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Indo-Russia Ties and the Indian EAM's Recent Russia Visit

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Indian External Affairs Minister (EAM) Dr S Jaishankar visited Russia from December 25-29, 2023 and held meetings with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. Importantly, this visit has taken place at a time when India's closeness with the West is increasing while also giving impetus upon India's inevitable strategic need to balance its ties with its long-time friend, Russia. In order to objectively understand the implications of the visit, it would be worthwhile to first understand in brief, the historical context of India-Russia relations evolving over the years followed by analysing the visit and the implications thereof on Indo-Russia relationship.

Indo-Russian Ties over the Years

Immediately after attaining independence in 1947, India was feeling childlike (read insecure).¹ This was the time when the Soviet Union came forward and helped India in setting up various industrial units that included mainly the steel plants in Bhilai, Vishakhapatnam and Bokaro, in addition to a plant in Durgapur that was involved in the manufacturing of the equipment for mining and a thermal power station in Neyveli besides a venture in Korba that was dealing into electromechanical equipment. Notably, the erstwhile USSR provided this help to India as a friendly gesture, with no strings attached.² The USSR had also been a significant source of arms and military hardware for India by virtue of having provided tanks like T-72, T-90 and the infantry combat vehicle i.e. Boevaya Mashina Pekhoty (BMP) to the Indian Army. The Indian Air Force (IAF) received the MiG and Su series of fighter fleets, as well as Mi series Helicopters and AN and IL series of medium and heavy lift transport aircraft respectively. Additionally, the USSR supplied a diverse range of radars and Air Defence systems to the IAF besides a host of other weapons and systems to the Indian Navy. This has positively helped in the modernisation of the Indian armed forces which of late had started turning their attention towards the West to meet the modernisation requirements, coupled with a growing emphasis on developing the indigenous capabilities.

This apart, the erstwhile Soviet Union was technologically an advanced nation from whom India could benefit in terms of the world-class technology as and when it needed. In addition to the Transfer of Technology (ToT) in multiple industrial sectors such as steel, defence, railways, construction equipment, metal & mining and petrochemicals, certain important public sector undertakings like the Steel Plants in Bhilai, Durgapur & Rourkela were built in India with Soviet assistance. These plants have been technologically superior and comparable with the best in the world. In short, the Soviet assistance provided significant impetus to the growth of core industries and helped greatly in transforming India from a developing country to a faster-growing nation.³ On the economic front, India's concept of Five Years Plans has its roots in the Central Planning Model of the erstwhile USSR, introduced by Joseph Stalin in 1920.⁴

However, in December 1991, the Soviet Union disintegrated and was replaced by fifteen autonomous republics, forming a loose union of erstwhile Soviet republics known as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).⁵ Soon thereafter, the special Indo-Russia relations of yesteryears got embroiled in the financial quandary, leading to a virtual collapse of Indo-Russian trade in 1992. Also, the Russian banking oligarchy endeavoured to manipulate the rupee fund to their advantage. Following all this, the Indo-Russian relations pulled away from each other. Coincidentally, India's exposure and integration with the world economy through the New Economic Policy 1991 occurred concurrently with the Soviet collapse.⁶

Analysing the Recent Russia Visit of EAM and the Implications Thereof

The recent visit of EAM Dr Jaishankar to Russia in December 2023 can be seen as a significant reaffirmation of the friendship and strategic partnership between India and Russia, sending a clear message of India's continued support and engagement with Russia. During this visit, Dr Jaishankar deliberated upon bilateral cooperation in trade and economics, energy, defence, connectivity, cultural, and people-to-people exchanges between the two countries. The perspectives on global and regional developments including multilateral cooperation also were discussed between the two sides. This apart, three protocols towards management of the Kudan Kulam Nuclear Power Plants besides a Memorandum of Understanding relating to cooperation in pharmaceuticals and healthcare spheres and a Protocol on Foreign Office Consultations were formalised during the visit. There were also deliberations with regard to the Indian foreign policy perspectives and the Russia-India relationship between the Indian side and the think-tanks & academic institutions of Russia. The discussions with respect to the cultural ties and people-to-people connect also formed part of the EAMs interaction with the Indian diaspora in Moscow. In Saint Petersburg, EAM discussed possibilities of cooperation in the economic and cultural fields with the Governor, H.E. Alexander Beglov. He also had discussions with an assorted cross-section of Indologists at Saint Petersburg University wherein the deliberations focussed upon enhancing a better mutual understanding and appreciation of developments in the two countries. As another step in the direction of soft power diplomacy, the EAM interacted with teachers and students at a leading Russian government educational institution named after Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, which notably has Hindi language in its course content.⁷

In short, EAMs Russia visit has showcased the prospects of objectively evaluating the current bilateral collaboration and further strengthening the distinct strategic ties existing between the two countries for the past nearly seven decades or so. Notably, the India-Russia bonding has always been strong based upon the strategic convergence, mutually shared geopolitical considerations and multilateral cooperation between India and Russia. The recent visit can be said to have further strengthened the strong and enduring ties between the two countries, with discussions focusing upon bilateral cooperation, trade and strategic relations. Despite Western efforts to isolate Russia due to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, India has continued to maintain and

strengthen its relationship with Moscow, highlighting the mutual historic diplomatic ties and India's reliance on Russian imports, particularly in the defence and energy sectors. The major takeaways of the visit included the reaffirmation of a strong and enduring India-Russia relationship, discussions on trade and strategic cooperation and the invitation for Prime Minister Modi to visit Russia.

During the visit, Dr Jaishankar met Russian President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and discussed a diverse range of regional issues related to conflicts, connectivity and multilateralism.⁸ Again no big announcements were made, but the visit emphasised the multifaceted nature of India's diplomatic engagements with Russia and showcased the enduring strength of the India-Russia relationship. The interactions are expected to go a long way in defying all the apprehensions about strains in the relationship emerging from India's recently growing ties with the West and Indian participation in the QUAD.

In order to objectively evaluate the implications of the EAM Dr Jaishankar's visit to Russia in December 2023 for India, it would be worthwhile to consider a diverse range of factors. The geopolitical dynamics, status and extent of economic ties and extant diplomatic relations amongst the concerned nations play crucial role in shaping the impact of any such diplomatic visit. The economic considerations and deliberations thereupon form crucial parameters in evaluating any meaningful diplomatic interaction. An assessment of the state of trade agreements, discussions on investments and economic partnerships forged during a visit become the vital components of a successful diplomatic mission. Considered in this perspective, the visit may be treated as a pre-requisite of strengthening the ties between the two nations and as also carrying the potential to provide India with new opportunities in energy, defence as well as the technology sectors.

The diplomatic relations between India and Russia have been historically strong.⁹ Therefore, understanding the nature of deliberations of the present visit with regard to political, security and defence cooperation is essential. Viewed from this angle, the visit involved discussions on regional and global issues which signify India's global perspective on key international matters e.g. cooperation on global challenges like climate change, terrorism, or health crises indicating India's commitment to multilateral ties.

The security concerns and international defence collaboration are considered vital to any international relationship, a point very relevant especially with respect to Indo-Russian ties. The discussions during the instant visit with regards to defence deals, joint military exercises or technological partnerships, would have far-reaching implications for augmenting India's defence capabilities and emboldening its strategic posture. Assessing the level of trust and cooperation in these areas would be crucial for understanding the visit's strategic impact.

Furthermore, considering the visit's timing in December 2023, it's also essential to evaluate the domestic political scenario in both India and Russia. Political changes or developments in either country are likely to have the potential to influence the dynamics of the visit and subsequent outcomes.

The ties between India and Russia hold significance owing to our longstanding defence affiliations and need for import of oil and gas, regardless of an apprehension that India's growing association with Russia might irk the West with whom India is trying to progress its relations.¹⁰ This anxiety is guided by the fact that the bitterness provoked by the Russia-Ukraine war has rendered the ties between Moscow on the one hand, and the US and Europe on the other, practically irreparable.¹¹

Way Forward

However, notwithstanding the above, the visit holds tremendous significance in the realm of Indo-Russia relations taking one more step beyond the special and privileged partnerships already established between the two nations. The future of the Indo-Russia relationship appears bright also because India's relationship with Russia from 2009 to 2023 has evolved with dynamism amidst the changing global order. The strategic, defence, economic and cultural dimensions of the Indo-Russian partnership have constantly remained significant, with both countries deftly navigating through emerging geopolitical challenges and the disturbing environment during and post pandemic. Undoubtedly the multifaceted character of the Indo-Russian engagement underscores the resilience and depth of the bilateral relationship flourishing between the two nations in the times to come.

Notes:

¹ Rajneesh Kumar, Extract from Doctoral Thesis on "India's Energy Security in terms of oil and natural gas contextualising Central Asia since 2012," Submitted to Amity University Uttar Pradesh, September 2019.

² Monisha Pradhan, "Role of Soviet Union in India's Industrialisation: A Comparative Assessment with the West," *IJRAR Journal*, Vol. 6, Issue-1, January-March 2019, http://ijrar.com/upload_issue/ijrar_issue_20544196.pdf.

³ Rajneesh Kumar, "Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and India's Strategic Options in Central Asia," CAPS, May 22, 2023, <https://capsindia.org/shanghai-cooperation-organisation-and-indias-strategic-options-in-central-asia/>. Accessed on January 02, 2024.

⁴ Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation (MOS&PI) Report, "Five Year Plans", Chapter 7 Para 7.3 & 7.4, https://www.mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/Statistical_year_book_india_chapters/ch7.pdf. Accessed on January, 05, 2024.

⁵ US Department of State, "Dissolution of the USSR and the Establishment of Independent Republics, 1991," January 20, 2001- January 20, 2009, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/pcw/108229.htm>. Accessed on January 03, 2024.

⁶ OpCit Rajneesh Kumar, (n1)

⁷ Ministry of External Affairs, "Visit of External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar to Russia (December 25- 29, 2023)," MEA Press Release, December 30, 2023, <https://fsi.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37489/Visit+of+External+Affairs+Minister+Dr+S+Jaishankar+to+Russia+December+25+29+2023>. Accessed on January 08, 2024.

⁸ Ministry of External Affairs, "Visit of External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar to Russia (December 25- 29, 2023)," MEA Media Center Report," December 30, 2023, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37489/Visit_of_External_Affairs_Minister_Dr_S_Jaishankar_to_Russia_December_25_29_2023. Accessed on January 03, 2024.

⁹ Embassy of India in Moscow, "Bilateral Relations: India-Russia Relations," January 03, 2024, <https://indianembassy-moscow.gov.in/bilateral-relations-india-russia.php>. Accessed on January 03, 2024.

¹⁰ Ashok Sajjanhar, "Jaishankar in Russia: India-Russia ties are stable and steady," *India News Network*, January 04, 2024, <https://www.indianewsnetwork.com/en/20240104/jaishankar-in-russia-india-russia-ties-are-stable-and-steady>. Accessed on January 08, 2024.

¹¹ Pankaj Saran, "Jaishankar Would Have Explored Every Aspect of India Russia Ties," *Strat News Global*, January 01, 2024, <https://stratnewsglobal.com/the-gist/jaishankar-would-have-explored-every-aspect-of-india-russia-ties/>. Accessed on January 08, 2024.