

Russia and India: Correcting Damaged Relations

By Alexey Kupriyanov

Russo-Indian relations have a long history. During the Soviet-era, especially from 1971, India was, in the full sense, a strategic partner to the USSR. It was not a member of the Eastern Bloc, but nonetheless maintained a friendly posture as one of the leaders of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which engaged in resisting the world order led by traditional colonial powers. At the same time, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) supported the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) and Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) member state Pakistan, an important element of the Western Bloc's security system. NATO's propensity to support Pakistan automatically pushed India towards rapprochement with the USSR.

1971 was the turning point for Russo-Indian relations. Previously, the USSR had tried to maintain good relations with both India and Pakistan, but after the start of the 1917 India-Pakistan War leading to the creation of Bangladesh, Moscow was forced to make a choice in favor of India. Another important reason leading to the consolidation of Soviet-Indian rapprochement was both countries' problems surrounding China which both India (after the war of 1962) and the USSR (after the border conflict of 1969) viewed as a threat. India even refused to condemn the entry of Soviet troops into Afghanistan, as it turned quite sympathetic to the Soviet presence in the Indian Ocean and the Middle East. Of course, there were disagreements between Indian and the Soviet leaders (for example, in private conversations Jawaharlal Nehru condemned the suppression of the revolt in Hungary in 1956, and Indira Gandhi criticized the defeat of the uprising in Prague in 1968), but they were not strategic.

The Indian leadership repeatedly expressed intentions to build socialism within its borders which, in turn, aroused political support from the Soviets. The partnership between the Soviet Union and India was comprehensive. The USSR, being one of India's most important trading partners, helped to develop the Indian economy (especially heavy industry), and the two also collaborated with third countries. Contacts between the two were made at all levels, including cultural ones. While Indian films remained very popular in the USSR, Indian schoolchildren were being taught about Russian writers through Indian language books printed in the Soviet Union. This strategic partnership, which was markedly different from the conventional patron-client inter-socialist state relationships, has formed an important basis of mutual respect that still exists today.

However, with the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the Russo-Indian friendship fell into crisis. The onset of the new world order and the end of the Cold War forced India and Russia to completely reconsider their places in the world. India shifted attention by beginning to pursue a 'Look East' policy and increasingly strengthened ties with Southeast Asian countries. Russia, in turn, announced its intention to diversify its foreign partners in South Asia and redeveloped relations with Pakistan, no longer privileging India as its main regional strategic partner.

Alexey Kupriyanov, Research Fellow at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations, Moscow, explains that “with the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the Russo-Indian friendship fell into crisis. The onset of the new world order and the end of the Cold War forced India and Russia to completely reconsider their places in the world.”

However, in the mid-1990s, both countries gradually began to understand the value of the old friendship. This was primarily due to the fact that Yevgeny Primakov, a well-known orientalist and supporter of friendship with India, became Russia's foreign minister instead of Andrei Kozyrev, a pro-Western advocate. Russia's readiness to renew friendship has provoked a reaction from the Indian side, interested in expanding and diversifying trade and political ties. This process led to the agreement on strategic partnership signed by Moscow and New Delhi in 2000.

The post-2000 and current Indo-Russian partnership is different from that of the Cold War period. First of all, it lacks the economic and cultural components. Perspectives of Moscow and New Delhi on the world order coincide at a political level: penchant for a multi-polar world order, an absence of a hegemonic power, and preservation of the role of the UN. But on an economic and cultural level, there is a big rupture and falling ties. Russia and India lack the economic relationship like the one between the United States and India or India and China. Russia is economically much weaker than the USSR was. Its trade with India cannot reach that of the Soviet times, and old niches in the markets are now occupied by other manufacturers. Furthermore, India itself has grown into one of the leading economies of the world and no longer requires Russian economic assistance.

Additionally, Russia either cannot carry out soft power programs in India like it once did in Soviet times, or does not understand the value of doing so. This is primarily due to the Russian leadership's understanding that when pursuing a policy of restoring Russia's position in the world, it is wiser to spend limited resources on hard power rather than soft power. At the same time, it is widely believed in Russian society that soft power programs in relation to third world countries, conducted by the USSR during the Cold War years, led to a considerable waste of its scarce resources.

Now, Russia and India have three key areas where they are effectively cooperating: weapons, nuclear energy, and scientific research. Cooperation in these areas will continue to grow. Moreover, new forms of cooperation are emerging such as collaborating in the construction of the Rooppur nuclear power plant in Bangladesh. At the moment, the most promising Russia-India economic avenue is establishing a free trade agreement (FTA) between India and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) where Russia is the main driving force. The establishment of an FTA between Vietnam and EEU increased trade between Russia and Vietnam by 30% in the first year alone. There is reason to believe that the same could happen with India, especially if two main trade routes are launched: the North-South corridor through Iran and the sea transport corridor to Vladivostok. Russia is interested in both investing in India and receiving investments from India. India seeks to diversify its fuel imports, and Indian companies are investing in Russian energy projects (Sakhalin-One and geological exploration in the Tomsk region, Vankor and Taas-Yuryakhsk oil fields). Russia, in turn, is investing in the transportation and oil production sectors in India.

Moscow is also interested in attracting more Indian funds to projects in the Arctic and the Far East and despite the threat of US sanctions, remains confident in India's investment commitments. India, aspiring to be a great power, demonstrates the readiness to defend its right in choosing external partners and making independent decisions all the while remaining adamant against the threat of sanctions. Besides a weak economic relationship, another serious problem of Russia-India relations at a strategic level is the deep distrust between India and China. Russia maintains good relationships with both countries. In addition, it is interested in forming a common space of trust and security in Eurasia through the implementation of the Russia-India-China (RIC) format proposed by Yevgeny Primakov, making Russia sensitive towards any conflicts taking place in the region.

In general, relations between Russia and India are developing steadily. After the signing of the FTA agreement and the opening of transport corridors, the damage in bilateral relations – strong political-security relations with weak economic relations – will most likely be gradually repaired.

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