

India and Russia: India's Balancing Game

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Abstract

India and Russia (former Soviet Union) are traditional allies. During cold war, both have developed close strategic ties encompassing areas as diverse as defence, technology, culture and energy. This suited to India's non-aligned policy, which was not appreciated by the western block led by the US. The disintegration of Soviet Union and end of cold war in 1991, the emergence of the US as the sole superpower and globalization provided a new strategic matrix before the Indian foreign policy. In the post-cold war era, though India has developed close strategic ties with the US, India has also tried to maintain balanced relations with Russia. This was the prime objective of India's post-cold war principle of 'Strategic Autonomy'. But the growing rift between the US and Russia in last decade has made India's balancing game a difficult task. Russia too has become concerned with India's strategic proximity. This paper seeks to analyze Indo-Russian relations and India's balancing game in the changing strategic environment.

Keywords: Strategic Autonomy; Balancing Game; Indo-US strategic partnership; C AATSA; Changing Strategic Environment; US-Russia Rift.

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India and Russia share a background of close strategic relationship. The compulsions of the cold war, following the WWII brought them together as natural allies. Their partnership was natural during as India was following the policy of Non-alignment policy, which made India away from the Western capitalist world led by the US. It was based on naturally mutual interests of the two countries. When US threatened India with her gun boat diplomacy during the 1971 Indo-Pak war, India sign the Treaty of friendship and cooperation with Soviet Union in August 1971, which deterred the US from military intervention in the war. Soviet

Union, being a permanent member of the UNSC, always supported India at the UN on various issues include Kashmir problem. India too avoided the direct criticism of Soviet Union during its military interventions in Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968) and Afghanistan (1979). India and Soviet Union also developed close ties in various fields including defence, energy, advance technology, and culture during the cold war era.

However, the disintegration of Soviet Union in 1991 and the end of cold war changed global strategic equations. While Russia was preoccupied in her won domestic problems of reconstruction, India moved closer to the US camp. In the post-cold war era, the resurgence of Russia forced India to maintain a balanced relationship between the US and Russia under her principle of 'Strategic Autonomy'. But growing rift between the US and Russia has made India's balancing game a difficult task. Following the forcible takeover of Crimea by

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Russia in 2014 and its anti-Ukraine policies, the US has imposed sanctions against Russia. India is increasingly being forced to choose a side. In view of this, on the other hand Russia too has some reservations with India to accommodate her all concerns in view of India's close strategic ties with the US and other western countries.

The Cold War Era: Close Strategic Ties

India and Soviet Union (Now Russia since 1991) have been 'natural allies' during cold war and consistently maintained a stable relationship during this era. Their gradual evolution to ideological and strategic affinity spans around hundred years in modern times, even before independence of India. The following are the main factors for close ties and natural friendship between the two countries:

- The modern Soviet Union emerged in 1917 following the Bolshevik revolution (Communist revolution), which was welcomed by India leaders during national movement. Since then, the process of ideological affinity gradually evolved and strengthened over the time. India's socialist orientations, mixed economy, and planned development during cold war era were inspired by Soviet Union. Jawahar Lal Nehru visited Russia in 1927 and was much impressed by the success of Planning in Soviet Union. Back home much before India's independence Congress set up national planning committee in 1938 under the chairmanship of Nehru. The modern Planning commission of India is successor of this planning committee. India's socialist orientations were disliked by the capitalist world led by the US.
- Again, India followed the policy of non-alignment, which aimed at opposing imperialism, colonialism, apartheid and supporting a balance global economic order. These objectives suited Soviet Union as she has never been a colonial power. Thus, India's policy of non-alignment made Soviet Union as the natural ally of all third world developing countries, which followed the policy of non-alignment. On the other hand US Foreign Secretary termed India's Non-alignment as 'immoral'.
- Within this ideological symmetry, the Soviet Union played important role in 1950s in India's development: Bhilai Steel Plant, Bhakra Nagal hydroelectric project to name a few. The Soviet Union has always supported India's sovereignty over Kashmir,

Indian claims over Goa against Portugal, maintained a neutral stand during the 1962 Indo-China war, and transferred MiG-21 jet fighter technology to India in 1962, which was denied to China. Subsequently, Russia emerged and continues to be the largest supplier of defence material and technology to India. Russia also plays important role in India's energy sector. The Kudankulam Nuclear plant in Tamil Nadu state of India is launched with Russian assistance. As a reciprocal gesture, India too expressed muted criticism of Soviet military intervention in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968, and later in Afghanistan in 1979. India maintained a balanced outlook and demanded withdrawal of all external forces from Afghanistan including the Pakistan supported Mujahideens.

- A major turning point in their relationship came in 1971 when India and Soviet Union signed Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation to hedge against the American threat during Indo-Pak war, 1971. America has threatened to move its 7th fleet against India in favour of Pakistan during this war. Following this treaty, the Soviet warships arrived at the Eastern Indian Ocean which acted as a deterrent against the America's open support to Pakistan. Some critics even termed this treaty as India joining the Soviet Camp, but India defended its decision to sign the treaty in the name of her core interests of security. After that they never looked back. It is the Soviet Union that always supported India at the UN on various issues including the Kashmir issue.

Post Cold War Era: Close Ties with the US and Balancing Game

A shift in India's global strategic partnership occurred in the post-cold war era, which witnessed India developing fast and deep strategic partnership with America also. It was in this background of ideological affinity, mutually beneficial economic and strategic partnership that both India and Russia continue to maintain a balanced partnership even in the post-cold war era, when India has developed strategic partnership with the US also.

A. Close strategic partnership with the US

Indo-America strategic partnership is a new feature of India's foreign policy in the post cold war era. Some of its sign posts are signing of Defence

Cooperation agreement in 2005 and its extension for another 10 year in 2015, which facilitated the supply of advanced defence equipment from the US and beginning of joint maritime exercise in 2006 (Malabar Exercise); India-US Civil Nuclear Cooperation Agreement, 2008; signing of Four Foundational Agreements to encourage interoperability of defence forces of the two countries; promoting counterterrorism cooperation; US declaring India as a 'Major Defence Partner' in 2016, and enhanced strategic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific including the revival of four nation QUAD in 2017, among others. India's strategic ties have assumed global and regional strategic salience in view of India's participation in American Indo-Pacific strategy (Rossow: 2021).

B. India's Strategic Autonomy and balancing between Russia and the US

But India has maintained a balanced partnership with both the major powers Russia and the US. This was done on the basis of India's post cold war principle of 'Strategic Autonomy', which stipulates that India would maintain autonomy on decisions affecting her core interests and partnership. In fact, the principle of strategic autonomy is nothing but the reincarnation of principle of 'independence of foreign policy', as articulated under India's policy of Non-alignment during cold war.

In the given global strategic flux and uncertainty, India cannot side with one major power at the cost of partnership with other. The post-cold war world is also moving towards a multi-polar configuration. In view of this, India has consistently maintained a fine balance in her relations with Russia and the US both. Some of the examples of India's fine balancing between the two major powers are:

First, India has close strategic ties with the US, but it also maintains higher level of regular exchange of views with Russia. Russia is one of the three countries with which India maintains the mechanism of regular annual summits since 2000. The other two countries are Japan and China. This year the 21st annual summit is to be held in India for which preparations are going on. Russian President Vladimir V. Putin is likely to visit India later this year. Earlier, Putin visited India in October, 2018 for the 18th Summit, and the Indian Prime Minister Modi visited Russia in 2019 for the 20th Annual Summit. No Summit was held in 2020 due to Pandemic.

The higher level exchange between the two leaders is not limited to annual summits only. As per the information given by the Indian Ministry

of Foreign Affairs, Modi and Putin have met 19 times since 2014. This higher level of frequent exchange of views indicates that both assign great value to their bilateral relations. Both have signed the "Declaration on the India-Russia Strategic Partnership" in October 2000 which resulted in a qualitatively new character of relationship with enhanced levels of cooperation taking place in almost all areas of the bilateral relationship including political, security, trade and economy, defense, science and technology and culture (MEA: 2021).

Second. In spite of India's close ties with the US, Russia is always sensitive to India's needs and aspirations. Russia has consistently supported India's claim for the permanent membership of the Security Council. It was due to Russian initiative and Support that India became the member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). In reaction, China supported Pakistan's membership in the SCO. This is how Pakistan also became a member of SCO in 2017.

Third, though the defence cooperation between India and the US has increased in recent years, but India still relies on Russia for the supply of the critical and advanced defence equipment and technology. India has purchased advanced weapon systems like C-17 heavy-lifters air crafts, Apache attack helicopters, C-130J special operations aircraft, P-8I surveillance aircraft for India's Navy and the Indian Army's M-777 ultra-light howitzers among others. In spite of this, Russia continues to be largest supplier of defence equipment to India at present.

A significant aspect of defence supplies from Russia is the transfer of defence technology also. The production of Brahmos missile in India with Russian technology is a case in point. Russia's Sukhoi fighter jets are still the mainstay of India's fighter jets stock along with French Mirage 2000 and recently supplied Rafale jets.

In 2019, India signed a mega deal of \$ 5 billion to purchase five S-400 missile defence systems from Russia. The US opposed the deal as it has imposed sanctions against Russia in 2014 following the forcible takeover of Crimea by Russia. In 2017, the US has enacted a law called CAATSA (Countering American Adversaries Through Sanctions Act), which imposes sanctions against those countries which have dealing with Russia and Iran. For India, its implication is that, if India purchases the S-400 missiles from Russia, the US might impose sanctions against India also.

It is not without reason that India defied the US sanctions to go ahead with S-400 deal with Russia. India considers the purchase of S-400 as essential item for her security. This is the best example of application of the principle of Strategic Autonomy and India's balancing game (Kaura: 2018; The Economic Times: 2020).

These examples show that India's strategic autonomy has worked well in maintaining balanced ties with both Russia and the US. This balance is also in tune with the current s of multilateral global order. Of course, this balance is a great achievement but it also a future challenge for India's diplomacy. During the time of acute polarization between Russia and the US, India may find it difficult to maintain this balance. The Biden administration has shown some amount of flexibility towards Russia as the June 2021 summit between Putin and Biden has proved to be an icebreaker. If the US-Russia tensions are somehow reduced, it would be easy for India to carry on her policy of strategic autonomy. But that may not be the possibility in future due to China factor.

Fourth, A new feature of India-Russia partnership is the initiative of India's Look Far East policy. India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the launch of India's Act Far East Policy at Vladivostok, Russia, while participating as Chief Guest in the 5th East Economic Forum meet on 5 September, 2019 which was organized by Russia. It is the first ever visit to Vladivostok (Far East) by any Prime Minister. The Russia region of Far East covers the vast area between Baikal Lake to the Pacific Ocean with cold Siberian climate. Russia's this region is not developed and Russia wants to attract foreign investments for the rapid development of the region. Thus there is mutually of interests between India's desire to gain foothold in this region and Russian plan for development of the region. The following points of this policy indicate the potential for closer ties between India and Russia:

The region of Far East holds significant to India for the following reasons

- The region is rich in natural resources like oil, gas, gold, diamond, timber and other resources. India's ONGC-Videsh has already invested \$6 billion in Sakhalin for oil production. India needs to diversify her oil import sources for energy security.
- The Far East straddled in the north-west of the strategic Indo-Pacific region is important for India, as it would increase her strategic

reach in the region. As Chabahar in the east of Indo-Pacific is important for India, so is the Vladivostok in the North of the Indo-Pacific region. India and Russia have decided to construct a shipping lane from Vladivostok to Chennai, which would reduce the distance from the existing 40 days to 24 days.

- Russia wants to develop the Far East region by attracting foreign investment. Modi has announced investment of \$1 billion in this region for development. The investment will be made in the form of LOC (Lines of credit or soft loan) on easy terms. This will add another feather in traditional India-Russian strategic partnership. India has already established her Consulate in Vladivostok way back in 1992. Last Month India's Commerce Minister has visited the region along with many state Chief Ministers for exploring the cooperation avenues in agriculture and skill development. This is for the first time that India has offered cheap lines of credit to a developed country.
- India's Act Far East policy is likely to have a deep bearing on the India's involvement in the Indo-Pacific, which has assumed importance in recent years. Any connectivity between India and Far East must pass through the heart of the Indo-Pacific. For example the proposed Vladivostok-Chennai maritime route would also pass through this region including the South China Sea. So far, India's involvement with the Indo-Pacific has been in tune with the US strategic plans in the region. The strategic interests of the US, China, India and Russia would come into sharp focus in India's Act Far East Policy sooner or later.

In view of the above positive developments in the Indo-Russian relations in the post-cold war era as well as their past background, many observers are optimistic about the stability in bilateral relations in spite of changing strategic environment.

The Signs of Unease in Indo-Russian Ties

In spite of India's best efforts to maintain a healthy balance India's relations with the US camp and Russia, India is hard pressed and signs of unease are visible in the India-Russian Ties. While India's close ties with the US are the prime driver in Russia's changing perception about India, other factors of tensions are equally important. The unease is reflected on various issues like India joining Quad, new warmth in Pak-Russian relations or Russia-China relations, Afghanistan issue, and even diplomatic conduct among others.

China Factor: As far as India-China tensions are concerned, Russia has preferred to maintain a neutral stand in this regard. At present, India and China are engaged in a tense military stand-off at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh. China has disturbed the status quo at the LAC in May, 2021 by encroaching upon the Indian side of the LAC and deploying nearly 50000 troops along the border. India has too responded with matching deployment of forces. But Russia has refrained from siding with either China or India. Russia facilitated the meeting between the Foreign Ministers of India and China in September, 2021 in Moscow and called for both sides to maintain restraints and resolve their tensions through bilateral negotiations.

In spite of this, China actor has become very relevant in Indo-Russian relations from an altogether different angle. At present, the US-China relations are passing through a difficult phase. The US considers China as the number one threat to her global interests and influence. On the other hand, China under the leadership of Xi Jinping has adopted an aggressive and expansionist policy to make China as an influential nation. This is what we call 'China Dream'. China and the US have come face to face confrontation on many issues like the status of Hong Kong, Taiwan's security, trade issues, and US assertion about the origin of Covid virus from Wuhan lab and demand for such probe, the issue of human rights violation in Xinjiang etc. The US and China both have imposed sanctions against each other and taken punitive trade related actions.

In order to counter China, the US has adopted a robust Indo-Pacific strategy, which involves among things, developing close strategic partnership with her regional friends. It is under this strategy, that India has joined the QUAD group of four countries (Japan, India, the US and Australia), which was revived by the US President Trump in 2017. The first Summit meeting of the QUAD was organized by the US in March, 2021, which raised new objections from both Russia and China.

Russia and China have termed this initiative as a tool for containing China. The close ties between India and other three countries under the banner of QUAD have led to closer strategic cooperation between China and Russia. This is how China factor has become strategically important in Russia-India relations also. In simple terms it means that though India and Russia may have close bilateral relations, but at global level China and Russia will remain together and India has moved towards the US led coalition under the forum of QUAD. So China-US

tensions have created a new factor which influences bilateral relationship between Russia and India. But, Russia is highly critical of QUAD. Russia shares China's perception about QUAD. When the first QUAD summit was held in March, 2021, the Russian Foreign Minister was highly critical of QUAD as a tool of China's containment. He termed it as the Asian NATO. India is the founder member QUAD along with Japan, the US and Australia. India might not have relished Russian criticism. These recent events raise the questions whether there are some underlying currents of change in the Indo-Russian relationship.

Pakistan and Russia: During cold war period, Russia and China had strained relationship. It was Pakistan, who in association with the US and Saudi Arabia trained Jihadis and Taliban who launched violent attacks against Russian forces in Afghanistan during (1979-1989) its presence in that country. No Russian President has so far visited Pakistan, in spite of many official invitations by Pakistan. Also during cold war Russia always supported India's position on Kashmir issue at various levels. However, Russia-Pakistan relations have witnessed some perceptible change in the post-cold war period.

Both countries signed Defence Cooperation Agreement in 2008 and joint defence exercises are also held between the two countries. Pakistan is seeking advance weapons from Russia, though no such deal has been finalized so far. Russia's increasing proximity with Pakistan is facilitated by China which hold strategic partnership with Pakistan. Thus, a new strategic combination consisting of Russia, China and Pakistan is emerging in the horizon. India may not like Russia's growing overtures with Pakistan in future.

C. Afghanistan Problem: While India continues to face tensions with both China and Pakistan for long time, the Afghanistan problem brought these countries closer to Russia. Pakistan, China, and Russia all three view the withdrawal of US forces as defeat of US in Afghanistan. All three supported Taliban government for different reasons.

Russia-India relations came into sharp focus when Moscow launched a quartet initiative on Afghan problem consisting of Russia, China, Pakistan and the US to seek a political settlement of the problem, but India was carefully kept out of this process, may be under Pak-China pressure. India has conveyed to Russia about her valid stakes in Afghanistan but Russia failed to invite the two meetings of this quartet in April, 2021 and August, 2021. Contrary to Russian support to Taliban government, India

does not have diplomatic ties with Taliban. The Afghan issue has resulted in diplomatic strains in Indo-Russian ties. The eyebrows were raised when the Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar paid a two day visit to Georgia on 9-10 July, 2021, while returning from his Russian visit on 08 July, 2021. Jaishankar's visit to Georgia included handing over the Holy Relics of St. Queen Ketevan of Georgia to the Government and people of Georgia and unveiling the newly installed statue of Mahatma Gandhi in the city of Tbilisi.

The issue is that Georgia does not have good relations with Russia in the manner India does not have good relations with Pakistan. Apparently, Russia might have felt it otherwise. But, observers feel that India is also countering Russian move to develop closer ties with India's neighbor Pakistan. This was in response to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's visit to Pakistan on 06 April, 2021 immediately following his visit to India on 05-06 April, 2021. Observers even comment that the Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov was not given meeting appointment with the Indian Prime Minister Modi due to his planned visit to Pakistan.

D. Limited Range of Bilateral Relationship: An additional cause of concerns in Indo-Russian relationship is their limited range which is largely confined to defence and energy partnership. Though, Russia continues to be the largest defence supplies of India with 50 percent share, it is being reduced year by year as the US is fast emerging as India's leading defence partner. The trade potential is yet to be fully expanded as bilateral trade hovers around \$ 10 billion (2019-20) and has missed many targets of its diversifications and enhancement over the years. This trade volume pales into insignificance in comparison to India's bilateral trade of \$86.4 billion with China and \$ 80.5 billion with the US in 2020-21 (Banerji: 2021).

Yet both Russia and India never miss an opportunity to officially declare the stability in their relationship. During his Russia visit, Jaishankar also claimed in Moscow that the Indo-Russian relationship is the 'steadiest of the major relationships in the world'. Yet he also remarked that the relationship 'stable but not static'. In spite of official assertion of stability, many scholars find that the disagreement is bound to grow between India and Russia as both have become less useful to each other (Rajgopalan:2012).

The Future of Balancing Game

The contemporary regional and global strategic environment impacting India is very complex.

The present global strategic scene is marked by intense rivalry between the US and China for global leadership. In last four decades, China has scored an average 210-percent annual growth and has emerged as the second largest economy in 2010 after the US. Meanwhile China has also modernized her defence forces, with the development of long range missiles, advanced fighter jets and aircraft carriers. China has tried to spread her economic and strategic influence through global trade, investment and ambitious programmes like BRI running from Asia to Europe.

On the other hand, the new National Security Strategy, released by the US in 2017 clearly states that China and Russia are the greatest threat to American interests and global influence (US Embassy in Georgia: 2017). This American approach has brought China and Russia in the same strategic platform. Though Biden administration has tried to mend ties with Russia by organizing Biden-Putin Summit on 16 June, 2021 at Geneva, but it has proved inadequate in melting the ice between the two countries.

This development has not only threatened US position as a leading global power, but has implications for India also. Russia may feel uneasy about India-US strategic partnership, but it is the result of, among other things, their common concerns about the threat posed by rising and assertive China. Like China-US, rivalry, India and China are also involved in the strategic rivalry in the Indian Ocean and South Asia. India cannot ignore China's footprint in this region as it serious implication for her security and growth both. It was in this context that India became inclined towards western alliance mainly the US.

This has helped India in balancing China in the Indo-Pacific region. This is the common goal shared by both the US and India in view of rising and ever assertive China. India's closer ties with the US have the potential to affect the Indo-Russian relations. In addition, Russia's closer ties with China make it difficult for Russia to facilitate India's balancing game with ease (Pandeya: 2020).

But India has so far succeeded in maintaining a fine balance between the US and Russia, India needs to continue with this policy to maintain an autonomous space for her in the region. This is also in tune with India's principle of Strategic Autonomy to protect her valid interests. But the increasing rift between the US and Russia on the one hand and India and China on the other hand, have made India's balancing act a challenging task. Unnikrishan (2021) aptly sums up India's anxiety,

"In the past 70 years, the relationship between India and the Soviet Union, and now Russia, has historically been stable and mutually beneficial. However, cracks are beginning to appear. Russia's growing alignment with China, a major rival of India, is proving to be a sticking point. There is also growing anxiety in Moscow over New Delhi's deepening security ties with Washington, both bilaterally and through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. Additionally, Russia appears to be increasing its relations with Pakistan, a potential concern for India. How will India manage relations with Russia as Russia grows closer to a more assertive China, while at the same time balancing its growing ties with the United States and U.S. allies?"

Also, the global strategic situation is passing through the transition from a unipolar world led by the US to the one in which there are multiple power centres.

India too has scored a reasonably good economic progress in last three decades with an average growth rate of 7-8 percent. India is playing an important role in global affairs through various forums such as G-20, BRICS, outreach partner of G-7, Shanghai Cooperation Organization and so on. India is at present the non-permanent member of the UN Security Council has placed her claim for the permanent membership. So India too has global ambitions in tune with her power and capabilities. But this position has to be maintained and enhanced through appropriate policy initiatives. Thus in view of both regional and global strategic conditions, India needs to follow strategy to enhance her global influence:

- To maintain a balanced relationship with all major powers including the US, Russia and the European Union. A multi-vector foreign policy is the best approach in this strategic flux.
- To diversify her regional engagement in West Asia, Central Asia, Africa, Latin America and East Asia through various policy and diplomatic initiatives. India faces tough competition from China in these regions.
- To devise suitable foreign and domestic policies to attain energy security and self-reliance in defence matters, which are crucial for India's future growth and position.

It means, in spite of many difficulties involved, India needs to continue with the balancing game by maintaining closer ties with all major powers including Russia. In view of these facts, scholars suggest India to be realistic in her approach to

Russia. 'Progress can certainly be made in Russia-India relations. But an India that is simultaneously Russia-friendly and America-friendly should be realistic about Russia's international priorities' (Singh: 2021). Another scholar (Kapoor: 2019) has also claimed that 'India and Russia's relationship cannot flourish on defence and historical linkages alone. With systemic changes underway in international relations, new dimensions of cooperation need to be found to build a strong economic and strategic partnership. Both India and Russia will have to learn to navigate their relationship amidst challenges emerging not just from bilateral factors but also regional and global ones'.

Though Russia has developed close ties with China in reaction to the US threats, there is much scope in expanding Indo-Russian relations in new directions like trade diversification, energy security or economic partnership in Far East projects. If India has to appreciate Russian global strategic concerns, Russia also needs to appreciate India's concerns and constraints in the contemporary strategic environment.

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