

Indo-Russia Defence Cooperation under Modi: Challenges and Prospects

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Over last five years, the Modi government has taken efforts to strengthen India's ties with Russia. Thus, while India and Russia organise the annual summit alternatively, Prime Minister Narendra Modi held an informal meeting with President Vladimir Putin in Sochi in 2018 with the aim of having free and open discussion covering the whole range of issues of bilateral and global significance.ⁱ Surely, these high-powered meetings and other initiatives have marked a profound impact on the bilateral relations, with the two sides having expanded cooperation in several areas including economy, trade and commerce, science and technology and others. Of course, defence cooperation has gained a new impetus in the recent times with the two sides having signed several agreements regarding arms-purchase including S-600 defence missile system. New Delhi and Moscow have also increased joint military exercise and intensified cooperation in other areas of defence and security.ⁱⁱ

But it is equally true that the improving ties between China and Russia, Moscow considering defence deals with Pakistan, the expanding defence ties between India and Russia are some of the issues that have the potential to limit the defence engagement between India and Russia. It is in this context that this paper seeks to evaluate the direction of India-Russia relations under the Modi government.

II

India-Russia relations have largely been viewed as a time-tested friendship.ⁱⁱⁱ During the Cold War, the former Soviet Union was a major partner of India in the security area, with the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation having played a pivotal role in institutionalizing such security ties between the two countries.^{iv} This can be gauged from the fact that the former Soviet Union fully supported India's stand on the Kashmir issue in the Security Council and helped in building its defence capabilities by exporting 60-70 per cent of India's defence imports. However, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the end of Cold War brought about a new world order led by the US in the 1990s. This transformational shift in the balance of power and geo-politics came to have profound impact on India-Russia bilateral ties for many reasons. More specifically, though Russia inherited the status of the Soviet Union; it was not in the position of playing the same role in international politics as its predecessor did.^v In fact, having reduced to the status of a regional power and facing acute economic crisis, Russia focused on improving ties with the west, and it also indicated its inability to honour defence and other deals that the former Soviet Union had signed with India. Thus, for New Delhi, it was not only the loss of a time tested friend –the Soviet Union, but the supply of military spare parts was also seriously disrupted. In turn, with the aim of

expanding sources of its defence imports, New Delhi focused on adapting to the new international order by improving ties with the US and other western countries, which further slowed cooperation between India and Russia.

Though failing to garner favourable response from the west through its pro-Atlantic policy, and Moscow geared into improving ties with India as a part of its Asia policy, it was only in 2000 when Prime Minister Atal Bihar Vajpayee and President Vladimir Putin succeeded in laying the foundation for transforming the bilateral ties into a strategic partnership, which was further upgraded to a “special and privileged” in 2010.^{vi} This in turn accelerated cooperation between the two countries in many areas including defence. For instance, during President Putin’s visit to India 2000, Russia agreed, among other defence issues, to transfer technology and licensed production of 140 SU-30 MKI multi-role fighters.^{vii} In 2004, both the countries finalised the agreement on the transfer of Admiral Gorshkov to India. When the UPA Government came to power in the same year, the two countries further consolidated the deepening bilateral ties in the defence area. In 2007, an intergovernmental agreement was signed in Moscow on joint development of an advanced multi-functional fighter aircraft helicopter of the fifth generation.^{viii} Addressing India’s concerns over its ageing Russian defence systems, Russia consented to upgrade military systems like 21-km range BM-21 multi-rocket system and other similar ones. In 2008, a high-level committee called the High-Level Monitoring Committee (HLMC) was set up with Defence Secretary from the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of India and Director of Federal Service for Military Technical Cooperation (FSMTC) from the Russian Federation as its co-chairs. During President Medvedev’s visit to India in 2010, the two countries also agreed to jointly develop a fifth-generation fighter aircraft – Sukhoi T-50. Consequently, these defence and other agreements led sections of defence experts, diplomats, journalists and others in both the countries to argue about the coming back of Cold War bonhomie between the two countries.

However, this hope was soon dashed to ground when India and Russia faced some serious differences on many defence related issues. Moscow disliked the transforming relationship between India and the US, especially following the 2008 Civil Nuclear Agreement between two countries. Sections of experts and analysts in Russia began to argue that Indian foreign policy had undergone a defining shift, with India having decided to focus more on improving its ties with the US than with Russia. On the other hand, India expressed its displeasure over Russia’s decision to sell attack helicopters to Pakistan, without taking into account of India’s security concerns. New Delhi also raised its concerns over the increasing supply of Russian systems to China, which equally brought India’s security under deep strain.^{ix}

Not only this, the most important segment of Indo-Russia defence ties – the supply of weapons and other defence systems – also faced a severe crisis. The Indian Government expressed reservations about transparency in defence deals, raised questions about the quality of Russian spares parts supplied to India. In the meantime, Russia lost some important Indian defence deals to other countries including the US, Israel and France. For instance, Russia lost a deal for 126 Medium Multi-Role Combat Aircraft, a worth of \$20 billion, to France’s defence company Dassault Rafale. Since the deal was the largest-ever defence procurement deal of India at that time, Russia reacted angrily to India’s decision by cancelling the April 2011 joint naval exercises “INDRA” at the last minute.^x Russia also cancelled a joint army exercise with India in June 2012. The procurement of aircraft carrier Admiral Gorshkov became a classic example of the widening differences between

Indian and Russia. Russia's failure to deliver the aircraft carrier Admiral Gorshkov on time annoyed New Delhi because it forced India to pay Russia \$2.34 billion, against the originally agreed price of \$947 million.^{xi}

III

When the BJP-led government under leadership of Modi came to power in 2014, it realised the unguent need to reset India's ties with Russia in a fast-changing regional and global order. Consequently, Prime Minister hosted President Putin in December 2014 and the two leaders issued a joint statement under the head of Druzhba-Dosti: A Vision for strengthening the Indian-Russian Partnership over the next decade.^{xii} President Shri Pranab Mukherjee participated in the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of victory in the World War II on 9 May 2015 in Moscow, and on the sidelines held a bilateral meeting with President Putin. This was significant in the sense that it not only reaffirmed old ties between Indian and Russian soldiers who fought together the World War Second, but also sent a clear signal about two countries' shared ideas of global order. When Prime Minister Modi went on a state visit to Moscow in December 2015, he did every right thing to show the high value that India accords to its ties with Russia. Furthermore, Prime Minister Modi and President Putin held the first informal meeting in the city of Sochi in the Russian Federation on May 21, 2018. The Summit provided an occasion for both leaders to deepen their friendship and to exchange views on international and regional issues, in keeping with the tradition of high-level political exchanges between India and Russia. The two leaders agreed that the Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership between India and Russia is an important factor for global peace and stability. They shared the view that India and Russia have an important role to play in contributing to an open and equitable world order. In this regard, they recognized each other's respective roles as major powers with common responsibilities for maintaining global peace and stability. The similar commitment was also expressed during the latest annual summit in September 2019.

Truly, these intense political engagements, domestic and external factors and other developments have infused a new momentum into the bilateral relationship. Defence and security cooperation has received much attention of the two countries. India and Russia have an institutionalized structure to oversee the complete range of issues of military technical cooperation. The India-Russia Inter-Governmental Commission on Military Technical Cooperation (IRIGC-MTC), set up in 2000, is at the apex of this structure. The two Defence Ministers meet annually, alternately in Russia and India, to discuss and review the status of ongoing projects and other issues of military technical cooperation. There are two Working Groups and seven Sub-Groups under the IRIGC-MTC, which review and discuss an array of military technical issues.^{xiii} In December 2014, the two countries signed the Agreement on Training of Indian Armed Forces Personnel in the Military Educational Establishment of the Defence Ministry of the Russian Federation.^{xiv} This in turn would help the armed forces of the two countries forge deep engagement with each other. They can effectively share their ideas and experiences about how to deal with security issues like terrorism and others. This agreement would enable the Indian armed forces to identify their capabilities and weakness against a major global military power. Between 2018 and 2019, India and Russia have signed arms deals estimating \$14.5 billion, in addition to the purchase of five S400 supersonic air defence systems

from Russia, costing around \$6 billion.^{xv} India and Russia are seeking to boost their current \$11 billion annual trade to \$30 billion by 2025.^{xvi}

There are talks going on between two countries over purchases of Sukhoi Superjet-100 airliner. New Delhi and Moscow are in serious talks on jointly developing the fifth-generation and it has also been reported that both the sides are committed to equally contribute to this project accounting for \$4 billion. Efforts have been taken to facilitate the way for many mega projects including the upgradation of Sukhoi-30 MKI jets into Super Sukhoi with advance avionics and weapons and other which have been stalled for many years.^{xvii} The two governments reached an agreement on cooperation in the production of spare parts for Russia/Soviet military equipment. It was further decided to continue joint manufacturing of spare parts and others under the 'Make in India' programme. India and Russia have also decided to formulate a framework for cooperation on reciprocal logistics support to further their military cooperation. An agreement was signed between the two governments to manufacture Ka-226 helicopters.^{xviii} The Sides noted with satisfaction achievements in the field of joint design, development and production of high-technology military equipment. The countries have converted the joint naval exercise INDRA into a Tri Services Exercise, giving a boost to the defence cooperation.^{xix}

IV

Undoubtedly, it would be naive to believe that two countries have accelerated defence cooperation in recent times for the sake of honouring their old friendly relationship. In fact, both the countries have their own compelling reasons to do so. So far as India is concerned, it has focused on the modernisation of its military. However, India's any efforts in direction cannot bring much success without the active support of Russia, mainly for two reasons. First, as majority of the weaponry and defence equipments India possess are Russian-made, Moscow's role is indispensable in India's military modernisation programme. Moreover, with 58 percent of Indian arms imports coming from Russia in the 2014-18 period, it remains a critical partner for New Delhi. The fact that joint production and technology transfer enriches Indian producers in a relationship that is yet to be replicated with any other country underscores the importance of Moscow in Indian policy.^{xx}

Second, Since Russia is one of leading countries in the manufacturing of arms, fighter aircrafts, missiles and other defence hardware, India needs to deepen its engagement with Russia to get access best of available defence systems in the world. This was precisely one of the reasons that Prime Minister Modi said during his visit to Russia that "Russia has been India's foremost defence partner through decades, accounting for a majority of our defence equipment... Even in the current environment, despite India's improved access to the world market, Russia remains our principal partner," Cementing ties between Russia and Pakistan have not gone unnoticed in India.^{xxi}

The Indian defence establishment has taken note of the fact that while there is already a China-Pakistan alliance working against India, the emerging engagement between Islamabad and Moscow can further pose great threat to India's security. Thus, the current boost to the defence engagement with Russia will also help India to contain the growing engagement between Russia and Pakistan. As one of the main objectives of the Modi Government is to promote joint defence

production with other countries in line with the “Make in India,” New Delhi sees Moscow playing a vital role in realising the Modi government’s this ambitious programme. In fact, Russia has already expressed its willingness to strengthen the defence partnership with India under the “Make in India” initiative.^{xxii} So while only the public sector has been involved in defence cooperation between the two countries to date, and the Russian defence establishment has treated India as a market for licensed production, the new initiatives will encourage joint manufacturing of defence products in India and motivate the private sector to play a role in developing a strong defence manufacturing base in India. This will ultimately reduce India’s reliance on defence imports.

For its part, Russia has been facing a severe economic slowdown due to the economic sanctions imposed on it by the West over its incursions into Ukraine, exacerbated by a sharp decline in oil prices and the costs of Moscow’s military involvement in Syria. Thus, Moscow sees the moderation programme of the Indian military as an opportunity to revive its economy, especially when India is forecast to spend \$250 billion over the next decade upgrading its military and Russia wants to seize the opportunity to become a major part of this mission, expressing its readiness to work jointly with India on defence manufacturing.

Though there have been some developments towards bridging the gap between Russia and Pakistan, it is equally true that Moscow continues to share New Delhi’s interest in promoting peace and security in Afghanistan and Central Asia, thereby it has remained committed to not allow Islamabad to succeed in reviving the Taliban regime in Afghanistan again, as the environment of insecurity and political unrest would have far-reaching consequences for both India and Russia. Both the countries also have the shared interest in promoting the multi-polar order in Asia, where China wants to establish its hegemony. This has become quite evident from Beijing’s recent behaviour in the South China Sea and elsewhere in this continent.

Counterterrorism is another area where two countries find a convergence of interest. The two have strongly condemned terrorism in all its forms, stressing the need for an effective global effort in dealing with the terrorist menace. They have also called for the elimination, once and for all, of all terrorist “safe havens,” presumably referring to Pakistan.^{xxiii} Since Russia has been facing a recognition crisis as a global power ever since it was hit with sanctions by western countries and was ousted from the G8, it believes that close engagement with a country like India, which has emerged as a major power in world politics, can help it in regaining its lost status of global power.

VI

Notwithstanding the increasing defence ties between India and Russia, New Delhi is very much concerned about the transforming Russia-China security ties. Russia sold around \$15 billion worth of weapons to China in 2017, which include Su-35 combat aircraft, S-400 missile defence system and other arms.^{xxiv} Certainly, these defence procurements will have a direct bearing on India’s security, as it is heavily dependent on the similar Russian weapons and arms. In fact, China has become all the more assertive against India and the Doklam crisis was a classic example of the Chinese hegemonic behaviour. At the same time, New Delhi is upset over Russia considering formalising major arms deals with Pakistan. On the other hand, Russia has expressed its discomfort over the fact that the relations between India and the US have taken a new height in the recent time

in all the spheres including defence and security. Since Russia and China share the ambition of limiting the US' clout in Asia and beyond and Beijing has become a good market for Russian arms among other things, it is also highly unlikely that Russia will pay much attention to India's security concerns emerging from the sale of Russian arms to China. New Delhi also fears about the profitability of the emergence of a triangular security relationship of China-Pakistan-Russia, which in turn could seriously undermine India's regional power status in South Asia.

Notwithstanding these structural constraints, the two countries continue to enjoy considerable trust in their bilateral relations. Thus, it should be hoped that under the dynamic leadership of Prime Minister Modi and President Putin, the shared security and other interests would continue to deepen and widen the areas of engagement between the two all-weather friends –India and Russia.

End Notes

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