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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Russia as a Factor in India's Nuclear Strategy: A Strategic Analysis

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#### Abstract

The strategic partnership between India-Russia has been natural and objective. Russia and India national interests coincide, or at least so not contradict each other. Despite all the reasons in favour of improved Russia-India ties, the bilateral relationship has endured many setbacks and faces multiple challenges. One aspect of the relationship, however, has thrived spectacularly- Russia arms supply to India. In just few years, Russia has quietly emerged as India's largest arms supplier. Indian efforts to acquire a nuclear capability started already in the 60s, and the country's first nuclear test in 1974 was accompanied by refusal to sign the NPT and the CTBT. India's nuclear test in 1998 came at a time when India saw increasing need for economic integration with the outside world, including technology for civil nuclear energy. During the Cold War, India and Russia enjoyed close relations, based largely on a common interest in countering the U.S. It was very much a client-relationship, with Russia as India's diplomatic supporter, major trading partner and supplier of military hardware. The break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 had implications also for relations with India. This Paper examines the facts that behind the India Russia nuclear relationship and big power directed their attention to this region which has suddenly become very significant for the big powers.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the post second world war period, the focus was on military power. Subsequently, nations wanted to enhance their military capability, in order to make themselves more powerful. In this power game, USA and USSR were the main captains, who possessed huge stockpiles of military equipments together with nuclear arsenals. But as Heraclitus (of Ephesus), observed six centuries before Christ that nothing in the universe is constant-or, if you prefer, that the only constant thing is change itself. The same is true of international relations as well. The shift in the prime focus of power enabled economy to super-cede the military. It was in the eighties, that this change became visible and consequently economy came into being as the leitmotif of power in the international relations. The collapse of the Soviet Union was the outcome of this phenomenon. Though militarily she was strong enough, but weak on the economy front. As a result, USSR withered away from the world map.<sup>1</sup>

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union the world faced a new situation and so did India. Many of the old hypotheses had become victims of the march of history. The economic struggle had become more crucial than before, with palpable consequences for foreign policy. United States with its overwhelming power became the chief architect of all the major decisions in the post-cold war era.

#### Brief Background:

From 1954 onwards, India found the US in a cold war partnership with Pakistan, which impeded Indian efforts to assert its interest in the subcontinent. Also, India confronted China in a border dispute and struggle for influence over Tibet, which culminated in defeat in the 1962 Sino-Indian war. Subsequently, India asserted its power in the South Asian subcontinent as a counter to Pakistan, China and the US. India moved towards the USSR which began to supply warplanes and other military hardware and helped build Indian defence capabilities in both

conventional and nuclear areas. In the wake of China's 1964 nuclear test, India developed its own nuclear weapons programme. In August 1971, India signed a twenty-year Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation with the USSR.<sup>2</sup>

India's relationship with the principal successor state to the other former superpowers, the Soviet Union, has also undergone profound changes. India can no longer rely on Russia to militarily pin down a recalcitrant China, nor can it count on Russian support on the Kashmir issue in the UN Security Council. Yet, because India possesses a very substantial Soviet made military arsenal, India maintains a substantial arms purchase relationship with Russia. India has, however, rebuffed Russian overtures for the formation of an Indo-Russian Chinese diplomatic bloc as a bulwark against overweening American power. Given India's recent efforts to count on the United States, its reluctance to participate in such dubious enterprises is hardly surprising.<sup>3</sup>

During 1991-92, Russia did not have any clear cut policy towards Kashmir. The pro-western drive to protect and promote national interests was the major thrust of Russia's foreign policy in that period. Hence, it was not surprising to see changes in the Kashmir policy on unexpected lines. It was evident during the visit of Russian Vice President, Alexander Rutskoi to Pakistan in December 1991. During the visit, he announced a very significant change in his country's stand on Kashmir by saying that the right of self-determination of the people of Kashmir should be decided under UN auspices and in accordance with its resolutions.<sup>4</sup>

The Russia-Pakistan Joint Communiqué,<sup>5</sup> issued on 22 December 1991, read along with other things: "The Russian side acknowledged Pakistan's position and expressed the hope that the issue would be resolved peacefully through negotiations between Pakistan and India on the basis of international agreements."<sup>6</sup> It was also against the provisions of the Simla Agreement, signed by both India and Pakistan, which emphasized on the resolution of the Kashmir issue bilaterally without any third party mediation. This approach of Russia caused grave concern in the Indian political establishment in particular and public in general. Kesava Menon, expressing concern over the Russia stand, wrote, "It is now possible that the United Nations Security Council will not exercise veto in favour of India."<sup>7</sup>

India could not afford to ignore the smooth supply of Russian weapons and spare parts. Sharad Pawar, India's Defence Minister came to Moscow on 6 September 1992 on the invitation of Russia's Defence Minister, Pavel Grachev, to discuss the possibility of obtaining an improved version of the Mig-29 fighters. He also discussed the further deliveries of spare parts to India. Pawar after the meeting commented that, "We will always try to maintain the development of cooperation with Russia in the military sphere at the level of the past 40 years."<sup>8</sup>

#### **Dynamic Alterations:**

President Boris Yeltsin's visit to India in January 1993 marked the beginning of a new phase in Indo-Russian relations. The visit ended all speculations regarding the declining relations between the two countries; the process of which started with the collapse of Soviet Union. Regarding the Kashmir issue, a clear shift was discerned with the Yeltsin visit; a sharp contrast to Russia's perception of the issue just after the disintegration as we saw in Vice President Rutskoi's visit to Pakistan in December 1991.<sup>9</sup>

Russia's policy towards the Kashmir issue favouring India appeared in a major way during the Yeltsin visit. The Russian President minced no words in expressing Russia's unequivocal support to the Indian stand on the Kashmir issue. He cleared the doubts in the Indian mind that the newly emerging Russian State, in its drive to shed the old ideology, had made a dramatic turn from the old Soviet policy. Yeltsin asserted the Russian stand on Kashmir while speaking at a meeting with Indian businessmen on 28 January 1993 in New Delhi: "We stand for the integrity of India. We support the settlement in Kashmir according to the Indian version so as to maintain integrity and unity of India. We support it. And in whatever international organisations it may-be the United Nations Security Council or others-we shall stand by this point of view."<sup>10</sup> These words were strong enough to clear any suspicions in anyone's mind.

One major development that took place after 1993 was an increase in the level of defence cooperation between India and Russia. It was no secret that Indian military establishment had been dependent on Russia for spares as well as their modernization. The ratio of independence for Russian spares in India was 40, 64 and 80 per cent for the army, the air force and the navy, respectively.<sup>11</sup> Though, starting with a disappointing note after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Russian cooperation in the field of defence increased gradually. For instance, the two countries signed an agreement on military cooperation on 22 October 1996, during the visit of Russian Defence Minister, General Igor Rodionov to New Delhi.<sup>12</sup>

The uncertainty regarding the cooperation in the nuclear field was overcome gradually in the later phase of the Yeltsin period. The Russian leaders, during the visit of Indian External Affairs Minister, I.K.Gujral to Moscow in February 1997, reiterated that Moscow would honour its commitment to sell nuclear reactors to India.<sup>13</sup> The Russian Parliament, on 14 March 1997, approved with applause the statement that each one of its factions supports the policy of cooperation with India.<sup>14</sup>

This was an indication of the overwhelming public support in Russia for strengthening relations with India. This also served as a reliable pointer for the forthcoming visit by the Indian Prime Minister, H.D. Deve Gowda to the

Russian capital in March 1997, in which both the countries discussed the policy of nuclear cooperation. One of the major purposes of the Deve Gowda's visit was to finalize the purchase of two 1000 MW nuclear power reactors. The negotiations for the sale of reactors had started in 1988 but Russia started dillydallying after the 1992 Nuclear Suppliers Group Pact; it was considered to be bowing to the US pressure. It became doubtful if the reactors would ever be supplied. Since the proposal dated back to 1988, it could escape the provisions of the Pact. To nullify the American pressure, the Russian leaders assured Deve Gowda that no third country could have any say on their bilateral relations.<sup>15</sup>

Deve Gowda, during his talks with President Yeltsin, recalled the Moscow Declaration of 1994 as a joint declaration against 'aggressive nationalism, separatism, religious extremism, terrorism and cross movement of narcotic drugs and arms.'<sup>16</sup> He emphasised that India and Russia had a shared interest in working together in these areas. These challenges posed dangers to pluralistic societies of both the countries. Therefore, to check the danger of these ever increasing threats both needed to develop a common approach on the issues of mutual concern. Yeltsin was of the view that India was a major stabilizing factor in Asia.<sup>17</sup>

After the Indian tests of 1998, the friendship between India and Russia seemed to come to a dead end. Russia had always been a promoter of Non Proliferation Treaty and Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and wanted India to sign both the treaties, but India did not accept on the ground that they were discriminatory in nature. Due to Indian tests, Russian leaders were in a quirky situation.

President Yeltsin, on 12 May 1998, publicly expressed his anguish and declared, "India has of course let us down over their nuclear explosions."<sup>18</sup> Foreign Minister Primakov, in an NTV interview emphatically stated, "We do not like it. Naturally, we are against them because India is upsetting stability that has taken shape in the world now in preventing nuclear explosions in general, both underground and so on. We would like very much that India, being our friend and partner, stop and would not go any further."<sup>19</sup>

Primakov, on 30 May 1998, made a three point proposal for discussion at the Foreign Ministers Conference of the P-5 on 4<sup>th</sup> June. These were as follows:

1. India and Pakistan should be subjected to increasingly intense pressure to make them sign NPT;
2. India and Pakistan should be made to join the international test ban;
3. Everything should be done to ease tensions in the relations between the two states.

The proposal envisioned signing of the NPT and CTBT by India and Pakistan, joint discussion to resolve outstanding problems between the two countries, and immediate interaction among permanent members of the United Nations Security Council [UNSC] to work out common measures for curbing an arms race in the South Asia. However, Primakov opposed any economic sanctions but stressed on the big powers stepping up "efforts for resolving the Indo-Pakistan conflict in Kashmir and sorting out all other outstanding differences between the two countries".<sup>20</sup>

### **Strategic Nuclear Partnership**

Though, the initial reaction of Russia leaders to the Indian nuclear tests was bitter, yet they did not take any concrete steps commensurate with their reaction. No one, Yeltsin, Primakov or Russian Parliament, stressed on the big powers to intervene to resolve the Kashmir issue. The strategy of Moscow seemed to resolve the post Pokhran dilemma by condemning the nuclear tests in the subcontinent along with the other members of the p-5 countries but, at the same time, going ahead with business as usual with India. Russia did not impose any sanction on India and did not let the nuclear issue have any bearing on bilateral relations.<sup>21</sup>

Not all Russian leaders were critical of the Indian nuclear tests even at the initial phase of reactions. The Russian Duma in fact came out in praise of the Indian tests. Gennedy Seleznev, Chairman of the Duma, supported the Indian tests: "I believe that India acted correctly. In this respect it acted very consistently and it was a correct decision not to curtail its research programme halfway in spite of US pressure. I can only admire their national pride."<sup>22</sup>

India and Russia were no longer looking at a buyer-seller relationship of arms but at joint development of technologies and systems and marketing those abroad under the long term Integrated Military Technical Cooperation Agreement of 1994. Initially meant for six years, this deal was extended in 1998 to 2010. Renewed defence cooperation covered the full spectrum from the consideration of the Admiral Gorshkov aircraft carrier to the development and production of the cruise missile, Brahmos. Other major items included the purchase and production of the Su-30, development of avionics for the Indian light combat aircraft, advanced air defence missile, upgradation of old MiG aircrafts, joint development of military and civilian transport aircrafts and multiple launch rocket systems, to name a few. At the turn of the millennium, Indo-Russia defence cooperation never looked better.<sup>23</sup>

The Russian policy on nuclear cooperation with India was based on the premise that India was already a nuclear weapons power and denying it advanced technologies in the name of preventing proliferation of nuclear weapons made no sense. To illustrate this judgment, Putin visited the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre [BARC] at Trombay, the heart of Indian nuclear weapons programme. His visit to BARC was the first by any political leader of a nuclear weapons state, and it occurred less than two and half years after India proclaimed itself as a state in possession

of nuclear weapons. Furthermore, during Putin's visit the two countries announced a protocol on nuclear cooperation.<sup>24</sup>

During his visit to New Delhi at the end of 2002, Putin reaffirmed the Russian commitment to expand nuclear cooperation with India by selling additional nuclear reactors, but he said that this will have to take place "within the framework of our international obligation in the nuclear field.... We also believe that the rules and regulations of this framework require improvement. We have discussed our [nuclear] cooperation with India in detail. We are ready, prepared and willing to develop relations with India, including in the nuclear field."<sup>25</sup>

After this announcement, India was also satisfied that Putin made a noteworthy difference between the Indian and Pakistani weapons programmes and on the eve of his visit to New Delhi, Putin expressed concern at the menace of Pakistani weapons falling into the hands of terrorists.<sup>26</sup> Throughout his speech in India, Putin refrained from saying anything on Indo Pakistani relations on Kashmir that would be offensive to Pakistan. While emphasizing the importance of the war against terrorism, Putin avoided blaming Pakistan directly for cross-border terrorism in Kashmir and called for an Indo-Pakistani dialogue. In his address to the Indian Parliament, Putin said, "We know at present what is going on in Kashmir. We share your concern about outbreaks of violence there. The fact that the Kashmir issue has not been settled has been making the relations between Indian and Pakistan tense, worst over the last three decades. The issue can be resolved on a bilateral basis, on the basis of a compromise and on an unconditional respect for the Line of Control. Any foreign interference should be stopped."<sup>27</sup>

An otherwise excellent track-record of Russia-India cooperation in the field of peaceful issue of nuclear technology has come under scanner owing to the refusal by Russia to keep supplying Low Enriched Uranium [LEU] fuel for Tarapur Atomic Power Station [TAPS].<sup>28</sup> From the perspective of an otherwise generally satisfactory outcome of the Russian President Putin's December 2005 visit of India, it was considered by many in India as unfortunate that Russia expressed its inability to keep on supplying LEU fuel for TAPS, and to build additional power reactors similar to those being built at Koodankulam. According to Alexander Yuryevich Rumynacsev, Director of the Russian Atomic Energy Agency, the guidelines of Nuclear Suppliers Group [NSG] were the stumbling block.

It is noteworthy that Russia is a founding member of NSG, a multilateral arrangement founded in 1975, following India's Pokhran-1 explosion in 1974. At present NSG has 44 members and China was admitted into the Group in, as late as May 2004. In its formative years the rules and guidelines of NSG were not very clear, but in the April 1992 meeting of the NSG, it was decided that as a consequence of Iraq attempting to develop nuclear weapons, it was necessary to strengthen the safeguards system so as to prevent any more new nuclear states from engaging in clandestine non peaceful activity. It was decided to adopt full scope safeguard that would be 'triggered' on all nuclear facilities of a country that wished to import nuclear technology from a state that is a member of the NSG "Suppliers should transfer trigger list items or related technologies to a non-nuclear weapon state only when the receiving state has brought into force an agreement with the IAEA requiring the application of safeguards on all source and special fissionable material in its current and future peaceful activities."<sup>29</sup> So, there are many ups and downs between Russia and India on defence cooperation but gradually the warmth in Indo-Russian relations has been maintained and sustained by the efforts of both the countries.

Putin's visit to India in January 2007 (his fourth visit to India) was as India's chief guest at the Republic Day celebrations, an honour reserved for special friends. His predecessor Boris Yeltsin has visited India only once, in 1993. A great deal of the military equipment on display during the ceremonies was of Russian origin, a reminder of the strong bonds. The agreements forged during his trip have cemented the ties that his regime rejuvenated and demonstrated that Delhi's growing ties with the US has not negatively impinged on Indo-Russian relations. In a joint statement after the military parade, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Putin of Russia offered to build four new reactors that are already under construction.<sup>30</sup>

India was selected by Moscow in 2007 to jointly develop the fifth generation fighter aircraft and a multi-purpose transport aircraft. As early as 2000, Putin had assured the Indian leadership that Russia was willing to share any cutting edge defence technologies that it had; this became evident in the subsequent joint development and production of weapons such as the Brahmos Supersonic Cruise Missile, a highly advanced system.<sup>31</sup> India is fast becoming a very attractive target for arms exporters from the west, with the addition of US firms into the fray since 2005. India is the developing world's largest arms importer, reaching \$5.4 billion in 2005. Although Russia remains the most important supplier at nearly 80 percent, it faces an increasing competition in the Indian arms market and thus is trying to protect its market share. For instance, in 2006, Russia set up a consignment warehouse and a service centre in India called Rosoboron Service, as a part of a joint venture which is expected to meet India's significant demand for timely and uninterrupted supply of spare parts and repair and maintenance of Soviet and Russian equipment.<sup>32</sup>

## Conclusion:

Russia is still one of the major source of arms for India. Russia has not only been supplying arms to India, but also has been giving license for joint production. Brahmos Cruise Missile has been the result of joint India-Russia efforts. These projects might be jeopardized, if India continues to accord primacy to its evolving strategic relations with the US. From the above discussion, we can conclude that India has some valid reasons for going nuclear as India has faced many threatening attacks by her neighbours, Pakistan and China.

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