

GUEST COLUMN

India- Russia Relations: Towards a Stronger Strategic Partnership

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India-Russia relations, in the contemporary period and historically, India-Soviet Union relations had continued to be strong. There might be a little difference as far as their dynamism and energy are concerned, but by and large, the ties have been solid and extremely vital for both our countries. This relationship, notwithstanding the fact that it is so important, doesn't attract a lot of traction; it doesn't attract much attention from the people, whether it is from the academic world or the general public. In his first foreign visit, Prime Minister Modi went to Fortaleza in 2014, after assuming power in July 2014. If one were to go down a street and then meet a child and ask them which the strongest relationship is for India, the child, even without batting an eyelid, would say it is Russia. So, as far as people are concerned, as far as academia is concerned, they do realise it is the most crucial relationship however doesn't get all that much of attraction. This paper discusses the historical evolution of relations between India and the Soviet Union and, later, Russia, focusing on the current state of relations. We are also at a very important stage in the development of the bilateral ties because we have just had on 10th November 2021, the meeting of the national security advisers to discuss Afghanistan; the Russian NSA also participated in those discussions and in December, the visit of President Vladimir Putin is much awaited. And just before that, India and Russia are expected also to have the first 2+2 dialogue, which means India's defence minister, Raksha Mantri Shri Rajnath Singh and external affairs minister Dr S Jaishankar will be travelling to Russia to meet with their counterparts to mark the first 2+2 dialogue between India and the Russian Federation. So, we are at a threshold of a very important phase in our bilateral ties.

Coming to the significance and importance, the bilateral or diplomatic relations of the two countries were established even before India became independent. On the 11th of April, 1947, just a few months before India got its independence, India and Russia established bilateral relations. Nonetheless, historically, the first visit from Russia to India was a person named Afanasy Nikitin. He was the Russian merchant, and he belonged to Tver, a city very close to Moscow. He travelled to India in 1466. He took a ship down the Volga, but it got wrecked, so he swam across the Caspian from Iran and Persia, he took a boat and came to India, where he spent much time and wrote about his own impressions of what he saw. There is a film that was made just after India's independence, *Travel Over The Three Seas*, and the well-known film actress Nargis acted in that. India just celebrated the 550th anniversary of Afanasy Nikitin; the Indian Postal Service released a postage stamp and a special day cover was also released on that occasion. The second important individual who has written and contributed significantly to the understanding of India in Russia is a person by the name of Gerasim Lebedev. Gerasim Lebedev was a talented musician.

He travelled to India in 1785. He was from a place not far away from Moscow called Yaroslavl. His family moved to St Petersburg; he worked in the choir. He came with a British band to Madras in 1785. He was a violinist. He learnt violin by himself, and he thought he'd be able to play, teach music and go around and see the country. However, Madras was too small and too conservative for him. So in 1787, he moved to the capital of the British empire or the East India Company in Calcutta. He learnt Bengali, Sanskrit and Hindi and even compiled a Bengali Dictionary, and translated several works into Russian and Bengali. He became very friendly with the people there and eventually started a Bengali theatre, the first Bengali theatre in India. However, the fact that he was so close and so friendly with the Indian people was not appreciated by the Britishers, so they got him arrested and sent him to London. He was able to get his freedom and went back to St Petersburg. There he established a printing press, and he did a lot of work. He published dictionaries, and translations in Bengali, in Sanskrit and Russian.

And the last in this series is Nikolai Roerich. He was a Russian artist, philosopher, architect, archaeologist, theosophist, writer and public figure. He opened a club named Agni Yoga in London in 1923 and came to India in 1925. In his youth, he was significantly influenced by Russian symbolism, a movement in Russian society centred on the spiritual, and he took this forward with him. He had close contact with Gandhi and Nehru. His son Svetoslav Roerich was also a great artist and painter. He married Devika Rani. Nikolay Roerich had met the grandfather of Devika Rani, who was Rabindranath Tagore, in London. She was at that time the queen of the Indian Screen, and they lived in Bengaluru; he died in 1988. So, historically these are significant figures in India-Russia bilateral relations. Coming beyond that, there were robust relations between Mahatma Gandhi and Leo Tolstoy. As Mahatma Gandhi mentioned, he owed the foundations of the philosophy of Satyagraha to Leo Tolstoy, and he opened a Tolstoy farm during his time in South Africa. Tagore also visited the Soviet Union in 1930 after he received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. He travelled in the Soviet Union and was deeply impressed with what he saw. Jawaharlal Nehru was also profoundly impressed with the Soviet experiment; he went along with his father, Motilal Nehru, in 1927 which is after the first decade of the Bolshevik Revolution.

Post- Independence Period

But after India became independent, the relations did not start off on a good note because Stalin always looked at India with great suspicion. He considered the Indian National Congress, the forces which had won independence for India, as counter-revolutionary forces, as agents of the bourgeoisie. He always looked with great suspicion as far as the Indian leadership was concerned. So, only after his death in 1953, the relations between the two countries started improving and getting better. Nehru and his daughter Indira Gandhi visited the Soviet Union in 1955. This visit was responded to and reciprocated by Bulganin and Khrushchev the same year, which helped to cement the ties further. And this is why today, when we speak about India's foreign policy, Russia is a key pillar of it and a long-standing, time-tested partner of India. The Soviet Union extended very significant, valuable, political, diplomatic and strategic support to India. The West was not forthcoming in providing support and assistance to India for its economic growth and development; the Soviet Union stepped into this sort of vacuum that had become available. India received

very generous assistance in terms of funding and technology and economic support for its industrialisation in defence, space, atomic energy, or economic development. These have become household names, like the Bharat Heavy Electrical Limited, the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation, Hindustan Aeronautics Limited, and the Regional Engineering Corporation.

The Soviet Union also came to help and support India at the UN Security Council. There were six times when the Soviet Union exercised its veto that favoured India. Once, it was during the Goa conflict in 1961, thrice during the war for the liberation of Bangladesh and on two other occasions on the question of Kashmir. So, the Soviet Union was the go-to country as far as support to India was concerned in various fields, even in the area of multilateral diplomacy. The pinnacle of our relations was reached on the 8th of August, 1971, when we signed the treaty of peace, friendship and cooperation. This was just before the war for the liberation of Bangladesh in December 1971, and against India was the United States, China, and the United Kingdom axis, against the war in which Pakistan would be eventually defeated. The United States was highly grateful to Pakistan because it had provided the conduit for the visit of Henry Kissinger to China in June 1971. The US did not want the war to lead to the defeat of Pakistan; the US's enterprise part of the seventh fleet failed in the Bay of Bengal to intimidate and threaten India, a move aimed at avoiding the dismemberment of Pakistan. But India was not cowed down by this convoked diplomacy of the United States and China. India also kept its peace, although the United States tried to provoke it into opening another front on the northern border. That did not happen. So, this treaty of peace, friendship and cooperation was a masterstroke by India by Indira Gandhi. It came to India as a considerable support and aided in the war in 1971. Since 1991, even after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, solid ties between India and the former continued to be characterised by a strong edifice of robust and vigorous relations. We experienced some uncertainty as we had Yeltsin at the helm of affairs. Andrei Kozyrev was the foreign minister who was leaning and wary towards the West, thinking that they would be able to get much greater economic and political support from the latter. So the 1971 treaty, which was valid for twenty years, was not extended in 1991 as the Russians were facing the impact of the disintegration and had many other affairs to look after.

Current Relations: Opportunities and Challenges

In the current day, relations were firmly established during the first visit of President Vladimir Putin in 2000 to India. The year 2000 was very significant because that also represented a very sharp upward trajectory of India-US relations. In March 2000, US President Bill Clinton visited India, and since then, there has been no looking back as far as India-US relations are concerned. We also signed the India-EU strategic partnership, which has also been very significant in taking our relations forward. In India-EU strategic partnership, we agreed to have annual summits between the two, and we did have them till about 2013. Nonetheless, as far as Russia is concerned, we have been able to sustain those annual meetings between our two leaders except last year in 2020. The reason that has been given was Covid-19, and neither of the two leaders was able to travel. They were not travelling last year at all. Hence, this was the strategic relationship that was established in 2000, which was upgraded to a special and privileged strategic partnership in 2010, on the tenth anniversary. There are times when people say that if one has nothing more

to show as far as the substance of the relationship is concerned, one puts more flowery language as far as their ties are concerned. However, this might be true in some instances, but it is not true regarding the relations between India and the Russian Federation, as the relations are genuinely dynamic, vibrant, and robust, and they continue to get better and improve. So, we have seen enhanced cooperation in several areas, including political, security, trade, economy, defence, science, technology, and culture. The most important aspect of the relationship is the defence ties between the two countries. Here we had seen that before the break-up of the Soviet Union, India depended on the Soviet Union to the extent of 80-90 per cent of all our defence imports coming from the former. This was also because the latest technology was not being provided to India by the West by the United States. However, the first defence agreement was signed between India and the United States in 2005, and after that, India's defence partnership with the United States also started increasing. As a result, the imports from the US had significantly expanded, including the Apache helicopters, the Chinook helicopters, and the Reaper drones. So, with an increase in the imports of the latest technologies from the United States, the share of imports of defence equipment from Russia has subsequently come down. It has come down to anything between 55-65 per cent but remains a significant figure. India placed the order in 2018 during the summit in St Petersburg for five systems of the S-400 ballistic missile defence system, which is valued at up to 5.5 billion dollars. The supply is commencing this year, so again this is a significant time as far as the relations between India and the Russian Federation are concerned.

At the same time, there is a cloud-sort of a Damocles sword hanging over it as India is facing the CAATSA (Countering American Adversaries through Sanctions Act) on the horizon. This is a Congress Statute of the United States according to which if a country undertakes significant arms acquisition from three countries-Russia, Iran and North Korea, then this act would come into operation. CAATSA was utilised against Turkey last year because it imported S-400 from Russia. So now, when Lloyd Austin, the US Secretary of Defence, came earlier this year, he was asked whether the United States would impose the CAATSA sanctions against India. He replied that the supplies had not yet started, so he could not say anything; it was premature. However, the supplies have started, and India can discuss the possibility of the sanctions, as this is a very significant acquisition from Russia. The United States wants India to import its own ballistic missile defence system called the THAAD, which it was putting in place in South Korea because of which it had big problems with China. However, the S-400 is supposed to be much more advanced in technology than the THAAD system. So, over the last few years, India's procurement has jumped from 2-3 billion in 2018 to around 9-10 billion the previous year. In October 2021, we also launched the Indian Navy Frigate of Tushil class in Moscow. The contract for this frigate was signed in 2018 at the nineteenth summit between the two countries in Delhi. This inter-governmental agreement is for the manufacture of four frigates, two in Russia and two at the Goa Shipyard Ltd also involved the transfer of technology from Russia to India. The production is about to start of 700,000 AK 203 rifles in Amethi, for which a factory is set up. Talks are also continuing to procure the MiG 29K, or the indigenous aircraft carrier, known as INS Vikrant, manufactured in India, more T90 tanks and Su-30MKI for the Indian Air Force.

In 2016, when the summit took place in Goa on the sidelines of the BRICS summit, there was also an agreement signed for 200 Camou 260 helicopters; it was agreed that 40 of them would be supplied in fully finished form and 116 hundred supplied in terms of components and parts which would be made and assembled in India. So, we see that now the defence relationship between India and Russia is no longer merely a buyer-supplier relationship; it is also in terms of designing, progressive manufacturing, indigenisation, in terms of Make in India of many of this equipment that is also happening, so one is the defence partnership, defence relationship. Although India has been under immense pressure from the United States not to have such huge inventories and acquisitions from Russia, India has made it very clear to the US that it is a legacy relationship. In case India requires any of the accessories and spare parts, this relationship has to continue. Many of the systems that India has worked only with Russian equipment, so it is not that we can make a total jump although diversification has been taking place, with the United States remaining as the second-largest exporter of defence equipment to India.

The second area of the strong relationship between the two countries is nuclear energy and nuclear power. India received Cryogenic engines from Russia in the 1990s. We also had a heavy water plant established in Kota that continues to function well. However, the most important thing is that India commissioned the functioning of the Kudamkulam Nuclear Power Plant project in the last decade. Furthermore, we have the latest technology, some of which are transferred by Russia. In that regard, India established these nuclear power plants after it received a waiver from International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 2008, a unique waiver to engage in a global partnership for nuclear materials and technology. So, we had the first nuclear power plant in Kudamkulam in 2014. It is 1200 megawatt, known as the VVER technology, the latest technology. So, the first two plants are already functioning very well, established in 2014 and 2017, respectively. The third and fourth reactors are in the process of construction. One of them should be ready in 2022 and the other in 2023. The concrete for the fifth one was done in the mid of 2021, making a total of six power plants in Kudamkulam. There are another six power plants to be established in Andhra Pradesh for which talks are going on. The Russian Federation completely set up the first two power plants; however, with progressive indigenisation, the turbine components of the third and fourth ones were contributed by the Indian Industry. India is also collaborating with the Russian Federation in other countries; for instance, Russia is constructing a similar power plant in Bangladesh in Rooppur. Certain parts and components are being manufactured and supplied there. Russia is also getting orders to supply these power plants to Africa, Ethiopia and other countries; India and Russia will cooperate and collaborate in all these initiatives, making it an essential segment of our cooperation. What is particularly worth noting here is that Russia is the only country that has supplied nuclear power technology to India. We have signed an agreement with the White House of the United States and with Areva of France, but there has been no progress on the ground so far.

The third important aspect is space. Whether it is Aryabhata or Bhaskara, the Soviet Union helped India send those satellites into space. After that Rakesh Sharma became the first Indian man to go to space was Rakesh Sharma in 1984. Currently, Russia is helping and supporting India in its first man mission, Gaganyaan. Discussions have been going on, and training is already taking place. The following important

area is hydrocarbons. In 2016, in the seventeenth summit between the two countries, Russia agreed to invest about 12 billion dollars, the largest investment from Russia to India, in acquiring assets of SR Oil company. India also invested about 8 billion dollars into the hydrocarbon sector in 2000. It was a 2.5-billion-dollar investment. It was the highest investment in this area by ONGC Videsh Ltd. After that, India went to other areas, Vankorneft, Rosneft and other oil fields; the imperial coalfield was acquired for 2 billion dollars at the beginning of the 2000s. So, in the area of hydrocarbons, there is active cooperation which is increasing. There are also talks about setting up of gas pipeline from Russia to India; however still in the stage of development.

Apart from the areas of cooperation, there is also a need to look at summits where decisions regarding cooperation are taken. So, one of the most important recently concluded was the 20th summit in 2019, which took place in Vladivostok. Prime Minister Modi was the chief guest at the Eastern Economic Forum. Several agreements were signed between the two countries, with over 19 documents signed, including cooperation in defence, space, technology, foreign policy, trade and investment, hydrocarbons, shipbuilding, and railways. They also adopted a joint statement that tightened global peace and security partnerships because that was critical and crucial. Although India and Russia have an advanced strategic partnership, the economic interaction and cooperation are far below potential, amounting to about 8-10 billion dollars. The maximum it has gone about in recent years is about 12 billion dollars which is a pity. India has agreed that it would increase this to over 30 billion dollars by 2025, but now with Covid-19 going on, this possibility does not appear to be all that great. Then, the discussion at the twentieth summit in 2019 at Vladivostok was that India should sign a free trade agreement with Eurasian Economic Union. Talks have been going on for quite some time, and this will happen sooner. When Prime Minister Modi was in Vladivostok, he committed 1 billion dollars to explore the possibilities of collaboration between Russia's far east and India as it is a vast area with significantly less population, rich minerals and commodities. What Russia is particularly apprehensive about is that since it has a border in that area with China and China is slowly inching its way forward in the far east. To counter any threat by China, Russia wants India to support them. Considering all these factors, four chief ministers of Indian states, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Andhra Pradesh, visited to explore the possibilities with the Indian Commerce and External Affairs Minister Piyush Goyal. He also went to Vladivostok to look at what could be done to take the relationship forward and improve India's investments there.

What President Putin also offered to India was its collaboration in the Arctic. It is imperative because Russia is apprehensive about China getting in there, so it wants India to come in a big way. The importance of civil nuclear energy in bilateral relations was underlined, and both countries said they needed to cooperate in third countries. They also noted the immense potential of cooperation in non-nuclear non-fossil fuel energy, i.e., renewable energy. They also agreed to develop the International North-South Transport Corridor, which goes from Russia via Iran to India. India is now trying to take from Central Asia. India has started working on the Chabahar project also. We wanted to integrate Chabahar with INSTC, which also became a point of discussion. Additionally, there was a discussion to open a connectivity route between Chennai and Vladivostok. In the area of the diamond

industry, it was decided that both sides should start working together because India is the biggest centre of cutting and polishing small diamonds owing to India's trained workforce. India and Russia have been working together and expanding the joint exercises; the first tri-services exercise was held between the two countries.

The first informal summit was held in May 2018 between the two sides, and they exchanged views on global and bilateral ties. At that time, it was thought that maybe the relations needed some greater attention from our political leaders to take it forward. So, we exchanged several MOUs in the fields of space and nuclear energy. That was the time also when this S-400 triumph agreement was signed. There was also some discussion on building a gas pipeline. Russia also awarded its highest state decoration which is called the order of St. Andrew the Apostle, to Prime Minister Modi in 2019, presented to him for the contribution to the development of privileged strategic partnership between Russia and India and friendly ties between the Russian and Indian people. Nonetheless, there have been some comments about India and Russia not being on the same page as far as Afghanistan is concerned. India was not invited to those discussions, whether the Moscow format or the extended TROIKA format. This is related to the question Russia raised regarding what India brought to the table when countries were having discussions were in dialogue with the Taliban. India was the only country which was not talking to the Taliban, and we were strongly supportive of the Ashraf Ghani government. However, since the Taliban took charge of Kabul on the 15th of August, Russia has also realised that the Taliban is not in a position to execute and implement all the promises that it had made. India then saw the first telephonic call at the initiative of President Putin to Prime Minister Modi on the 24th of August. At that, they decided to establish a personal bilateral channel to discuss Afghanistan issues and keep a very close eye on this, the result of which was the visit of the Russian NSA, National Security Advisor, General Nikolai Patrushev, to India on the 8th of September so that there could be convergence as far as positions of both our countries were concerned. And notwithstanding the fact that he was in India on the 8th of September, Patrushev came to India again on the 10th of November. So, within about two months, he was back here to discuss Afghanistan again. This speaks about the confidence both sides have in each other and the importance of each other's positions on Afghanistan, with total convergence of views. India was also invited to the Moscow format of Afghanistan talks on the 20th of October, in which India not only participated but had a one-to-one meeting with the Taliban delegation there. This was the second direct covert contact between India and the Taliban on this issue.

The first in terms of wrinkles between the two countries is Russia's relations with China, which have been strengthening. The turning point for the swift development of the relationship between the nations came in 2014 with the Ukraine crisis and the annexation of Crimea by Russia. The West imposed sanctions on Russia, led by America and Europe. Russia had no avenue to export its gas and energy, which pushed Russia into the arms of China. They signed a 400-billion-dollar deal for gas and oil supply to China. Since then, the relations between India and China have also deteriorated significantly. Secondly, Russia stridently opposes the Indo-Pacific and the Quadrilateral Dialogue (the US, India, Japan and Australia) (QUAD). Russia is using the language that China had been using in the past, calling it an Asian NATO and that it is a security grouping to act against China. The third aspect of friction is Russia's growing ties with Pakistan. There is a supply of military equipment. The

bilateral military exercises started in 2016, just after the Uri attack on India. Russia is also investing in Pakistan by building a gas pipeline to Karachi. Then there is also Russia's position on Afghanistan, but that seems to be getting better as we proceed.

The question arises that despite India having virtual summits with many countries, whether it is countries in Europe, the EU including the Netherlands, Denmark, Uzbekistan and others, why could a virtual summit not be organised with Russia. The answer is that the relations between the two countries can be characterised as complex, and it would not be possible to do justice to them in a virtual setting. So, maybe it was good that this was not happening, and now the fact that Mr Putin is coming to India and that it is his first visit outside Russia in two years gives high expectations. The only other visit that he has made was to Geneva in June 2021 for a bilateral tête-à-tête with Joe Biden; other than that, he has not gone anywhere, and the fact that he has decided to make a stand-alone to India rather than to China, is sending a message to China, to India as well as the world. When India was having its presidency of the United Nations Security Council in Odessa, it organised a discussion on maritime security on the 9th of August, 2021, which Prime Minister Modi chaired. President Putin personally came for that meeting, he stayed for the meeting, he intervened, and this was his way of showing his respect and his regard because the last time he had attended such a meeting was in 2005.

So despite a few wrinkles, there is an underlying strength, dynamism and resilience as far as this relationship is concerned. At the same time, India needs to recognise that times and circumstances are different as they were in 1971 when the world was going through the Cold War. This relationship is vital to both countries, and both of them will try to expand the areas of convergence and minimise the areas of divergence. Another prospect is the upcoming 2+2 dialogue, the first of its kind between the two. So far, India has had only three 2+2 relations with the three QUAD partners, Australia, Japan and the United States. So, Russia is also at the same level as the QUAD partners, if not higher; the content of our relationship is much stronger than many of the other countries.