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## Political and Strategic Dimensions of India-Russia Relations in Present Scenario

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*This paper discusses the Indo-Russia strategic relations, through various phases such as 1947-1956, 1956-1971, 1971-1985, 1985-1996 & 1996 onwards. In each of these phases, Indo-Russian relations have grown or declined depending on the perceptions and experiences that both the countries have had mainly with the Western powers. The rough period in Russian-Indian relations after 1985 arose from the perceived need of both the countries to connect more intensively with the West. This paper also covers the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War which brought about a fundamental transformation. India has used the Soviet economic and military aid to pursue its own regional goals, the most important of which are containment of Pakistan and China. Experience suggests that the bilateral relationship works best when both perceive a link between China and Pakistan.*

*Kyewords: Indo-Russia strategic relations, Political and Strategic Dimensions.*

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### Introduction

Indo-Russian relations have overall remained smooth and continuous, though they have gone through distinct phases in their history and development.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, these phases relate to the national interests of these two countries as well as each of these phases has some linkages to the global environment. One can classify these phases as- 1947-1956, 1956-1971, 1971-1985, 1985-1996 & 1996 onwards. In each of these phases, Indo-Russian relations have grown or declined depending on the perceptions and experiences that both the countries have had mainly with the Western powers. The rough period in Russian-Indian

relations post-1985 clearly arose from the felt need of both to connect more seriously with the West. However, overall the bilateral relationship has been characterised by a strong sense of commitment towards each other. Each of these phases has some distinct characteristics in terms of trade and political relations.

For instance, in phase 1956-1971 and 1971-1985, trade between the two was state dominated but this ended after phase 1985-1996. During phase 1996 onwards, trade was dominated by military hardware and joint military production between the two sides. There is a fundamental baseline in the relation between these two countries that has built up over the years.

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### **The Political Dimension – The Post Cold War Era**

The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War brought about a fundamental transformation in the geopolitical map of the world.<sup>2</sup> The most prominent among the successor states of the Soviet Union, Russia, in spite of inheriting the formidable military might of its predecessor, suddenly found itself reduced to the position of a second ranking regional power. Its predicament was further compounded by economic chaos and political uncertainty at the domestic level. It was clearly caught between a declining nostalgia for past relations with countries like India and growing proclivity towards cultivating relations with the West.<sup>3</sup> As a result, the first couple of years of India's relations with post-Soviet Russia were marked by a good deal of uncertainty, inconsistency and lack of clarity.

India did take early steps, though they did not yield any significant results. The two-track approach that India adopted was on the one hand aimed at resurrecting the vital elements of its economic and military relations with Russia and on the other searching out alternatives in the West, as the unipolar international order had emerged.

It was in this atmosphere of uncertain Russian foreign policy objectives that the post-Cold War relations between Russia and India were further strained by two events. The first of these destabilizing events centered around a contract dispute between the Russian space directorate "*Glavkosmos*" and the Government of India for the purchase of Cryogenic engines and the related technology. The contract, signed on 18 January 1991, stemmed from India's desire to gain knowledge of the liquid oxygen propulsion system of Russian Cryogenic engines in order to advance India's Geo-synchronous Satellite Launch Vehicle (GSLV) programme.

From the Indian and Russian perspectives, the Cryogenic engine deal was legal under the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) on the grounds that the treaty did not block the support of "peaceful space ventures." While the ability of India to indigenously produce GSLVs and ICBMs was delayed by several years due to the cancellation of the original Cryogenic engine deal, the main concern in New Delhi was that the Yeltsin government had given in to Western pressure. The conclusion drawn in New Delhi was that Russia's overriding need for American economic aid would make it susceptible to American pressure. In Indian eyes, Russia was therefore perceived as henceforth unreliable, and it had also lost its international stature. As Indo-Russian relations appeared to weaken under Western pressure, direct bilateral interactions between the two states also revealed tensions.

Relations between the two re-stabilized again after 1996 when both Russia and India realised that the West, especially the United States had not lived up to their expectations to deliver its promises to both these countries. The China threat factor also remained as a major impediment for India to look forward for a better relationship with Russia. On the other hand, Russia too gave up its initial hesitation and inconsistency in engaging India. This was possible as the Russian leadership itself felt that overtly banking on the western world was making it susceptible and creating major fissures within the Russian society. For the last eight decades it had been extremely anti-West and a sudden closeness with the West might bewilder the nation fully. So there was a need to accept more or less a balanced approach especially while initiating and even continuing relations with nations.

With time, the contours of new Russian foreign policy have become clearer. It is now giving all the indications of its ability and intentions of redefining its foreign policy goals,

priorities and international role. With India, the objectives and character of its relations are being defined with a measure of clarity. As the Indian leadership has successfully taken a significant posture in the international political platform after 1998 till date, it has become easier on the part of the Russian leadership to choose amongst the cluster of Third World countries, whom to interact closely. The India has also strengthened various sectors of its economy significantly like the software sector and the information sector. This has opened major avenues where scope of mutual interdependence has arisen between India and Russia, which needs high level of political cooperation between the leaderships of both the nations. Especially after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the twin trade towers of the World Trade Centre in New York and the initiation of the “War on Terror” by United States with a large alliance of nations, India and Russia have made many bilateral agreements to deal with the issue of terrorism in their own manner.

On various terrorist incidents that have taken place in Russia (2003-2004), especially in Beslan, Yessentuki, Moscow and in other places, Indian establishment has been quick to show the ‘solidarity with the Russian Government in its efforts directed towards tackling the problems of terrorism, fundamentalism and extremism, which have international links.’<sup>4</sup>

Close and friendly ties between India and Russia, based on continuity, trust and mutual understanding, constitute an important foreign policy priority for both countries. There is a consensus in both countries on maintenance of good bilateral relations. Recognition of the strategic dimension to Indo-Russian relations has grown. India and Russia share similar perceptions on many international issues.

While the Indian Prime Minister *Atal Bihari Vajpayee* was on a visit to Moscow in 2003, he mentioned that “Sky is the limit” for the strategic

partnership and cooperation between India and Russia, adding that the friendship between the countries has become a “stabilising force” in the changed world scenario. The friendship has remained unchanged despite economic problems and political instability.

The national goals of two countries are being looked upon in the light of new international realities. The two countries have once again begun to rediscover the mutual importance but with a qualitative difference, which commensurate with the realities of the post cold war era.

### **The Strategic Dimension – The Post Cold War Days**

From 1959 India had accepted Soviet offers of military sales. Indian acquisition of Soviet military equipment was important because purchases were made against deferred rupee payments, a major concession to India's chronic shortage of foreign exchange. Simultaneous provisions were made for licensed manufacture and modification in India, one criterion of self-reliant defense on which India placed increasing emphasis.

India used Soviet economic and military aid to pursue its own regional goals, the most important of which were containment of Pakistan and China. In other words, the Soviet Union and India had the basis for an ideal relationship: India's needs matched for Soviet capabilities, and Soviet needs were a match for India's strengths. The Soviet-Indian relationship works best when both perceive a link between China and Pakistan.

The contextual imperatives that forged the India-Russia strategic cooperation were from the Indian side: US-Pakistan military alliance and aid, Indo-US estrangement, the Sino-Pak strategic relationship and the Sino-Pak-US strategic convergence. On the Russian side the imperatives were: Sino Russian military confrontation, the Sino-US quasi-strategic relationship of the 1975s

-1980s and the Russian need to reach out to Third World countries through India. The basic and common denominator on both sides was the containment of China and Pakistan. These contextual imperatives underwent a sea-change with President Gorbachev coming in to power in 1990. He initiated what can be described as Russia's 'China First' priority. Russia's strategic shift in its foreign policy formulations removed the planks on which rested the India-Russia strategic cooperation.

The primary short-term military concern for India in the early 1990s was its limited supply of spare parts and supplies for its Soviet-produced armaments. After three decades of reliance on Soviet-produced hardware, India was in a position in 1991 in which seventy percent of Army armaments, eighty percent of Air Force armaments, and eight-five percent of Navy armaments were of Soviet origin. Lacking the indigenous capability to produce spare parts and supplies for these systems, India's military faced an immediate crisis. The break-up of the Soviet Union had caused a fracture in the Soviet-Indian military supply-line as the administrative control and actual locations of the Soviet defense industries were situated throughout the newly independent states. «As Air Vice-Marshal S. Krishnaswamy noted with some understatement, there was a 'hiccup' in supply relations during 1991-92.» Over-reliance on Soviet military hardware had allowed India to postpone developing a self-reliant indigenous defense industry. More to the point, «the dependence on Russian weapons over 30 years was a serious strategic defect.»<sup>5</sup>

Defense relations still drive the Indo-Russian relationship. Russia is India's biggest supplier of defense equipment, and India is the cash-strapped Russian defense industry's biggest customer. India is the only country with which Russia is engaged in the joint development and production of high tech, very complex weapons

systems. In October 2000, Russia and India finalized defense deals worth \$3 billion for 140-150 Su-30 multi-role fighters, and 310 T-90S main battle tanks, with payments and deliveries spread over five years. In January 2002, the Indian Air Force (IAF) added stealth modifications to its \$340million program to upgrade 125 of its MiG-21bis fighters to MiG-21-93 standard.<sup>6</sup>

Indo-Russian cooperation in the area of defence supplies is gaining momentum in contemporary times. Indo-Russian defence supplies are in the range of 70 per cent of total defence imports of India. Agreements on scientific collaboration between India-Russia in the area of biotechnology have begun a new phase. Agreements have been signed for the Mig 29 K fighter, Kamov 31 helicopters, T 90S tanks and other defence equipment. Nearly \$ 3 billion defence contracts have been finalized. Indian Navy has acquired two submarines and three frigates from Russia, which costs around \$ 300 million each. The Navy is also acquiring three Krivak-class frigates or project 1135.6 from Russia. There are some indicators, which suggest that Indo-Russian cooperation in the peaceful use of nuclear technology, related particularly to nuclear energy have already taken concrete shape. In the oil and gas sector, Gas Authority of India Ltd.(GAIL) and Russia's Gazprom have signed a contract in the field of oil exploration.<sup>7</sup> Indo-Russian politico-strategic defence cooperation is an important element of strategic partnership between the two countries.

Presently Russia though not considered being as much powerful as it was during the pre-Cold War days still maintains the strategy of curtailing the monopolistic tendencies of the US. According to Russian Defence Minister *Marshall Igor Dmitrievich Sergeyev* in an interview given to *The Hindu* stated that "the United States in this unipolar world seeks to cash in on the Cold War outcome, pursuing its own strategic interests. And

the issues are as follows: either the world will go back to multipolarity typical of the previous stages of historical development or one superpower will dominate the system of international relations. However, it is too early to draw final conclusions, since only two trends are well discernible and other development patterns may emerge. A contributing factor is the effective and fruitful cooperation between Russia and India in regional and international affairs and Indo-Russian ties are rising to the level of real strategic partnership.”<sup>8</sup>

In December 2002, India and Russia reaffirmed a long-standing friendship through the adoption of the Delhi Declaration. Since both the countries are struggling to define their relations with other major players on the global stage, in a situation where the rules of international politics are in a state of flux and where the term of the economic interaction between nations are being reset, this specific encounter between the Indian and Russian leaderships was of significance for the affirmation of continuity and mutual reassurance that it symbolized.<sup>9</sup>

Between *Vladimir Putin's* first visit to India as president of Russian Federation in October 2000 and his second visit in December 2002, the framework for India-Russia relations was firmly set.<sup>10</sup> This was a framework of another special relationship of «Strategic Partnership», expanding cooperation and multiplying contacts in various fields, some of them of critical importance to India-Russia both.

Undoubtedly, both India and Russia are sovereign countries and would be looking after their own in the first instance. The understanding between Russia and India flowed from the complementarity of their interests both in historical, geopolitical and futuristic terms. Whether it was the question of terrorism or of the defence of Indian territorial integrity or that of Russia, whether it was a question of India's role in this region and the world and on most international

issues of importance to the two countries, the Russian and Indian interests generally tended to coincide and there is a certain empathy for each other.<sup>11</sup> There is therefore, an intrinsic value in the Indo-Russian ties. This does not exclude differences of approach on certain specific issues, but the general, overall parallelism of interests has been evident. The two sides so far have soft understanding of each other's concerns while retaining their autonomy of action and expanding their relations with diverse other countries.

### **The nuclear cooperation agreement**

The nuclear cooperation agreement with Russia (2009) is essentially different from 123 pact signed with the US (2008) that envisages not only ending of the ongoing nuclear cooperation but also the return of equipment and fuel supplied by the US, in case the nuclear agreement is terminated. Russian President *Dmitry Medvedev* made it amply clear that Moscow will not accept any restriction imposed by any foreign country on its civil nuclear cooperation with New Delhi under any pressure. Replying to a pointed question if Russia would continue unrestricted nuclear cooperation with India despite the G-8 resolution restricting the sale of reprocessing technologies to non-NPT countries, President *Medvedev* stressed that the ‘resolution does not change anything in our cooperation’. Under the agreement, Russia is expected to build 12-14 reactors on India's east coast. Russia's continuing political backing for India was best illustrated when Putin publicly backed Indian permanent membership in an expanded United Nations Security Council during his last visit to Delhi. Russia and India also signed a Declaration on International Terrorism on November 2001.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Nuclear Strategic Dimension**

The initial nuclear dimension that was practised by Soviet Union had practically more or

less no opposition from India, as she herself was not in as position to make any comments on any such significant world developments. However, with the first Pokhran blasts in 1974, India was criticised by the Soviet leadership along with the US administration, and as it was the age of détente, it became difficult for the Indian leadership to pursue its own nuclear policy during that period.

On the nuclear strategic issue, especially on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty – Moscow stands firmly with the West. However, these issues normally stand in the way of mutual cooperative agreements and became an issue, especially after the 1998 nuclear tests taken by India.

Though Russia wholly criticised India's decision to go ahead with the nuclear tests in 1998, but it also went against the manner in which the international community went ahead imposing sanctions on India and later on Pakistan. It was commented that sanctions usually prove to be counter productive and diplomacy must be tried to bring about a change in India's nuclear policy. It was also announced that such tests would not stop the cooperation with India in the civilian nuclear sector.<sup>13</sup>

The strategic dimension that has started growing during the present years has been more on the principle of mutual benefit than on the principle of threatening or curtailing a third country, the relationship having an entirely strategic bearing.

Today there has been a significant line of thought that is prepared to accept a strategic triangle having India, Russia and China in it. The concept of a strategic partnership between India, Russia and China in a trilateral strategic arrangement is not a new one. Although the idea was sounded in the Brezhnev years (1964-1982) in the form of collective Asian security, it was never vigorously pursued. However, when the idea was again brought back by the Russian Prime Minister

*Yevgeny Primakov*, in the last week of December 1998, the idea started became a topic of analyses amongst strategic circles. Considered by many as an axis of strength, and by some as an ephemeral eddy of Russian overtures in Asia, the idea was certainly born out of the conviction of having a viable regional security arrangement that would simultaneously countervail the growing US influence in the region.

It has been seen that as both the nations have recognised each others' strategic position and powers, they have started thinking about the initiation of the dialogue of disarmament between themselves. During the second presidential visit of Russian president Vladimir Putin to India, on December 3–5, 2002, the Russian President along with the Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee signed a strategic declaration agreeing on a strategic partnership mandated to hold annual summit-level meetings and make efforts to reduce nuclear arms globally with the ultimate aim to eliminate these weapons.<sup>14</sup>

India's acquisitions from the USSR/Russia comprise 70% of its major weapons systems, and include up-to-date tanks, fighter aircraft, cruise missiles, and an aircraft carrier. In the future, energy cooperation may prove just as beneficial for both sides. Indian firms are involved in collaborative projects on Sakhalin and in the Caspian region, and Russia has cooperated on eighty hydro and thermoelectric projects-as well as a light-water reactor plant-in India.<sup>15</sup>

#### **The Gorshkov Aircraft Carrier Deal and Leasing of Nuclear Submarine from Russia**

The Vikramaditya, formerly the Soviet Union's Admiral Gorshkov, (was originally built as the Soviet Project 1143.4 class aircraft carrier originally laid down in 1978 at the Nikolayev South shipyard in Ukraine, launched in 1982, and commissioned with the Soviet Navy in 1987) has

finished a long-delayed refit for the Indian Navy at Sevmash on the Kola peninsula. The ship was extensively modified to undertake STOBAR (short takeoff but assisted recovery) operations with MiG-29K naval fighter aircraft, as well as receiving new air defense, communications and navigations systems. India and Russia signed a \$947 million dollar deal in 2005 for the purchase of the carrier, but delivery has already been delayed twice, pushing up the cost of refurbishing the carrier to \$2.3 billion.

The Project 1143.4 carriers and a class of destroyers with the same engines suffered a history of boiler failures during their service lives. However, the incident in the Barents Sea couldn't have come at a worse time for bilateral ties. Russia has lost a string of military deals, notably for MRCA and helicopters. From the public's point of view the latest soap opera needs to end soon. Sevmash Shipyard in North Russia, where Vikramaditya is being refitted, needs to get its act together. There are reports in the Russian press about mismanagement and lack of accountability at the company.<sup>16</sup>

Indian Navy's lease of the nuclear submarine Nerpa 971 at the cost of \$920 mln in January, 2011 has been the third biggest transfer. The lease of the nuclear powered submarine Nerpa and Russia's not-so-secret help with the development of India's own nuclear submarine, Arihant, are pointers to the deep ties between the countries. Again, these are not off-the-shelf technologies and Russia is not sharing them with any other country. The thickest action is on the seas where a Russian Akula II class nuclear attack submarine (renamed Chakra II) is transforming India's sea doctrine. Russian expertise is helping build India's first nuclear powered submarine 'Arihant'. Former Russian ambassador to India, *Vyacheslav*

*Trubnikov*, says Russia provided "some degree of assistance" in developing the Arihant's naval propulsion reactor despite Russia being bound by an international treaty which prohibits technology transfer in this area". IDSA's *Thornton agrees*: "Russia does not see India as a strategic rival and has faith in the country's willingness to keep to agreements and not, as Moscow claims the Chinese have done, to illegally make use of Russian intellectual property." As the scope of joint defence development grows, the two sides will encounter a myriad of problems but none of it has to be a deal breaker.

Russia and India are working with BrahMos Aerospace to promote a family of all-purpose supersonic BrahMos land-launched and ship-launched versions of the missile based on the Russian medium-range P-800 Onyx anti-ship missile, which some experts believe is unrivalled in the global marketplace. According to Russia's deputy prime minister in charge of the defence industry, *Dmitry Rogozin*, "BrahMos Aerospace is not only a successful Russo-Indian joint venture, but it also represents an optimal model for bilateral cooperation that has tremendous political importance for both countries".

### **Conclusion:**

While assessing the section of the strategic and political dimension of India and Russia, there needs no requirement of any explaining how these two nations have come closer to each other at least in these dimensions better than that of the Cold War days as the relationship today has grown on a sense of parity than that of over independence of India on Russia, as was the case during the Cold War years. As there remains no drastic clash of political ideology today. Relations between the two nations have been growing.

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<sup>1</sup> Sergei I Lounev, "Russia and India : Political Cooperation in the sphere of Global, Regional and Bilateral Relations", China Report 38: 109, 2002, pp. 109 – 111.

- <sup>2</sup> Jyotsna Bakshi, has given her arguments on Russia's post-Pokhran II dilemma in *Strategic Analysis*, (August 1998), <http://www.idsa-india.org/an-aug8-4.html>
- <sup>3</sup> Roy Medvedev, Vladimir Putin, New Accents in Russia's Foreign Policy, *Rossiskaya Gazeta*, August 8, 2000.
- <sup>4</sup> Statement in connection with the terrorist blast on a train in Russia, Ministry of External Affairs, Press Briefing, New Delhi, 5 December, 2003.
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- <sup>7</sup> See Working Paper of Nivedita Das Kundu, on "Indo-Russian Relations: An Overview", available at [http://www.helsinki.fi/aleksanteri/english/publications/ap\\_das\\_kundu.htm](http://www.helsinki.fi/aleksanteri/english/publications/ap_das_kundu.htm). Also See Jasjit Singh, Trends in Defence Expenditure, *Asian Strategic Review* 1998-99, p 40-47.
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- <sup>9</sup> News From Russia, *Weekly News Bulletin* Edited and Published by the Information Department of the Russian Embassy in India, Issue No. 39, dated 27th Sept. 2002
- <sup>10</sup> See Appendix I, See *Ria Novosti*, May 31, 2002.
- <sup>11</sup> See *The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, February 4, 1998, 50 (1), pp. 1-2
- <sup>12</sup> Kavita Sangani and Teresita C. Schaffer, "The Changing Face of Russia-South Asia Relations", *South Asia Monitor*, Number 59 June 1, 2003, Center for Strategic and International Studies, CSIS, [www.csis.org](http://www.csis.org)
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- <sup>15</sup> "Prospects for India-Russia Security Relations", A Seminar, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Friday, March 7, 2003.
- <sup>16</sup> Rakesh Krishnan Simha, *Vikramaditya: Why India must stay the course*, September 24, 2012, *Russia & India Report*. [htm](http://www.vikramaditya.com)

## **Политические и стратегические аспекты взаимоотношений между Россией и Индией в рамках сегодняшнего сценария**

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*Статья посвящена стратегическим отношениям между Индией и Россией, которые прошли через разные стадии развития в 1947-1956 гг., 1956-1971 гг., 1971-1985 гг., 1985-1996 гг. и с 1996 г. В каждую из этих стадий отношения между Россией и Индией испытывали подъем или падение в зависимости от того, какие ожидания обе страны имели в отношении Запада. Сложный период в отношениях между Россией и Индией после 1985 г. связан с необходимостью обеих стран более плотно сотрудничать с Западом. Настоящая статья также охватывает период распада Советского Союза и окончание "холодной войны", которые привели к фундаментальной трансформации. Индия использовала экономическую и военную помощь России для своих региональных целей, одной из которых было сдерживание агрессии со стороны Пакистана и Китая. История показывает, что двусторонние отношения работают лучше всего, когда обе страны видят взаимосвязь между Китаем и Пакистаном.*

*Ключевые слова: стратегические отношения между Индией и Россией, политические и стратегические аспекты взаимоотношений между Индией и Россией.*

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