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INDIA-RUSSIA RELATIONS IN THE WAKE OF THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE CONFLICT



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Introduction

Russia's 'special military operation' in Ukraine, which started on 24th February 2022, has entered into its sixth month and there have as yet been no signs of de-escalation of the conflict. From a geopolitical point of view, a lot has changed since it began. The conflict has highly undermined international peace, challenged the current world order and has had a significant impact on the global economy.

India and Russia share a strong, multifaceted bond – all-weather friends, as they are often called. Moscow and New Delhi are deeply engaged on various crucial fronts such as defence, energy, nuclear and space cooperation and all of them have been affected by the conflict, forcing India towards difficult diplomatic choices. Right from the start of this event, India's response has been a subject of global interest and it has had to respond carefully, keeping in mind its engagement with QUAD, its ties with 'the West' and also its aspirations in South- Asia.

New Delhi so far has maintained a very consistent response of cessation of violence towards the situation, following its traditional path of 'strategic autonomy.' As India moves forward on the path of self-reliance, focusing on its national interests through a position of confidence, a consequent shift in its approach has also been observed. There are thus speculations about what turn will India-Russia relations take in the aftermath of this geopolitical event.

History of India-Russia Relations

Russia had opened up its consulates in Bombay and Calcutta during the first decade of the 20th century and there had been interactions between a few prominent people on both sides, such as Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore and Alexei Tolstoy. There were also centuries-old contacts and mutual interests between the two nations that resulted in Moscow establishing diplomatic ties with India even before India gained independence against its British colonizers, on 13 April 1947.¹ Both nations have celebrated 75 years of diplomatic relations this year. Despite their fair share of highs and lows, it won't be unfair to say that India-Russia relations have stood the test of time, backed by trust and mutual development.

After independence, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's anti-colonial sentiments set the country on a path to autonomy and self-reliance, but Defence Minister Krishna Menon's socialist leanings drew India closer to the Soviet Union. At this point, India's priority was to gain economic stability and USSR was one of the first foreign nations to invest in Indian industries such as heavy machine-building, mining, energy production, and steel plants. Though India's policy of non-alignment was viewed with suspicion and reservation in Moscow, it went away during the second half of the Cold War as India drifted towards the USSR and made significant purchases of Soviet defence equipment. Moreover, the United States' (US) partnership with Pakistan, first through the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and then the Baghdad Pact in the 1950s, naturally prompted India to lean toward the USSR to balance Pakistan's growing might.² USSR also assisted India with infrastructural development, for instance, the setting up of the Indian Institute of Technology in Bombay in 1958.

Two major highlights of the strong friendship shared between these two are reflected in the 1962 agreement to engage in a program of military-technical cooperation and the signing of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship in August 1971. Space cooperation is another front where

both countries strongly connect. The flight of the first Indian cosmonaut on the "Soyuz T-11" spacecraft in 1984 was onboard a spacecraft of the USSR. There has been no looking back since then with respect to space cooperation between both countries.

India-Russia relations cannot be discussed without bringing the US and China into the picture. The relations took a major downturn when India couldn't get the desired reactions out of its old friend USSR during the 1962 Sino-Indian War. However, the Soviet support during the 1971 Indo-Pak War as a bulwark against US manoeuvres in the region was well appreciated by India. Later, the balkanization of the USSR in 1991 was the start of a low period in friendship, even though the formal relations remained strong. Right after the disintegration of the USSR, Boris Yeltsin came to power, during his time the country turned towards a pro-Western foreign policy orientation. During the same time, India started to liberalise its economy and engage with the Western countries for trade and investment. Both countries, therefore, were occupied with domestic priorities while adjusting to a changed world order with the US as the sole superpower.³

Undoubtedly, the Indian leadership during that time did a commendable job at keeping the India-Russia friendship boat afloat. More importantly, the partnership found a base in the Indian economy that was growing post its 1991 economic reforms. India also decided to repay, in full, its debt to the Soviet Union – a billion dollars a year for over a decade, at a time when Moscow needed it the most.⁴ India-Russia's engagements with respect to the trading of military equipment and hardware also helped both nations a great deal. Orders from India kept Russia's arms industry alive, which had suffered a huge deal after the collapse of the Soviet army. Indeed, as early as 1992, India and Russia had negotiated three arms' agreements worth \$650 million.⁵ The status particularly changed after Vladimir Putin's election as the head of the Russia's state in 2000.⁶ With the signing of the "Declaration on the India-Russia Strategic Partnership" in October 2000 during his visit to India, India-Russia ties have acquired a qualitatively new character with enhanced levels of cooperation in almost all areas of the bilateral relationship. These include political, security, defence, trade and economy, science & technology, culture, and people-to-people ties.⁷ This was later enhanced to the level of "Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership" in 2010. There is also mutual respect and both enjoy each other's cultures. For instance, Bollywood movies have always had an enormous liking amongst the people of Russia. There is also a strong interest among Russian people in Indian dance, music, Yoga and Ayurveda. These

factors have ensured healthy relations and multidimensional cooperation.

Contemporary India- Russia Ties

Defence. Defence cooperation is one of the greatest pillars that strengthen the relations between both nations. A particularly high point in past few years has been the evolution from “a purely buyer-seller relationship to joint research, design development and production”, one suitable example of it being the Brahmos missile system.⁸ Both nations have an institutionalised structure to oversee the complete range of issues of military-technical cooperation. The India-Russia Inter-Governmental Commission on Military Technical Cooperation (IRIGC-MTC), which was set up in 2000, and is currently extended till 2031, is at the apex of this structure.⁹ Russia has provided India with entire production lines on military platforms – from aircraft to tanks. The development of the Indian Navy, particularly of the submarine fleet, has been significantly enhanced through Russian cooperation.¹⁰ Russia is also involved with India in significant indigenous projects such as the production of tanks and fighter jets. New Delhi is also importing the S-400 air missile system from Russia. It has also assisted India in several high-level strategic projects, such as refurbishing India’s aircraft carrier, Vikramaditya and constructing the Arihant, India’s first nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN), which forms the underwater component of India’s strategic nuclear deterrent.¹¹ Russia is the only country which hasn’t been hesitant to share its technology with India, including those related to nuclear-powered submarines and accompanied advanced technology.¹² Moscow has come to India’s rescue on occasions when the Indian demands were not given an appropriate response by the US. For instance, when India tried to acquire the Arrow missile defence system from Israel, the American pressure on Jerusalem blocked the signing of the deal. Russia provided a way out and agreed to supply the S-400 missile system.¹³ Although India has recently been focusing on diversifying its defence purchases, Russia still remains an important source of its defence equipment.

Nuclear. Russia and India share an important partnership in the area of peaceful use of nuclear energy. The cooperation in the nuclear aspect can be traced back to the 1960s as Moscow extended scientific and technical know-how to New Delhi.¹⁴ Post the 1974 nuclear tests conducted by India, the Russian response was the polar opposite of the Western one as it agreed to supply heavy water to India for the reactors. Throughout the decades of the 80s and 90s, Moscow supplied fuel to

India that was crucial for the sustenance of the Indian nuclear programme. This was appreciated by the Indian administration and the nations signed a deal to purchase nuclear reactors from Russia.¹⁵ Moscow recognizes India as a country with advanced nuclear technology with an impeccable non-proliferation record and has also assisted India in setting up its largest Nuclear Power Plant at Kudankulam in Tamil Nadu, which was inaugurated in 2016.¹⁶

Space. India-Russia cooperation in the field of peaceful uses of outer space dates back about four decades. So far, both sides are working together on satellite launches, navigation systems, remote sensing and other societal applications of outer space. The MoU between the Indian Space Research Organisation 'ISRO' and the Federal Space Agency of Russia 'ROSCOSMOS' allows joint activities in the field of the Human Spaceflight Programme (HSP)¹⁷ and Indian astronauts, who will fly into space in 2023 aboard an Indian spacecraft, have received basic training in Russia.¹⁸

These are some significant fronts where India and Russia are deeply engaged with one another and exhibit the enduring nature of the friendship shared by Moscow and New Delhi.

Impact of Russia- Ukraine Conflict on the Global Geopolitics

The ongoing conflict amongst Russia and Ukraine has lasted longer than most analysts had predicted, based on the perceived superiority of the Russian forces as compared to the Ukrainians. As it stands, Russia is not likely to achieve a decisive victory against Ukraine anytime soon, which means both countries are in this armed conflict for the long haul.

The conflict is threatening the core principle underpinning the post-World War II international peace and security order, enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations – namely the prohibition of the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state. Both the nations involved have nuclear capability and the threat of nuclear escalation also hangs, as long as a peaceful resolution is not achieved. The conflict has led to thousands of casualties, both military and civilian and the migration of a vast number of affected Ukrainians.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) allies consider Russia a direct threat to their security, peace, and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area. As per the statement made by NATO, the threat of Russian expansion into Europe has risen further since the Russian invasion.¹⁹ Although it is unlikely for Russia and NATO to engage in a direct armed

confrontation, the conflict has further intensified tensions between both entities.

Another significant consequence of the conflict has been the dent in the global economy, which was already distressed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Russia has been subjected to heavy trade embargos imposed by the US and other western nations. This has led to market instability and its effects are being felt by nations all around the globe. One-fourth of the world's wheat supply and cooking oil comes from Russia and Ukraine collectively and the supply chains have been disrupted since the start of the conflict.²⁰ Russia is one of the world's largest exporters of the three major types of fertilizers – nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium.²¹ Replacing those ingredients, coupled with higher gas prices has resulted in higher input costs, which will, in turn, impact next season's harvest leading to elevated food prices in the longer run. Whilst developed countries may be able to manage these inflationary pressures, developing countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East are finding it hard to bear the consequences.²² This high level of inflation and food scarcity is leading to large human migration, especially in Africa, thus causing civil unrest in the affected regions.

Impact of the Russia- Ukraine Conflict on India & the Country's Response

India faces two inimical nuclear-capable adversaries on its north and their growing collusion, along with Chinese aggression along the LAC has raised concerns regarding the defence capabilities to counter these threats. There is also a growing global realisation of the need for self-reliance, especially in defence-related capabilities. India's efforts at establishing an indigenous defence industry base have been inconsistent and it has majorly been reliant on Russia and lately on the West. Russian origin platforms constitute almost 60 to 70 per cent of Indian weapons systems and with the sanctions on Russia, there is fear that the weapons programs will face a slowdown. "There are reports of anticipated delay in the production of T-90 tanks and AK-293 assault rifles, the provision of aircraft upgrades, and the supply of spares for submarines and helicopters."²³ 'Atmanirbharta' is the new slogan given by the Prime Minister towards self-reliance and its efforts in the defence sector have intensified as a result of this conflict.

Ajinkya Jadhav in one of his articles has given short- and long-term solutions for the defence sector. "The short-term initiative for the next 10 years should be to co-develop quality products in India with strategic

partnership with western partners; this will help build a manufacturing capability and eco-system and also generate employment in India. While this process is under execution, simultaneously build a strong research and development eco-system to eventually become self-reliant in research & development and manufacturing of quality defence weapons and equipment. The time is ripe to leverage the diplomatic ties with the west and harness them for developing a reliable defence ecosystem in the country.²⁴

The conflict started soon after India had started taking steps to recover from the COVID pandemic that had caused havoc on the economy. The flight of capital from the country that has resulted from the geo-economic consequences of the conflict has caused a weakening of the rupee and a rise in crude oil prices. Although New Delhi has purchased oil from Russia, its requirements are still huge. These have pushed up the import costs and the rise has had an implication on the Indian economy.²⁵ The spike in the cost of energy and fertilisers has severely impacted India's agriculture-based economy. The government has taken a number of policy measures and other steps to minimize this effect, including continuing to trade with Russia. India has faced questions about its imports from Moscow but has stood steadfast in arguing that it prioritises its national interest.

India's Response

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has further increased complexities for New Delhi, as it has to maintain its ties with Russia, while navigating the choppy waters with China and catering to western demands. Russia's ever-growing bond with China is a concern for New Delhi and is also one of the reasons for its tilt towards the US. Lately, India has been actively pursuing its relations with the West towards the fulfilment of its global and regional aspirations, especially in the Indo-Pacific, where it has joined hands with the US to counter China. QUAD has been an important aspect of this initiative and since its revival in 2017, India has been juggling between its fellow QUAD members and its strategic ally, Russia. Moscow has raised concerns about QUAD moving in a direction toward undermining the deep partnership shared by India and Russia.²⁶ India has to walk the tightrope in its relations with the U.S. and Russia, to prevent Moscow from getting closer to Beijing, which would be inimical for Indian interests.

Since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, India has had a very consistent response towards it, which is widely viewed by experts as

maintaining *Strategic Autonomy*, wherein the autonomy of decision-making, not dictated by any other power, is paramount. It has made the strategic choice of not supporting either side; while continuing to engage with Russia, it has extended humanitarian assistance to Ukraine. Till now, 7,725 kg of medicines, relief material and medical equipment have been supplied.²⁷ As the biggest democracy in the world, it has also tried to initiate talks with the leaders from both sides and has urged for an immediate cessation of hostilities and a return to the path of diplomacy and dialogue for the resolution of the conflict.²⁸

India has prudently avoided jeopardizing the friendship with its time-tested ally Russia, while fully appreciating the importance of geopolitical engagements with the US and its partners in the Indo-Pacific. It has abstained from openly recognizing Russia's actions as provocative, despite pressure from the West and has avoided reaction to the economic sanctions imposed upon Russia by the Western nations. It has also abstained from voting for or against either side in the United Nations Security Council and General Assembly on various related issues on multiple occasions. Moscow has previously shown concern about the strengthening of US-India strategic and defence cooperation, with its potential adverse effect on the current settlement shared between the two nations, but this Indian response as a solid ally will not go unnoticed by Russia. Moscow is also leaning towards India, both economically and politically, as it provides a big market for Russian trade when it is reeling under the West-imposed economic sanctions.

India has also stood steadfast against western criticism – of not openly condemning Russia's actions in Ukraine and not actively pursuing the sanctions against Russia. This attitude is best exhibited by Indian External Affairs Minister, Dr S Jaishankar's response to a question about India's oil purchases from Russia – *"India's total purchases for the month would be less than what Europe does in an afternoon."*²⁹ India has maintained a position that it stands completely against the conflict and has shown humanitarian concerns, but at the same time, it made it clear through its statements as well as actions that it's going to prioritise its security and safeguard the interest of its citizens. So far, the approach has been *"to promote dialogue to end the conflict; mitigate economic distress for itself and for the world."*³⁰

India has been helped in its response by the current multi-polar world order which puts it in a good spot to make the best use of these engagements and act according to its best interests. Some experts have opined that India is in an advantageous position, as neither Russia nor

the West wants to dismiss India's growing heft in the international order.³¹ The considerable number of high-level diplomatic visits to India since the beginning of the conflict, including from its adversarial neighbour, China, validates its incredibly significant position from a geopolitical perspective. QUAD members have also respected India's 'balanced position' so far, even looking past its decision of refraining to vote in the various related UN resolutions, reflecting highly upon India's position as the chief balancer against China in Asia.

Way Ahead for India-Russia Relations

When talking about the way forward for both nations, the most important aspect that comes up is their common aspirations for a multi-polar international order and they realise the importance of being in synchronization to achieve this shared vision. There are fault lines in Sino-Russian relations that have manifested on the political, economic and territorial front. For instance, China's self-proclaimed nine-dash line in the South China sea is detrimental to the Russian oil giant Rosneft's position in Vietnam.³² Russia has also made it clear on several occasions that it doesn't want a hegemon to emerge in South Asia, as well as the world. These factors would restrict Moscow from putting all its eggs in one basket, i.e., China and will motivate it to invest in its relations with New Delhi as a balancer to Beijing. Another common concern which connects them is the issue of terrorism in South Asia which have implications for both nations. While this issue does bring them together, there is divergence in how both nations perceive threats and deal with them.

India recognises Russia as a reliable partner for its economic as well as political needs and is also aware of Moscow's closeness with Beijing, as well as an increment in the level of its engagement with Pakistan. It is important to note that a group of Russian foreign policy experts believes that Russia must pivot towards Pakistan in order to gain access to China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which in turn would allow greater access to international key trade routes.³³ India must discourage this nexus in Asia, and for that, it will have to maintain close ties with Russia. India's participation in the recent multilateral strategic and command exercise 'Vostok-2022' with other participants like China, even amidst their ongoing rift at the Line of Actual Control (LAC), again emphasised the 'strategic autonomy' and primacy of national interest and the deep strategic bond shared by the two nations. It defended its participation by saying that these exercises are a routine activity where India has been a regular participator.³⁴

Though, India has initially faced pressure from its fellow QUAD members to take sides in the conflict, its partnership with QUAD provides India a solid base to bargain its interest in the arena of international relations. The conflict in fact brought forward a revelation in India's favour that QUAD needs India as much as India needs QUAD. This provides leverage to India to garner its interests. India looks up to Russia to help it bargain with China and in turn Pakistan but even Moscow wouldn't want to lose a 'strategic partner' like India and keeps a sharp watch on New Delhi's acquaintance with Washington.

Conclusion

India and Russia share a special partnership which is backed by a long history, a shared vision of multilateralism, and strong bilateral relations. Currently, both nations are deeply engaged on various fronts, sharing multidimensional cooperation. The Russia-Ukraine conflict has brought some major changes in the arena of global geopolitics and economy which will have long-lasting effects. Though the possibilities are minimal, it could take the shape of the biggest confrontation between the West and Russia since the end of the Cold War, gravely undermining international peace and challenging the current world order.

India has called for a peaceful resolution to the ongoing conflict through dialogue but it has consciously refrained from joining any sides. The conflict also made it clear that though New Delhi might aspire to deepen its partnership with the US, it is in no mood to jeopardize its friendship with Russia. For India, the biggest threat emerges from the neighbourhood itself and India does not want Russia to be closer to China than it is now.

Though the future will unfold itself, looking at the current scenario, India and Russia are bonded by strong history in the past and common aspirations for the future, which should keep them close. The act of balancing between the West and Russia is indeed tricky but India continues to skilfully navigate through the conflict, guided by its national interest.

In the arena of international politics, it is often called the 'overriding strategic interest' which would keep these players engaged with each other. India on the other hand must continue to choose the platform which the multipolar world offers in order to fulfil its strategic interests.

CERTIFICATE

The paper is author's individual scholastic articulation. The author certifies that the article is original in content, unpublished and it has not been submitted for publication / web upload elsewhere and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed and are believed to be correct. The paper does not necessarily represent the views of the CENJOWS.

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