 2008).

Recently, on the 19<sup>th</sup> edition of the Joint Summit, 2018 both the countries have signed an agreement that is stated as a Joint Action Plan for Civil nuclear partnership. Rosatom, the Russian State owned Nuclear Atomic Energy Cooperation has aims to build six more nuclear power plant at a different site including one at Haripur, West Bengal (The Economic Times, 2018). Continuing with the principle of joint manufacturing, Russia said it would share the enrichment and reprocessing (ENR) technology with India for the production of nuclear fuel for atomic power plants (Chenoy, 2010). The Russians have also engaged themselves in a joint project that will additionally construct four more reactors. The Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd. (NPCIL) will be assisting in building the new reactors and will be commissioned by NPCIL under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) designated safeguards. The Leningrad Metal Works is responsible for manufacturing of the turbines for the same project. The 2008 Indian Civil Nuclear Deal signed by India and USA not just has opened far new possibilities for India but has also acted as a cataract enhancing further nuclear trade even with Russia, although the new possibilities can only be utilised once India gets to join the IAEA and the NSG club (Chenoy, 2010)

Although the Russians have been a trusted ally for India since decades, yet the strategic partnership is often challenged due to the emerging competition in the market and strong competitors. India is among one of the 8 countries who from the very beginning despised the NPT and its biases towards the nuclear geared countries and thus never ratified for the sake of not jeopardizing its own weapons programme. The 2008 deal has changed that, gave a new footing to India in world energy market (Sharma, 1999). The 2008 Civil Nuclear Deal with USA has let India open up its market for new possibilities and thus for Russia to retain its importance in India's nuclear priorities needs a further modernization both in their approach and involve the private sector. Not only does it require more investments in joint projects but also other areas of cooperation should be taken into consideration. Moving beyond the constructions of reactors, the Indian government should borrow Russian know-how and technology transfer capacities to help develop its uranium deposits. There is a further need to engage in constructive engineering and huge investments in Research and Development funded by private capital leveraging Russian manufacturing capabilities and transition it into production.

### 3.3 Trade and Economy

The strategic dimension of India and Russia includes a strong bi-lateral trade ties between the two, although the potential for future developments are much higher than the current scenario. Rather, due to lack of adequate efforts taken by the two nations the bi-lateral trade rate is over all very low as compared to India's other trading partners. According to the data given by the Ministry of Commerce, Government of India, in their recent sheet of Export and Import data bank for the year 2019 and 2020 (April-August) clearly shows that Russia lies in the 25<sup>th</sup> position with an overall turnover of \$4295 USD whereas the leading partner for Indian trade is the USA with a glowing rate of \$38,780 USD. Moreover, the World Integrated Trade Solution's (WITS) statistics for the year 2017 (last updated) also shows similar configuration with Russia nowhere to be seen in India's list of top 5 trading countries. There are a few problems visible since a few decades now and have played a negative yet a significant role in the decline of the bi-lateral trade of the two nations. Instability is the key problem coupled with basic structural reforms, with the removal of State's dominance over foreign trade that further has resulted in an elimination of procedural clearance of agreement. Also, the biggest threat for Russia to secure its position as India's leading partner has repeatedly being challenged by the strong competitors like China, the USA and the European Union (Vasudevan, 2015)

The Absence of proper infrastructure, the distance and the logistic problems have made an adverse impact on their relations. The movement of goods, in this case takes time longer than the expected and the finances are much highly spent (Mohanty, 2010). This stands as not only an obstruction but a hindrance on utilizing the full potential of the two partners. And so, needs both the governments' attention to make necessary arrangements for adequate shipping arrangements and shipping facilities. Therefore, the North South Transport Corridor is of vital importance of India and Russia. Also, Moscow's participation in the Delhi Mumbai-highways or the DMIC international project connecting the cities by roadways, highways with other major smart cities and industrial park will further act as a catalyst in fostering better trade relations. Today, keeping in view their long-term economic relationship, India and Russia are also now encouraging their private sectors to enhance mutual connections as the trade between the two sides has been dominated by public sector companies. A number of joint ventures are being planned by India and Russia in order to further boost their economic ties, for example,

Russia's Uralmash and India's SRB International will form joint venture to make heavy equipment for steel and mining sectors. However, Russia has been concerned ever since the Supreme Court of India in 2012 cancelled licence of SistemaShyam, a joint venture between Russia's Sistema and India's Shyam Telecom (Radyuhin, 2012). Also, Apart from that, the Western sanctions have increased India-Russia trade in food products such as vegetables, milk, fruit, meat and unprocessed food (cited in Kuzmin, 2015). Apart from trading India's mangoes that has been marketed well by Russia recently, India Russia also shares a partnership in military and energy. The Russian military complex has helped India to create a stronger arms arsenal of its own and Russia has further went out of boards when it decided to co-produce Sukhoisuperjet 100, MS-21, FGFA, MTA and Kamov Ka-226. India and Russia has currently started working on the FTA that stands between India and the EEU, responsible for promoting investments that includes both mechanism and planning built into IRIGC.

Energy is another important aspect of Indo-Russia strategic partnership and is visible in India's huge investments made at the Sakhalin 1 and Sakhalin 2 projects. India has also seeks 20 per cent stakes in Sakhalin-3 project. Government-owned ONGC Videsh Ltd. has bought 15 per cent stake in a unit of Russia's Rosneft in 2015 (The Indian Express, 2015). For India, the Russian Companies such as Rosneft, Gazprom, Essar & Alrosa will act as long term suppliers respectively. The massive financial meltdown on 1998 made India loose its faith over Russia and its sanctioned Letter of Credits (LCs) and guarantees issued by the Russian banks (Mohanty,2010). This has impacted negatively the trading between the two nationalities. Currently, the SBI and Canara Bank, India has open joint venture Bank with equity 60:40 to promote trading. Talks are on hold on Russian banks making a steady entry by creating their branch at New Delhi.

Lastly, the visa issue should be dealt with ease and brilliance that could facilitate the Indian businessmen to get easy visa instead of going through the cumbersome procedure. The solution to this is simple and can be dealt with a little more flexibility from Russian side, goodwill and mutual concessions.

#### **4. THE PUBLIC-PRIVATE SYNERGY: KEY PLAYER IN THE PARTNERSHIP**

Up until now, not much has been done by both the sides to engage actively the private sectors of India and Russia. Currently, all most all the projects undertaken by both the countries include sophisticated, high technology projects but at the governmental level. To develop the present strategic partnership and renew, a major kick start is required by engaging its private sector in a stronger country to country relationship. There is a major requirement to forge a synergy between the public and the private where both can cooperate with each other. For example, the India and Russia Private ventures like the CEO's council should work in concert with the India-Russia Chamber of commerce along with other major bodies to revamp and reenergise the existing dimension of partnership. Having said that, the governments of both the nations should provide ample incentives that shall include tax breaks, state subsidies and enabling regulations can essentially revitalize a strategic relationship that, while positive, shows great scope for improvement along its every parameter.

For the Indian government, it should be their prerogative to make active participation in the private, make investments, design policies that give the Indian private sector an opportunity to engage in bi-lateral ties with Russia. An active engagement coupled with public private not only shall strengthen the Partnership, enable increment in trading but shall also play a successful role in driving the younger generation of the entrepreneurs to value the age old mutual respect and friendship shared by India and Russia.

In case of defence partnership, the private sector is almost neglected as most of the proceedings happen between the two countries in an exclusive state-to-state affair. There is a need of active participation of the private sector and there cooperation in both manufacturing and investing. The platforms of indigenization, joint development, and low-cost manufacturing in India should form the cornerstone of Indian negotiations with Russia's defence complex, on a free-market basis, in the future (Fosko,2011). It can't be denied that the Indian private sector has no role in the shared partnership by the nations and this can be stressed by already existent networking forums that enable exchange of information geared either to the corporate or to the Para-state companies. Talking about trade, there is a necessity of introducing and revamping mechanisms that could work alongside the public sector and cooperate further creating joint bodies for funds, highly financed by both the governments. There is also a need for more collaborative projects, that can provide further opportunities for joint developments, facilitating the R&D and a highly focused commercialization component.

In terms of finances, the governments should arrange for both funds along with subsidies for the private sector with minimum bureaucratic hurdles and an easy access to resources for a high prioritised joint research initiative

(Fosco,2011). Also, given the dynamic nature of the current international strategic scenario and the risks involved, a common body such as a bi-lateral Investors council can be set that targets SMEs involving collaborations and exchange with the support of the Russian Business Council and the India-Russia Chamber of Commerce. It can receive additional benefits from industry bodies like the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and its Russian counterparts. This will act as an in cent to forge better investment and trade relations and enhance the strategic dynamic of their relations.

Recently, the India-Russia Forum on Interaction between Small and Medium Enterprises was conducted by the Ministry of Commerce & Industry, GoI, Ministry of Industry & Trade of the Russian Federation, Russian Export Centre and Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) at Mumbai, February 2019. The main objective of this Forum was clearly to boost the SMEs of both the nations, young entrepreneurs for further business collaborations. As per the forum, India has set a plan on reaching \$50 billion bilateral trade and to fulfil this objective inclusion of more SMEs of both the nations are mandatory. The forum has also provided information and spread awareness among potential investors about the opportunities present in India and Russia and its potential to further strengthen the strategic bi-lateral relations. It has also played an impetus in promoting growth in import-export investments, JV's, co-manufacturing and by facilitating through structures B2B meetings between the nations at various sectors. Focus has also been rendered to cutting edge technology and R&D through collaboration (CII-SME, 2019).

Lastly, talking about the inter-governmental bodies, the Indo-Russian Inter-Governmental Commission (IRIGC) is the main body behind conducting all the affairs at the level of governments. The body is responsible for maintaining the Scientific, Economic, Technological, Trade and Cultural Co-operation. It is chaired by the Russian Deputy Prime Minister and the Indian External Affairs Minister and MTC is co-chaired by the defence Ministers of both the nations. Along with the IRIGC, being the main, there are some other government bodies that include Indo-Russia Forum of Trade and Investments, India-Russia Chamber of Commerce and India-Russia Business Council that are responsible for strengthening the partnership at the governmental level.

## 5. CONCLUSION

India-Russia relationship has travelled a long way since the Soviet disintegration based on deep trust, mutual respect and cooperation and a close understanding of each other's national interest. India and Russia possess similar world view and share common visions on global and regional issues that further play an impetus to cooperate. In defence sector, from a buyer-seller relationship it has now upgraded itself to a joint partnership. Although the trade relations between the two nations are still average or below, yet has a huge potential to invigorate dynamic changes. There is a requirement of revitalization and revamp on the already existing field of cooperation in an effort to strengthen the strategic partnership, for example Defence, MTC, energy, trade and so on and so forth. The current scenario uphold joint initiatives undertaken by both the governments including the INSTC, consultations on EAEU, a Joint Strategy of Action between India's leading institute i.e, Institute of Foreign Trade (IIFT) and All-Russian Academy of Foreign Trade and is placed under the supervision of NitiAyog, GoI and Ministry of Economic Development of Russia(Talukdar,2019). This clearly depicts how relevant it is for both the nations to engage bi-laterally.

Lastly, the much talked private-public synergy is vital for the strategic development of India-Russia. Involving the private and the corporate, boosting investment opportunities in case for both the countries have to be made a reality sooner. The relationship of the private players in India and Russia should be significantly reenergized with the aid of new mechanisms. India and Russia need to form more joint governmental bodies to boost further cooperation.

The modern globalised international system has its own sets of contestations, changing dynamics between nations make it hard and at the same time important for the nations to evolve the nature of partnership and strengthen. India and Russia have shared a mutually beneficial relationship since the time of Soviets and now the relationship requires revitalization and revamp. The India-Russia strategic partnership is also dominated by a common threat of resisting a re-uni-polarity in the international world order and a contagious Chinese upsurge and hegemony. This is another drive behind India and Russia's shared interest in strengthening the strategic relations between them. With the advent of globalization and the resultant new challenges emanating due to the change in intra state dynamics, this is none the less a test for both India and Russia and their shared strategic partnership. In the light of such scenario, it is advisable for both the countries to continue with the existing framework of informal meets between heads of the state, conducting summits at various levels and reframing new mechanisms of strategic communications. The signing of Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership in

2010 to the joint statement made in 2014, the Druzba-Dhosti, only shows how keen both the governments are to share their vision on strengthening the India Russia partnership even in the upcoming decades.

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