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The New Edge in India-Russia Relations: Probabilities

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Abstract

Indian-Russian relations have been based on a mutually beneficial partnership for decades. Over the years this relation has witnessed both systolic and diastolic phases in the backdrop of constantly changing international dynamics. The most significant part of this relation is mutual trust and mutual respect of each country's freedom to perform skilled manoeuvring in their foreign relations with other countries. The Soviet Union's support to the development of India's post-independence economy and New Delhi's support to Moscow's post-USSR dynamics and difficulties constitute manifestations of shared goals. Currently economic and defence ties between India and Russia are rising to new heights. New dimensions are explored in various geo-economical and geo-strategic engagements, providing this time-tested relation a new dynamic edge. However, in the matrix of global politics certain challenges may impact future relations and influence future probabilities. Skilful steering in bilateral relations is needed so as to reinforce solidarity and cooperation.

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Introduction

Russia's support and influence in the development of India's post-independence domestic and external policies could be best defined as *Sui Generis* – unique in character. The USSR was highly instrumental in providing *teachings and useful information* to newly independent India - from its industrialisation, to scientific research and development, to India's security concerns.

Over the years, this remarkable relation became unprecedented in the realm of International relations. The relation endured through the convoluted Cold War period; however the USSR's disintegration greatly affected the existent mutual balance. During the nineties there was an ebb in almost all the fields of bilateral cooperation - economic, cultural, scientific and technological- military. What endured through this crucial phase was the mutual trust and a shared ideology in both countries' cardinal, strategic and political outlooks on the world (Unnikrishnan, 2017) ⁱ. Perhaps they were *Ejusdem Generis*-similar in character and in outlook towards the world. The collapse of the USSR was indeed an economic, military, strategic and political setback for both India and Russia, forcing both countries to look towards the west so as to avoid complications. Most importantly the major changes brought by the collapse of the USSR in the dynamics of International relations greatly affected bilateral relations between India and Russia. Some of the new issues created fissures resulting in discontinued interactions. The new Russia under Prime-Minister Gennady Burbulis - under pressure from the west - was forced to make certain compromises with its relations with India. One of the important deals renegaded by Russia was the cryogenic engine deal between Glavkosmos and the ISRO (Rakesh, 2013)ⁱⁱ. The year 1992 brought in even more uncertainties, as both the Rupee and Rouble debt concerns hard-nosed Indo-Russian relations. These bearings were soon restructured and redefined. The Kremlin wanted to explore more opportunities for the revival of its relations with India as required for regaining its old standing in Asia. Few alterations were done to the 1971 treaty, in essence reinforcing mutual trust and friendship. Gradually the relation regained its lost momentum; soon this was visible on the diplomatic level too.

Moscow declared the significance of India in its South Asian policy by clearly supporting the country on the Jammu and Kashmir issue - and also assured support to India in its bid for the United Nations Security Council seat.

The successive governments of both India and Russia - with the support of their respective diplomats and administrations - worked diligently to revive the bilateral relationship. The most significant policy adopted by India was to payback its debt to Russia - which was over a billion dollars per year for almost

ten years in a row (Unni Krishnan, 2017)ⁱⁱⁱ. This was something actually required by Moscow at that point in time as Russia was economically struggling to hold ground. Subsequently India continued its military logistics and hardware trade with Russia. For its part the Kremlin most wilfully filled in the gaps of military weapons and scientific and technological demands of India, an attitude purposefully being avoided by the west. Over the years, Russia -with its competitive edge -supplied both military weapons and logistics to India. Most importantly, India benefited a lot by using Russian technology for its indigenous industries. The gradual revolving of trade and defence contracts coupled with a long history of mutual trust is now benefitting both India and Russia with new potentials in strategic bilateral relations.

New Trends and Shifting Geopolitical Dynamics:

The annexation of Crimea in 2014, followed by US and Western European sanctions on Russia, are bound to have enticed new reasons and ambitions for Russia to explore Asia. This crucial, factual urgency has generated various kinds of interpretations among observers. A major narrative among westerners seems to be that the evolution of China-Russia economic and political relations would lead to geopolitical dominance over the West. In fact, Russia's political and economic integration into Asia has a long history – although perhaps lately with a dormant status. The internal economic ebb has only brought back Russia towards its older allies in Asia. One of the most important dynamics in this context is the India-Russia relationship – regardless of the China factor.

The India-Soviet Union relationship during the cold war can be seen as a significant and comfortable relation. Although the nations never entirely shared the same political values, neither did they have any distinct point of conflict. The Soviet Union - a communist super power block - and India - an enthusiastically evolving democracy- both withstood the permutations of the world order quietly and with mutual support. Even after the Cold War Russia continued to be India's largest trading partner for defence. Over the years this balanced relation has harvested good results, and with Russia's current 'Pivot to Asia' policy a myriad of opportunities are presented to India as regards investing in Russia's Far East.

India was the first country to understand and realise the strategic and economic significance of Russia's Far East way back in 1992, when it opened a consulate there. It was opened in Vladivostok, the site from where the nuclear-armed Flotilla (Pacific-Fleet) was sent to support India during the 1971 India-Pakistan war. However, India took a bit too long to understand the importance of its presence in the region and its significance in the new geopolitical dynamics. As regards the presence and naval activity between Vladivostok and Chennai, India must consider two important aspects: reduced shipping time

and an un-provocative way to be present in the South China Sea, where China plays an authoritative role. In the renewed version of India-Russia relations trade and business will of course remain the focal point – but the importance of defence and the civil nuclear sector will strongly decrease as new, varied and exciting venues of cooperation are opened. It is relevant that India's current government even ambitions to switch roles with Russia – wherein sellers now become buyers, and vice-versa. Hence, India is entirely opened and indeed seeking more collaborative approaches in this newly developing or renewed bilateral relation. Both governments agree that the current level of trade is very low - i.e. \$ 11 Billion - and both allies are now determined to target approximately \$ 30 Billion for another 6 years.

India's economic credit to Russia's Far East region thus provides a new rejuvenation to India-Russia relations - Vladivostok constitutes a brand-new venture that will benefit India with mineral and oil-rich resources and a strategic counter-balance to China's pronounced influence in the region. This new prospective venture will allow India to become less dependent on the Middle East for oil resources - an approach to the potential Arctic region via this Far East route could in fact answer India's growing demand for energy resources. Moreover, it will also open new dimensions of trade for India beyond the defence sector – areas such as agriculture, pharmaceuticals and infrastructure.

Of course, the whole project gains even greater significance when observed in the context of China's Maritime Silk Route. Some of the flagship achievements during this revival of Indo-Russia relations include the supply of 3.3 million tons of Russian oil and 4.5 million tonnes of coal to India, gradually filling the gaps of India's energy requirements. The working on collaborative *Kundankulam* Nuclear Power Plant project is a landmark joint venture, of which already two units are functional and the next two phases are on schedule. India's line of credit to Russia's Far East could bring in more investors into the resource-rich region, particularly India's allies; this would be a potential gain for Russia.

But this reverting back of Russia and India towards each other after an inactive period could also be seen as the result of a compelling situation. After 2014, Russia was barred by the Western economies. Suspended from the Group 8, Russia was also imposed three types of economic sanctions. Firstly Russian enterprises in banking, energy and defence are completely tethered to enter western financial markets. Secondly a ban was imposed on exports to Russia of high technology and oil exploration. Finally a restriction on exports to Russia of defence logistics and dual-use products (Hunter Christie, 2015)^{iv} was put in motion. These sanctions started being felt in late 2014, with a speedy fall in oil prices. The impact of these sanctions also resulted in a dive on the value of the Rouble.

India faces an ebb in Indo-US relations due to the CAATSA (The Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act) and other trade-related disputes, including the imposition of tariffs on goods such as aluminium and steel exported from India under the Trade Expansion Act of 1962. This attitude by the US was argued for on the grounds of national security concerns. The US has also adopted certain other protective measures against India, in turn compelling India to impose tariffs on \$ 235 million on US goods worth \$ 1.4 billion (Pant, 2019). These trade disputes are not simple mathematical figures but rather complex and convoluted dynamics involving a number of other variables and leaving lots of speculations amidst Indo-US relations. Considering this as a clear pattern in Washington's foreign policy conduct regarding trade disputes and imbalances as well as immigration issues, more potential hurdles could be expected in the future.

Hence, these developments in Indo-US relations and the dynamics of the post-Ukraine episode could be analysed as a strategic move by both Russia and India to find appropriate alternatives and hence fill in the vital strategic gaps, so important for their respective security and economic concerns. Russia is facing an economic slowdown as well as a crash in oil prices and is perhaps looking for an alternative economic policy - other than that relating to China. It is only natural for Moscow to steer towards its old comfortable ally in Asia. India on its part must keep its alternatives and opportunities open to Russia, if for no other reason for trying to balance the shortfalls coming from the US front. Subsequent to these revived alliances, another major area demanding critical attention that is the China factor for both Russia and India.

In India's security calculus, the country can be seen as challenged by multi-lateral threat situations. Existing Security challenges could drag India into various confrontational grounds, conventional war, nuclear possibilities, proxy wars and the chances of war on two fronts. India's geographical landscape is from time to time challenged by its neighbours through unsettled and moot border disputes. India, being located between two unpredictable neighbours, needs strategic as well as economic alternatives and preparations. Furthermore, the significant and potent military involvement by China on both land and in the Indian Ocean Region via its infrastructural networks could be a major concern for India's security ambit. Considering all these factors, firstly, India perhaps now wants to shift from one-to multi-dimensional engagements- including with Russia. Secondly, its worthwhile venture in Far East Russia, by entering into the North East waters, would provide it a strategic benefit considering the current geopolitical events unfolding in Asia.

A major area of common interest for India and Russia concerns their respective dependency on China and the USA. In order to evade its involvement in the China-USA geopolitical dissensions India came

out with an analogous alternative by investing and connecting with Russia's Far East. Russia on its side shares a comfortable cordiality with China but perhaps wants to avoid a situation of sole dependency - hence the need to enhance its integration into the world economy on a wider and more active scale, including by forming alliances with its Asian allies. This may be one of the reasons why Moscow decided to open its Eastern region rich in natural resources to its Asian connections- including India, Japan and Southeast Asian countries. Russia understands that China's aspirations are strategically important for its own interests. On its part, Beijing understands that in the rising US-China competition which is leading towards bi-polarity, the country requires allies barred by the west – of which Russia is an obvious example (Raj Gupta, 2017)^v.

One more perspective relates to Russian access to Asia with a global prospect. The region is of course important to the Kremlin, since it can be termed as the 'mitochondria' of the world order currently and also the centre of economic growth and competitions. Forming and reviving alliances can do very much indeed to boost Russia's economy. The region also plays the role of potential alternative amidst a weak standing in Europe and marginalisation by the west in general (Lo, 2019)^{vi}.

Indo-Russia geo-economic connectivity in Russia's Far East is currently the most predictable and unchallenged integration path in an otherwise weak field of bilateral relations (Rekha, 2017)^{vii}. India gains access to oil and natural gases, along with abundance of natural resources such as copper, iron, timber, gold, diamond, marine resources and alternative energy sources. Since this region is scarcely populated, it would be an opportunity for Indian professionals to provide services and develop the region. Subsequently, the presence of an Indian workforce in the region would also iron out Russia's worry over Chinese migration into the Far East region. India could also benefit from the provision of joint ventures with other Asian countries investing and working in the same region. The 'Para-Diplomatic' ties between Indian states and Russian provinces will be significant as relates to an increase in trade and commerce (Pant, 2019)^{viii}; it may also embolden or at least deepen cultural ties.

Although this region is rich in mineral resources, Russia only recently opened it to international players. Changes in the global market and new strategies in relation to Asia led Russia to rethink its strategies. Converging interests, complimentary economies and a completely new perspective are leading Indo-Russia relations into a more pragmatic and multi-dimensional collaboration– with a new dimension and edge.

The Russian political establishment much highlights Indo-US proximity through the newfound concept of the 'Indo-Pacific' region - although India has made it clear on several occasions that the 'Indo-

Pacific’ does not refer to a specific group of countries but rather an attitude of welcoming inclusive engagements with various and varied stakeholders (Pant, 2019)^{ix}. The Sochi summit might have clarified this issue (Godbole, 2018)^x.

The Russian media outlet *Kommersant* stated that India and Russia signed a political document rejecting sanctions not approved by the United Nations. However, the joint statement resulting from the encounter did not contain the word ‘sanction’ (Zakharova, 2018)^{xi} – perhaps so as not to provoke the US and instead focus on a bilateral relationship that includes geo-economic, geo-strategic and geo-political leverages for both countries. Global geo-political dynamics will determine the character of future cooperative relations. Adapting to geo-political changes and addressing key geo-economical and geo-strategic concerns will lead the relationship to productive outcomes. The Indo-Russian S-400 deal is an indicator to US policy makers that Russia is adopting a balancing policy in the South Asian subcontinent - whereas India is boldly manifesting its independence in foreign policy.

India is ever concerned about Russia’s relations with Pakistan and China. A major area of concern for India concerns the growing antagonism between the US and Russia and the probable impacts on India’s strategic partnership with the former country. Another relevant dynamic surging since the Ukraine crisis concerns Russia’s proximity with China. The more vital part in that relation is that both are challenged by the USA on economic, political and strategic levels – stresses which an economically robust China is capable to sustain but which the enervated economy of Russia is less so. Russia does risk becoming dependent on China. Strategically speaking, Russia seems to have realised this dependency, as it started revitalizing its relations with India, Japan, S. Korea and South-East Asian countries. India maintains cordial relations with these same South-East Asian countries– and Russia would benefit by taking this fact into account^{xii}.

Considering the pugnacity of the Indo-Pacific region, the conflicting interests between stakeholders in the region, and the alarming rise of China, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue among the US, India, Japan and Australia was being considered, yet unfortunately it was not so successful. The existing vacuum could be filled in by a Russian-Indian partnership.

Conclusion

The most significant development is that other than defence and trade ties, India and Russia are also exploring other economic venues of cooperation. The major breakthrough concerns the recent developments happening in Russia’s Far East with a huge credit investment by India in the region and

maritime ties building up new avenues of future geo-strategic importance. India and Russia need to find more areas of convergences and strengthen their relations further.

Despite various international and regional dynamics, the maturity of this India-Russia time-tested relation provides leverage space for each partner without losing mutual trust. Hopefully, the new edge in relations will provide economic benefits and a new meaning to the relevant geo-strategic ties.

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