



MOVING AWAY FROM RUSSIA: IS IT RIGHT CHOICE?

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The thaw in relationship with United States is perceived to be an asset for India in recent years. The euphoria generated after much hyped strategic partnership did help to obscure the contentious issues which arose much before the Devyani Khobragade episode. But the real mettle of the resilience of the partnership is being tested in the wake of the Obama administration's reluctance to accommodate Indian interests on major issues and fault lines created there by.ⁱ

The rise of US arms sales to India has risen spectacularly in the recent past. In just a few years the US has emerged as India's largest arms supplier surpassing Russia and Israel. The development is linked to the Indo-US civilian nuclear deal. Although the deal is quite a damp squib on energy with little prospect of delivering a single operational nuclear power plant for years to come, it has definitely facilitated in opening the door to major US arms sales. The 2005 nuclear agreement in principle incorporated a specific commitment to ramp up defence transactions.ⁱⁱ When Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Washington in September 2013 he made a commitment to President Barack Obama to purchase \$5 billion worth of new arms.ⁱⁱⁱ

Ironically at the height of Khobragade affair, India far from seeking to impose any costs on America awarded it yet another mega contract worth \$1.01 billion deal for supply of six additional C-130J military transport aircraft. The arms sale to India has risen from a measly \$100million to billions of dollars annually in barely one decade. India's defence

relationship with US has resemblance to its ties with Russia, with weapon sales serving as the driving force. The difference however is perhaps evident when one has a look at the non-military commerce. The two way Indo-US trade has quadrupled in just seven years from \$25 billion in 2006 to about \$100 billion in 2013. The idea of not putting all the eggs in one basket might have been in the background behind the policy of reducing imports from Russia but a new dependency on the US without progress to build a domestic arms production base is hardly in India's strategic interests.^{iv}

Moreover Washington's special relationships with India's regional adversaries cannot be overlooked. With Pakistan it has a strategic alliance since 2004 and strategic partnership since 2006. With china it has a "Constructive strategic partnership" since 1997. The relationship binding India as a leading US arms client may prove to be detrimental to India's interest in the long run. The dependence on imports to meet its basic defence needs would preclude it in its quest for emerging as major international power in a true sense.^v

Biggest arms importer

Paradoxically annual value of India's arms contracts to the US has already surpassed American military aid to any country other than Israel. There is nothing flattering about earning the sobriquet "World's biggest arms importer". Today on an average India's imports account for more than 10 % of all weapons sold annually. An imported weapon makes India hostage to the supplier nation for spares and service for the full life of that system. For the US displacing Russia as India's largest supplier has been nothing short than a diplomatic coup.

Russia in the past has transferred even offensive weapon systems to India. They include:

- Strategic bombers
- An aircraft carrier
- A nuclear powered submarine.

In contrast US arms to India fall mainly in the category of defensive weapons. Would the US ever sell high-precision conventional arms, anti-submarine warfare systems, long range air and sea launched cruise missiles and other conventional warfare systems?

India-Russia Strategic Relations

During the Cold War, India and the Soviet Union (USSR) enjoyed a strong strategic, military, economic and diplomatic relationship. After the collapse of the USSR, Russia inherited the close relationship with India, even as India improved its relations with the West after the end of the Cold War. Traditionally, the Indo-Russian strategic partnership has been built on five major components: politics, defence, civil nuclear energy, anti-terrorism co-operation and space.^{vi} Both countries are members of many international bodies where they jointly collaborate closely on matters of shared national interest. Important examples include the UN, BRICS, G20 and SCO where India has observer status and has been asked by Russia to become a full member.^{vii} Russia has stated publicly that it supports India receiving a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council.^{viii} In addition, Russia has expressed interest in joining SAARC with observer status in which India is a founding member.^{ix}

In 2004, more than 70% of the Indian Military's hardware came from Russia, making Russia the chief supplier of defence equipment. India has an embassy in Moscow and two consulates-general (in Saint Petersburg and Vladivostok). Russia has an embassy in New Delhi and four consulates-general (in Chennai, Hyderabad, Kolkata, Mumbai).

India and Russia have several major joint military programmes including:

- BrahMos cruise missile programme
- 5th generation fighter jet programme
- Sukhoi Su-30MKI programme (230+ to be built by Hindustan Aeronautics)
- Ilyushin/HAL Tactical Transport Aircraft

Additionally, Russia has offered India various military hardware:

- T-90S Bhisma with over 1000 to be built in India
- Akula-II nuclear submarine (2 to be leased with an option to buy when the lease expires)
- INS Vikramaditya aircraft carrier programme
- Tu-22M3 bombers (4 ordered)

- US\$900 million upgrade of MiG-29
- Mil Mi-17 (80 ordered)
- Ilyushin Il-76 Candid (6 ordered to fit Israeli Phalcon radar)
- The Farkhor Air Base in Tajikistan is currently jointly operated by India and Russia.

If we lose our “privileged strategic relationship” with Russia, the consequences can be grave. That Russia has been our largest defence equipment supplier since Independence is an interesting fact. Neither Britain as the retiring colonial master nor the US as the most powerful democracy of the time seemed all that interested in the new country’s needs. But Stalinist Soviet Union considered it worthwhile to help India build its basic muscles. The qualitative nature of the relationship between India and Russia is more significant than its quantitative dimensions. Russia is always willing to share strategic military technology with India. With arrangements for joint research and development, the two countries are engaged in building fifth-generation fighter aircraft and multirole transport jets. Already the Brahmos cruise missile, the T-90 tank and the Sukhoi fighter planes exist as living symbols of this cooperation.

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This happened even when the US opposed technology transfer and refused help even with cryogenic engines for India’s space programme. It’s a different matter that India’s space technology advanced far enough to make it a leader in the field. There were of course irritants along the way. The Gorshkov-Vikramaditya’s delays extended from 2004 to 2013, the costs escalating from \$974 million to \$2.34 billion. India’s insistence on civil

liability clauses prevented a deal on Kudankulam's third and fourth reactors even on Manmohan Singh's latest visit. But these are nothing compared to the way Russia stood by India on critical issues. When military defence had become impossible without satellite navigation system and it was clear that the US would never help in the event of an India-Pakistan showdown, Russia provided access to its Glonass system in 2011. India's military facilities in Tajikistan bordering Afghanistan would have been impossible without facilitation by Russia. The advantages of having Russia on our side are enumerated in abovementioned paragraphs, but these leverages are put at risk by one dimensional approach to global strategizing.^x The facts speak for themselves. Russia is a trusted ally and always holds India's hand. The policymakers in India need to rethink on policy of preferring US over Russia with respect to India's defence needs.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies CAPS)

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End Notes

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