



India-Russia Defence Cooperation: Re-Discovering a Long Lost Friend

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Russian President Vladimir Putin is scheduled to visit India in October 2016 for the Annual India-Russia Summit on the sidelines of BRICS summit.

The visit has generated curiosity and expectations as India and Russia relations are seemingly on an upward trend (once again). Promising deals including the defence sector are expected to be signed between President Putin and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Some of the key

developments in the defence sphere include: Joint production of Fifth Generation Fighter Aircraft (FGFA) (the project is expected to be completed by 2022) and leasing of some submarines from Russia. New Delhi and Moscow have also agreed to license-build 200 twin-engine Kamov Ka-226T light multi-role helicopters and self-propelled artillery units (SAU) in India by Uralvagonzavod and Kalyani Group.¹ Russia has offered its latest nuclear aircraft carrier 'Shtorm' to India.² Other key defence deals would be the agreement on the sale of S-400 missiles and setting up of shipbuilding manufacturing hub in

Vishakapatnam by United Shipbuilding Corporation of Russia.

The signing of the proposed agreements certainly indicates that defence cooperation between India and Russia has once again gained momentum. Russia is conducting INDRA 2016—the Russian-Indian counter-terrorist exercise in Vladivostok. In total, more than 500 servicemen from both sides, up to 50 pieces

of armament and military hardware, including IFVs, APCs, T-72 tanks, Grad MLRS, cross-country automobiles, UAVs, attack and army aviation of the Eastern MD, are involved in the joint exercise.³ Joint production with Russia would further stimulate the 'Make in India' project as Moscow has been flexible and willing to share modern technology and has assisted India in several indigenous defence productions, such as BrahMos supersonic cruise missile.

Diversification of Defence Market

Defence cooperation until Soviet disintegration was a major plank in the bilateral partnership between the two countries and the defence trade

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was completely monopolised by the Soviet Union. Post Soviet collapse led to huge financial crisis that not only diluted Russia's status at the regional and global level but also had a huge impact on the Defence Industrial Complex (DIC) due to significant cut in budget allocation. This put New Delhi in a limbo as it had to browse former Soviet space for spare parts apart from the dismal status and technological gap of Russia's DIC. In many aspects Russia's DIC failed to satisfy the needs and demands of its client states (like India). Thus, to fulfill the growing demands of time, India sought to resolve this issue by diversifying its defence markets.

The diversification of India's defence market in post Cold War era caused anxiety to the Kremlin and it meant: a) There would be a huge cut in financial resource to its DIC, and b) India drifting away from its traditional ally- Russia. Additionally, Russia's defence capabilities were highly criticized post its military stint in Chechnya and Georgian crisis, as the army lacked cohesion and morale and also immensely lagged behind Western defence technological capabilities. This demanded serious revitalisation of Russia's defence industrial complex. Hence, revamping of Russia's DIC began to take place since 2000 as a result of economic progress (energy diplomacy) and revival programs and policies initiated by President Putin. Defence sale, innovation, and demand for Russian defence equipment gained back its lost glory in global defence market. Its recent campaign in Syria to support President Bashar al Assad regime and combat the rise of ISIS in the country proved beneficial not only because it revived its image as a reliable and responsible regional player in the Middle East, but it was also a 'field test' to display its defence capabilities which included well coordinated airstrikes and missile tests, such as the successful firing of Kalibr missiles from Caspian Sea. As a result, many countries began to show keen interest in purchasing Russia's armaments which included Saudi Arabia, UAE and Algeria. For instance: Russia's air defence

capability and performance in Syria gave a head start to negotiations between Algeria and Russia for the purchase of aircraft and also contracted a squadron (12 aircraft) of Su-34s.⁴

Current Developments: Prospects for Long Term Defence Cooperation

The current developments in defence cooperation between India and Russia have put to rest the uncertainties that loomed over the partnership for a long time. But, the question that still remains is: Have the two countries overcome the impediments in the partnership? Some of the predicaments which need to be analysed for the success of long term defence cooperation are: time slippage, cost overruns, edgy political negotiations, emergence of the US as India's key defence partner, Russia's relaxation to share advanced military technology with China, and its defence cooperation with Pakistan.

India's key defence partners apart from Russia are the US, Israel, France and United Kingdom.

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But the recent tilt towards Washington has been more vigorous. Today, India is the leading defence client of the US. Some of the developments in the defence ties are: the signing of a 10

year military technical cooperation and joint production such as, the Raven Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV), 'roll-on, roll-off' intelligence-gathering and reconnaissance modules for the C-130J Super Hercules aircraft, mobile electric hybrid power sources, and uniform integrated protection ensemble increment-2 (chemical, biological warfare protection gear for soldiers).⁵ Washington has cleared the purchase of attack and heavy lift helicopters which include 22 Apache and 15 Chinook choppers. Defence cooperation also includes joint military drills such as the 13 day military exercise- 'Yudh Abhyas' from 14-27 September 2016 between India and the US in Uttarakhand. Most recently, India and the United States signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA); this deal covers training, exercises, port calls, refueling, repair and humanitarian. Based on this

agreement, India can refuel its warships and aircraft as well as repair military hardware at US bases in Diego Garcia, the Persian Gulf, East Africa, Australia, Japan and the Philippines.⁶ These developments have signaled the strengthening of defence and strategic cooperation between India and the US.

On the other hand, Russia has signed an agreement on Military Cooperation with Pakistan on 22 November 2014. In Article 3 of the agreement, the avenue of cooperation includes port calls by the naval vessels and military aircraft visits, on the invitation from the other Party.⁷ Additionally, Russia and Pakistan are conducting first joint military drills for counter terrorism and drug trafficking- 'Friendship 2016'⁸ from 24 September-07 October 2016 (as scheduled) despite the political and security tensions in Indian sub-continent post Uri attacks. The crucial aspects of the growing defence ties between Moscow and Islamabad are: Moscow is driven by its self-interest i.e., inclusion of Pakistan in bringing regional stability in Af-Pak region and strategic partnership with Beijing would assist in challenging the pre-eminence of the US in current international order.

Another crucial aspect is political 'signaling' by the actors engaged:

a) Pakistan signaling to the US: Pakistan has partially lost its strategic relevance in Washington's foreign policy objectives as its efforts to combat terrorism in its territory has come much more under the US scanner post the killing of Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad and its failure to crack down on the Haqqani network. The US House of Representatives also voted in favour of a defence policy bill in May 2016 that imposed restrictions on military aid⁹ for Pakistan. The strategic partnership between the US and India has further aggravated Pakistan's anxiety. But, post US drawdown from Afghanistan in 2014 has revived Pakistan's strategic relevance especially for countries like Russia. Thus, developing closer ties with Russia is a shift from its pro-US policy but at the same time signaling Washington that Russia (Cold War

rival) will be given prominence in its foreign policy objectives— a shift from its previous stand of disregarding engagement with Russia.

b) Russia signaling to India: The rapprochement between Moscow and Islamabad is seen as an outcome of new synergies in India-US defence and strategic partnership ('exceptionalism' in nuclear energy cooperation, defence cooperation, US support for NSG membership to India and the recent signing of LEMOA agreement). It is believed that Russia is signaling India that it may lose the 'special privilege' in the foreign policy interests of the Kremlin. Russia is thus concerned about India's tilt towards the US as the strategic partnership is taking a concrete shape in recent times.

Strategic partnership between Russia and China is a cause of concern for India. In order to advance in contemporary geopolitics, Russia and China partnership is set out to challenge the pre-eminence of the US. In this regard, Moscow has relaxed its stance on exchanging advanced weapons technology to Beijing post the 'reverse engineering' saga. These include the sale of four diesel-electric *Lada*-class submarines (two of which will be built in China), and sale of 24 *Su-35* aircraft and the recent sale of S-400 missiles. The two countries have also conducted a number of joint war games. Recently, Russia conducted an eight day naval drill with China from 12-19 September 2016 in the South China Sea, off the coast of China's Guangdong province. The Joint Sea-2016 exercises between the two countries involved surface ships, submarines, fixed-wing aircraft, helicopters, and amphibious vehicles.¹⁰ One should bear in mind that Russia has engaged three major Asian actors in joint military drills at individual level but the key deduction is— Russia is carefully 'balancing' all three allies accommodating their interests respectively. By bringing in Pakistan alongside India and China, Russia is set to vigorously engage in Asian geopolitics through its 'Pivot to Asia' strategy. While India acknowledges Russia's interests, its decision to develop defence ties with Islamabad

and its relaxation of selling advanced military technology to China has aggravated India's concerns.

Another challenge that remains for Russia-India relations is in the context of China's presence and priority in Moscow's foreign policy interests. China's growing influence in global politics, its aggressive posturing towards India and challenging its interests has increased New Delhi's concerns. Moreover, China's inroads into the Indian Ocean Region alongside Russia-China maritime cooperation in South China Sea is taking place much to the displeasure of the US, Southeast Asian countries and also India. But, the key argument is: what are Russia's interests in China's sphere of interests (including both South China Sea and Indian Ocean Region)?

China and Russia's joint military exercises signal a strong strategic partnership, but, one needs to be aware that China does not prefer to resolve its disputes with a third party involvement. In case of Russia extending the role of a mediator, Beijing may not encourage its involvement, as China's foreign policy is based on *"never against each other, but not necessarily always along with each other"*. Moreover, throughout history, Russia has been a continental power, and enhancing naval strength post Soviet collapse has been of least importance until recently, as reflected in its current Naval Doctrine 2015. Besides, the current shipbuilding programme is primarily aimed at self sufficiency and to sustain limited blue-water (far offshore) capabilities - nuclear subs and frigates including mid-life upgrade of nuclear subs and nuclear cruisers¹¹ apart from the commercial purpose.

Russia also plans to reopen its naval base in Vietnam after refusing to renew the 25 year rent free agreement (1979) signed between Soviet Union and Vietnam in 2001 and Vietnam's readiness to allow Moscow to re-open its base in Cam Ranh Bay (on a condition that it is not directed against any third party). Does this signal Russia's interest to revive its influence in Asia-Pacific maritime region? Even if it does, Russia does not have the required resources to maintain

and sustain off shore naval bases, especially the financial resources. Moreover, even if Russia is keen on strengthening its offshore naval base, it would invest its time and resources in revamping the existing naval bases in its sphere of influence that includes Atlantic, Arctic, Antarctic, Caspian, and Pacific, but not in China's sphere of influence (Southeast Asia and South China Sea). In this context, India's strategic partnership with the US especially in the maritime sphere plays an important role as its naval capabilities are undeniably the strongest and more technologically advanced. Hence, India moving closely to the US is catering to its needs not only in defence sector but also in countering China's strategy of curtailing India's progress as both a regional and global player. What can be inferred from these developments is that the diversification of defence cooperation has to a certain level accomplished the desired goals and national interests for both the countries.

Conclusion

The signing of agreements worth billions (as mentioned earlier) during President Putin's scheduled visit in October are set to give new impetus to defence cooperation between India and Russia. However, despite the fact that the induction of FGFA into Indian Air Force after completion will be a force multiplier to the country's defence capabilities, some analysts are concerned that the timeline of completing the production of FGFA is late given the fact that China's military modernisation process will include the induction of something even more capable by then. Though India is geared up to buy S-400 missiles, *Almaz Antey*—the production facility, is said to be already overloaded with assignments to produce the same for domestic procurement followed by a delivery for China, which has also signed an agreement for the purchase of S-400 Triumph air defence systems, that is expected to be completed not before 2018, according to *Rostec* head Sergey Chemezov. This also means that India needs to wait even longer for the completion and delivery of the

consignment. India's goal is to achieve self reliance and indigenization of defence industrial complex since the announcement of 'Make in India' project. Yet, the trend in defence procurements has only increased more than ever.

New Delhi and Moscow have in recent times diversified their defence markets to secure their needs and demands, but one should not forget that India has simultaneously continued to sign many military deals alongside joint defence production with Russia, which in other words means, that there would be continuation and preservation of defence engagement between the two countries. An important component that enhances the relationship between the two countries is mutual trust, understanding, interests and mutual concerns. But, the possible détente between Russia, Pakistan and China reflects that India may no longer enjoy the 'exceptional' status (de facto/tacit) in defence cooperation, as Moscow until now had never desired to export defence equipment to Pakistan or share advanced weapons technology with China. Russia's intentions in terms of its alliance with the two countries may not be anti-India, but it needs to consider that the 'all weather friendship' between Islamabad and Beijing is aimed at challenging New Delhi's national interests, security, stability and growth. In this direction, Russia needs to clearly spell out the contours of its alliance with Pakistan and China. Hence, for long term defence cooperation and indispensable strategic partnership, both countries should identify and resolve the bottlenecks in the relations and revitalise their interests.

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Notes

¹ "India, Russia to jointly produce artillery", Russia and India Report, 14 July 2016, https://in.rbth.com/economics/defence/2016/07/14/india-russia-to-jointly-produce-artillery_611525, accessed on 22 September 2016.

² "India, Russia to Close Multi-Billion Dollar Defense Deals Before Annual Summit", *Sputnik*, 14 September 2016. <https://sputniknews.com/military/20160914/1045308981/india-russia-defense-deals.html> accessed on 16 September 2016

³ Indra-2016, Russian-Indian counter-terrorist exercise, started in Primorsky Krai, Ministry of Defence

of the Russian Federation, 23 September 2016. http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12096915%40egNews, accessed on 25 September 2016.

⁴ Discussion with Maxim Shepovalenko, Deputy Director, Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, 28 August 2016.

⁵ Amit Cowshish, "Indo-US Defence Cooperation: Harvesting Defence Technologies", *IDSA*, 13 October, 2015. http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/Indo-US-Defence-Cooperation_acowshish_131015, accessed on 22 September 2016.

⁶ "India, US to Hold Military Drills Near China Border on September 14-27", *Sputnik*, 12 September 2016. <https://sputniknews.com/military/20160912/1045207339/india-us-china-drills.html>, accessed on 16 September 2016.

⁷ The Agreement signed by the MoD of both Russian Federation and Pakistan translated from Russian to English by Maxim Shepovalenko, Deputy Director, Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies. <http://docs.cntd.ru/document/420283268>

⁸ On 18 September 2016, four terrorists suspected to be from the terror group Jaish-e-Mohammad carried an attack on the 12th brigade headquarters in Uri near Line of Control (LoC) that resulted in the killing of 17 Indian soldiers.

This is second such incident to have taken place on Indian Territory this year after the Pathankot attacks. Though all the terrorists were killed on both occasions, the security breach and the killing of defence personnel have raised India's security concerns that are mainly emanating from the territory of Pakistan and its terror outfits.

⁹ "US House decides on conditional military aid for Pakistan", *The Dawn*, 20 May 2016. <http://www.dawn.com/news/1259564>, accessed on 24 September 2016.

¹⁰Ankit Panda, "Chinese, Russian Navies to Hold 8 Days of Naval Exercises in the South China Sea", *The Diplomat*, 12 September 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/09/chinese-russian-navies-to-hold-8-days-of-naval-exercises-in-the-south-china-sea/>, accessed on 22 September 2016.

¹¹*Ibid.*



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