

70 YEARS OF INDIA-RUSSIA TIES

The Enduring Relevance of India-Russia Relations

NANDAN UNNIKRISHNAN

ABSTRACT The impact of Indo-Russian relations on the domestic and foreign policies of India from the 1960s is difficult to underestimate. The USSR was instrumental in helping independent India industrialise, develop its scientific potential, and defend its territorial integrity. The Indo-Russian relationship developed a level of trust between two independent countries that was unprecedented in international affairs. The collapse of the USSR negatively affected the bilateral relations, though the political leadership in both countries succeeded in containing the impact. Today the two countries need to find new ways to reignite their ties in a rapidly changing international system.

INTRODUCTION

Indo-Russian relations took root shortly before India's Independence, but began to blossom only in the 1960s and 1970s. Today most analysts agree that the relationship has developed to a degree that it can be characterised as “time tested”. Over the past several decades, and particularly at the time of the Soviet Union, Indo-Russian relations had been marked by a high degree of political and strategic trust.

As the relationship evolved, it gained strength based on five pillars: a) similar political and strategic perceptions of the world; b)

intensive military-technical cooperation; c) strong economic bonds; d) deep ties in science and technology; and e) people-to-people and cultural links.

THE BEGINNINGS OF INDO-RUSSIA RELATIONS

India and Russia's similar political and strategic outlook was reflected in the positions the two countries took on international issues through the second half of the 20th century. India's

Observer Research Foundation (ORF) is a public policy think-tank that aims to influence formulation of policies for building a strong and prosperous India. ORF pursues these goals by providing informed and productive inputs, in-depth research and stimulating discussions. The Foundation is supported in its mission by a cross-section of India's leading public figures, academics and business leaders.



To know more about
ORF scan this code

position in the international arena was significantly bolstered by the knowledge that the Soviet Union would back India's position on Kashmir. The Indo-Soviet Treaty of 1971 gave India the confidence to respond to the churn in East Pakistan that would lead to the creation of Bangladesh. Even when there were serious differences between the two, these were managed bilaterally and not voiced in public; often not even to their respective domestic audiences. The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in the 1970s and the two nations' differing views of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) are some of the areas of divergence kept out of the public domain and discussed only at the highest political levels.

The two countries' military-technical cooperation, meanwhile, has shown extraordinary levels of depth over the years. For one, Russia has provided India entire production lines on military platforms – from aircraft to tanks. The development of the Indian Navy, particularly of the submarine fleet, has been significantly enhanced through Russian cooperation. In the 1980s, the then-unprecedented lease of a nuclear-powered submarine by the Soviet Union to India served as a reminder of the unique strategic trust shared by the two countries.

The economic ties have also been noteworthy. The Soviet Union was, until its collapse, India's largest trading partner. It was Soviet money and expertise that were the foundations of many of India's domestic industries—including metallurgy, mining, and oil and gas—a fact that the public tends to forget today. The USSR made significant contributions to India's energy security through swap deals with Iraq, ensuring that India paid minimal amounts of the then precious foreign exchange for energy.

Similar was the situation in science and technology collaboration and cultural exchanges. The high points of both were the flight of India's first cosmonaut, Rakesh

Sharma, and the cultural festivals held in each other's countries.

POST-COLD WAR

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, how did the five pillars of Indo-Russia ties evolve? The 1990s were perhaps the worst years in Indo-Russian relations—economic activity declined, cultural cooperation collapsed, collaboration in science and technology slid down, and military-technical cooperation took a precipitous drop (although some aspects of it were kept alive). The only area which survived the collapse of the Soviet Union, in a sense, was the shared paradigm in the two countries' strategic and political view of the world.

This was only partly caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union. India, coincidentally, was undergoing a deep economic and social crisis at that time. And given the vanishing act of its erstwhile partner, the USSR, it was only natural that India began to look to the West for solutions to its problems. The Russians, meanwhile, were also looking in the same direction for guidance in moving from a planning-based economy to a market one.

Given the mood of the elites in the two countries at the time, it was hardly surprising that this western-oriented trend would adversely affect bilateral ties. Matters were not helped by the desire of some of the Russian foreign policymakers who pushed for reducing India's profile vis-à-vis Pakistan in the hope that this would buttress their desire for improved ties with the US. Russia renegeing on the cryogenic engine deal with India is probably the most memorable event of those times.

However, sagacious steps by the Narasimha Rao government and its successors, aided by the efforts of a group of highly active diplomats, helped India to once again find an anchor to the sinking ship of Indo-Russian relations. India was one of a handful of countries that decided to repay to Russia in full its debt to the Soviet Union – a billion dollars a year for over a decade. This

continues to be remembered with gratitude in Russia. The Russians are probably even more grateful for India's decision to place significant orders for military hardware and pay, in many cases, in advance. This helped Russia not only keep its military industrial complex alive, but retain significant numbers of its specialists who were being poached by interested parties from across the globe.

Today, almost three decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the military-technical cooperation between India and Russia has gone up tremendously and is probably at its most dynamic stage. The economic dialogue, after almost a complete collapse has improved, albeit marginally. Cooperation in science and technology continues to show growth. Cultural cooperation, however, remains minimal, and there is increased divergence in political and strategic outlook. This appears strange, because as Russian scholars have also rightly observed, India and Russia share a common strategic goal of trying to build a 'multipolar' or 'polycentric' international system.

This downward trend in a shared worldview may be attributed to the fact that a majority of policymakers in both countries are failing to think strategically and tend to have a purely tactical view. It would take extraordinary efforts from the highest political leadership of both countries to make course corrections at this point.

LOOKING AHEAD

Russia has recently started viewing South Asia, and India in particular, from a tactical prism. Within Russia, the worldview amongst the political and business elite is churning. Russia is engaged with the task of making itself an indispensable power in many parts of the world because it is worried that instead of a polycentric world, a bipolar one might re-emerge. If, however, it becomes a power without whom some of the problems afflicting the world cannot be solved—including terrorism, Syria,

Afghanistan, and North Korea—then it believes that it significantly improves its chances of staying relevant as a great power in whatever new world architecture emerges. Therefore it makes efforts to fill the vacuum wherever it perceives indecision on the part of a great power.

The overall effect of this strategic outlook which prioritises rivalry with the US results in tactical approaches to some regional problems. Also partly because the Russian policymaking establishment is losing bandwidth and capability to deal strategically with diverse geographical areas simultaneously. But the overall result is negative for South Asia, with Russia looking at South Asia through the prism of Afghanistan.

Thus the relationship with South Asia is reduced to a series of questions for the Russian policymaker. Is a stable Afghanistan necessary to have a stable Central Asia? The answer is yes. Therefore, is it important in the search for a solution to the problem in Afghanistan to have contact with all the warring parties? The answer is yes. If one talks to Taliban, then does one need to talk to Pakistan because Taliban is a creation of Pakistan? The answer is yes. Therefore is it not politically sensible to build leverage with Pakistan?

It is here that the legacy of Indo-Soviet relations becomes relevant. Russia has no leverage in Islamabad, having already put all its eggs in New Delhi's basket. Thus the outreach to Pakistan. Since Russia lacks economic heft in the world—having a share of less than one percent of the global GDP—it obviously finds the military-technical field an easier way to generate leverage in Islamabad. Although it is not ignoring economic projects, either, building gas pipelines and modernising steel plants.

At one level, India should not really worry because Russia is going to sell a few helicopters, and have a few anti-terror exercises and manoeuvres. At another level, it is causing a problem because at times it appears that Russia is not averse to cutting out India to achieve a narrow tactical goal. The example of that is the recent attempt by Russia to conduct talks on

Afghanistan which involved only Pakistan, China, and Russia. These talks took place in January this year and only after India and Afghanistan protested vigorously were they invited for the following meeting in February, along with the some other countries. While it may look as if the problem has been sorted out, India continues to faces the huge problem of Russia's approach to Afghanistan. Russia prioritises the threat from ISIS over the threat from Taliban and justifies its outreach to the Taliban. One can argue about whether India's objections to such a policy are valid or not. But this is clearly a departure from the past where differences between India and Russia were discussed strictly behind closed doors.

On Afghanistan, India is facing a huge challenge. Everyone is engaged with the Taliban—the US, China, Russia, and Iran are all engaging with the Taliban. India, it seems, is the only one that is not talking to the Taliban, although the United Nations says no state should engage with the Taliban unless they agree to certain conditions. The lesson for India is that in Afghanistan, it has to prioritise the protection of its own national interest as it cannot expect other nations not to protect their own.

Among the other differences cropping up in the relationship are Russia's ties with China. As long as Russia gets closer to China, the distance between India and Russia will only grow further, and not because India is moving closer to the

United States. In fact, the opposite is true. India is moving towards the United States because the only guarantee that it had vis-à-vis China from 1962 was its ties with Russia. While the Soviet Union was a balancer in the relationship at that time, India was not seeking other balancers vis-à-vis China. Today, Russia and China are in a close relationship, albeit not a complete alliance, and therefore India has no option but to seek closer ties with the US. Paradoxically, New Delhi will have to enhance its multifaceted relationship with Moscow if it wants to reduce Russia's seemingly growing dependence on China. It will have to significantly energise bilateral exchanges on matters of political and strategic importance, and equally revive economic ties, particularly in the area of energy.

This is important because India would like a polycentric world in which it has good relations with all nations; it needs to live in harmony to be able to deal with its pressing domestic problems. India, like Russia, would not want a bipolar understanding emerging between China and the United States because that would reduce the space for strategic manoeuvrability for both India and Russia. Therefore, reinventing Indo-Russian relations is an important task facing the political leadership of both countries, who must find ways to rejuvenate the confluence of political and strategic interests if the relationship must break out of its current shackles. 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nandan Unnikrishnan is a Senior Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi.



Ideas • Forums • Leadership • Impact

20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area, New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-43520020, 30220020. Fax : +91-11-43520003, 23210773
E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org
Website: www.orfonline.org