

Strategic Analysis Paper

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India's Continued Reliance on Russia: The China Factor

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Key Points

- The India-Russia relationship was born out of necessity on India's part.
- It has flourished in the intervening years despite occasional setbacks.
- India seeks to maintain the relationship as a counter to China's military might.
- In that sense, China is a motivator of the India-Russia relationship.

Summary

Between 2011 and 2014, the United States overtook Russia as India's largest supplier of weapons systems. Due for the most part to its poor defence manufacturing base, India has become the world's largest importer of defence products, importing an estimated 65 per cent of its military hardware from Russia, the US, France and Israel. While Russia supplied India with an estimated US\$40 billion (\$56 billion) worth of military materiel between the 1960s and 2011, the US sold arms and equipment to New Delhi estimated at approximately US\$4.75 billion (\$6.7 billion) between 2011 and 2014. Russia was its second-largest supplier with US\$3.7 billion (\$5.2 billion), followed by France with US\$1.75 billion (\$2.4 billion) and Israel with approximately US\$500 million (\$700 million) (all US dollar figures at current conversion rates; note that no attempt has been made to correlate, for example, the 1960s dollar values with their equivalent current values).

Any attempt to view the relationship between India and Russia purely in terms of the defence materiel bought and sold will prove short-sighted, however, since the relationship extends well past a mere buyer-seller arrangement. As this paper will demonstrate, India requires Russia's military and political support as a counter to the perceived threat that China poses.

Analysis

The Indo-Russian relationship really began in 1962. In that year, China, probably provoked by the misguided “Forward Policy” of India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, invaded India and overran Indian defences in its north-east. Nehru turned in desperation to the United States to supply it with aircraft and other materiel. Describing the situation as desperate, he requested the despatch of a minimum of twelve squadrons of supersonic all-weather fighter aircraft and radar equipment to be used against the Chinese forces. Probably seeking to draw the US into the conflict, he informed President John F. Kennedy that American personnel would be required to operate the aircraft and radar installations until Indian personnel had been trained in their use. If necessary, he suggested, the US would need to make available aircraft flown by American personnel to assist the Indian Air Force in battles within Indian airspace. He also requested two squadrons of bombers to strike at Chinese installations and air bases.

Nehru probably felt justified in asking for that aid, which was worth around five hundred million US dollars spread over five years – which the USA was willing to provide – because it had previously provided Pakistan with military aid worth over eight hundred million US dollars. Kennedy agreed to his request but the Departments of State and Defence prevailed upon him not to upset Pakistan. The aid package consequently offered amounted to half of that requested but, more importantly, came with the condition that India make territorial concessions to Pakistan on Kashmir. Nehru immediately backed away from his request for an American shield. As he later argued, apart from the fact that the Chinese could have attacked and inflicted much damage on Indian cities and infrastructure before any American support materialised, it made no sense to become militarily dependent upon another country to defend itself.

Washington was engaged in a crisis of its own: the Cuban missile crisis was at its height and President Kennedy was engaged in discussions with the country’s defence officials and in negotiations with Russian representatives and government officials. Recognising the USSR as a state that was able to threaten the US, Nehru turned to Moscow instead. Relations with the USSR had changed from about 1952, when the communist superpower began to support India in the United Nations on resolutions pertaining to Kashmir. In 1955, relations improved vastly with the visits of the two leaders to each other’s countries and the grant of considerable Soviet aid to India. Nehru also elicited an assurance from Khrushchev during his visit to India not to interfere in India’s internal affairs by assisting the Indian Communist Party.

It was possibly because of these growing relations that, when the Suez Crisis erupted in 1956, Nehru was far more vociferous in denouncing Western colonialism than the actions of the USSR at the same time in Hungary. That approach paid dividends when Khrushchev denounced China’s madness in attacking India. Khrushchev also urged the two countries to a peaceable settlement but assured India that the USSR would never support China’s aggressive policy against India. India could not forego such strong statements of support that came without the conditions that the US imposed on its support. That established the

tone for India's growing relationship with the USSR, a relationship which extended into the 1990s and which remains strong, despite some setbacks, at this time.

In the event, the Chinese withdrew unilaterally, retaining for themselves only the land they had claimed prior to invading India. (It is to be noted in passing that China invaded India only when the US was distracted by the events in Cuba and withdrew when the Cuban crisis had all but ceased. In this, it followed an established principle of striking when the world's attention was distracted by events elsewhere.) While the Chinese invasion left a searing mark on the Indian psyche, New Delhi did not forget that its request at a time of national crisis had been turned down by a country that it had considered a friend.

To prevent a repeat of that incident, it turned to the USSR for two main reasons. First, Moscow could supply it with the weapons systems and other technology it sought and, arguably more importantly, could be of major benefit to India merely by virtue of its geographical location. Situated as it was to China's west and north, New Delhi reasoned, if India could enter into a defence pact with the USSR, Moscow could be called upon for assistance in any struggle with China in the event that the latter once again tried to invade India. China, it felt, could not sustain simultaneous attacks on its territory from its north, west and south. In August 1971, after India had prosecuted a successful war with Pakistan in 1965 and amid ongoing tensions with both Pakistan and China, it signed the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Co-operation with the USSR. The fact that the USSR had the ability to threaten the US would undoubtedly have also influenced Nehru's decision to turn to Moscow.

Over time, a grateful Nehru widened Indo-Russian relations, a task that his successors furthered. Their relationship extended into the spheres of politics, economics, defence, science and technology, culture and nuclear energy. In political terms, the two countries have grown close, with the Annual Summit between the Prime Minister of India and the President of the Russian Federation being the highest institutionalised dialogue mechanism under the joint Strategic Partnership. During the 2014 Summit, for example, Prime Minister Modi and President Putin signed agreements covering issues as diverse as co-operation in defence, hydrocarbons, nuclear energy, science and technology, and trade and investment.

It is in the defence field that the relationship comes into its own. The defence relationship has proceeded in leaps and bounds to the extent that India now manufactures the *Sukhoi* Su-30MKI fighter aircraft under licence. The two countries collaborated to create the Brahmos Consortium that manufactures the missiles of the same name in India. These missiles have been inducted into India's defence services. Russia loaned *Akula*-class nuclear submarines to India so that the Indian Navy could study them and determine how nuclear submarines could be best inducted and used. The Indian nuclear submarine, the *Arihant*, was designed and built with Russian input. In short, defence co-operation is the foundation of their relationship.

All is not plain sailing, however. The sorry tale of the INS *Vikramaditya*, the aircraft carrier that India purchased from Russia, illustrates the point. Negotiations for the purchase of the *Admiral Gorshkov*, as it was known then, began in 1994 and an Inter-Governmental Agreement for the acquisition of the cruiser, after it had been converted into an aircraft

carrier, in 2000. According to the terms of the agreement, the ship would be given free of charge to India but the latter would pay US\$800 million for the changes to be carried out and a further US\$1 billion for the twelve MiG29 aircraft that India needed to equip it. The delivery date was to be 2008. Cost over-runs, however, required that India pay an additional US\$1.2 billion and delivery was pushed back to 2013 at the earliest. In 2008, however, Russia announced that it needed to increase the price of the carrier by a further US\$2 billion. When India protested, Russia threatened to scrap the deal altogether. India buckled, leaving the government's Comptroller and Auditor General to lament that India had paid sixty per cent more for a second-hand aircraft carrier than a new one and still did not have a definite delivery date.

That incident soured relations between the two countries. Things did not get any better when India, having placed a world-wide tender for 126 medium multirole fighter aircraft in 2004, eliminated the Russian offerings around 2011. India next increased its purchases of major, strategic aircraft from the US and weapons systems from Israel and France, further souring its relationship with Russia. Things took a turn for the worse when it was reported that Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov stated that Russia could form an axis of co-operation with China and Pakistan. That was first raised in the aftermath of Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu's visit to Islamabad in November 2014. Russia, it was reported, planned to sell Pakistan its sophisticated and lethal *Sukhoi* Su-35 aircraft. While the Russian embassy in New Delhi sought to play down the announcement by reiterating Moscow's commitment to the Strategic Partnership Declaration of 2000, whereby both countries are obliged not to undertake activities that could prove detrimental to the security of the other, India was under no delusions as to the danger that such a development would pose. Modi's visit to Moscow in December 2015 was, therefore, a bridge-renovating exercise in many respects.

It must be noted, however, that the dependence on each other is mutual: Russia's induction of India into the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation to lend it support in balancing China, especially in the Central Asian republics and Afghanistan, is just one indication of that. India, moreover, refused to condemn Russia after it invaded the Ukraine and annexed the Crimean Peninsula. Moscow needed that support. It came as no real surprise, then, that the negotiations on the development of the Fifth Generation Fighter Aircraft that India sorely wanted re-started after they had slowed to a standstill.

Modi's visit to Moscow was an exercise in re-building the Indo-Russian relationship, remarking that Russia remained 'a strong and reliable friend'. Putin, not to be outdone, replied that he looked forward to 'developing the privileged strategic partnership between India and Russia.' The two leaders then went on to sign sixteen agreements on co-operation in various fields of endeavour. It appears that both recognise their interdependence: India still requires technology transfers and energy; Russia, India's defence and energy infrastructure spending. The trick will be to manage the relationship so as to engender mutual benefit and that demand will always require compromise.

One way of achieving that is to acquire more Russian weapons systems. New Delhi is doing just that. It has orders worth around US\$15 billion (\$21 billion) for Russian military

equipment in the pipeline. Those orders include 750 thousand AK-203 Kalashnikov assault rifles that are to be manufactured in India under licence, four *Krivak* III-class frigates, 18 *Sukhoi* 30MKI fighter aircraft, 21 *MiG*-29 fighter aircraft, 200 *Kamov* helicopters, five units of the S-400 *Triumf* air defence missile system and the ten-year lease of a nuclear-powered attack submarine from Russia.

These purchases could also be perceived as India's peace-making gesture to Russia. Moscow has, of late, become cool towards India, no doubt because of India's growing closeness to the US. It has, consequently, taken a number of actions that appear to be designed to either cause India some discomfiture or to even embarrass it. A point in the latter case was the [interview](#) given by a leader of the Baloch insurgency in Pakistan, Dr Jumma Marri Baloch, to a Russian news outlet in February 2018. In the course of that interview, Dr Baloch declared that India had hijacked the insurgency, which caused India no small degree of embarrassment. Shortly after, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov met Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Mr Khawaja Asif, and offered to sell him Russian arms that could be used in its counter-insurgency efforts.

India fears China's military might. New Delhi appears to hope that a strong relationship with Russia would act as a deterrent against a Chinese attack. It is afraid, however, that an economically-debilitated Russia could become dependent upon China for its energy sales, especially if US President Trump were to succeed in persuading Germany to desist from purchasing Russian gas. If that were to happen, China could easily become the senior partner in the Sino-Russian relationship, assuming that it is not already that, and persuade Russia to focus on selling arms and weapons platforms to Pakistan, thus isolating India. Given its policy of "strategic autonomy", India is very reluctant to become overly-dependent on the US for its military supplies. China would, effectively, be using India's own policy against it. India, therefore, has to continue to purchase weapons from Russia in order to make itself useful to Russia and worth that country's efforts to defend.

All of that said, it is not clear that Russia would come to India's aid in the event of Sino-Indian conflict. While Moscow would likely make the usual placatory and diplomatic noises, it is hardly likely that it could do more than that, given its existing relationship with China. In the aftermath of the Doklam stand-off, when India stared down China, it is often assumed that India could stand up to China's military might. While China could ill-afford a war with any country at the present time, leave alone with India in extremely inhospitable terrain such as in the Himalayas, India's all-but-obsolete military platforms and equipment and the fact that it has, for example, only enough ammunition to fight a war for ten days, works against it. India would need Russia's assistance for spare parts and other supplies in the event of conflict with China. Whether Russia can meet that objective is yet another issue India needs to consider.

It is in that sense, nevertheless, that China motivates India's continued dependence on Russia for support. India may not require Russian manpower on its side or for Russia to actually engage in a conflict between New Delhi and Beijing but would definitely require it to supply India with equipment and spare parts should one eventuate. The relatively short distance between India and Russia could make those spares and equipment more readily

available unlike, for example, having to acquire those from the US, France or Israel. If that is indeed the case, the India-Russia relationship will continue to flourish.

Any opinions or views expressed in this paper are those of the individual author, unless stated to be those of Future Directions International.

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