



Indo-Russian Missile Defense Deal: Re-Calibration of Ties

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Sahar Anwar Khan*

Uroosa Ishfaq†

Muhammad Usman
Ullah‡

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Abstract *Russia has been India's all-weather friend and strategic partner for the past 70 years. However, for a decade or so, they are drifting away and are seeking new friends and partners. India has been making new partners in the West and Russia is working closely with China to counter US hegemony. It has been forging warmer, more cooperative relations with Pakistan. In this scenario, the recent missile defense deal can be considered a milestone in bilateral relations between India and Russia, ushering in a new era in relations. Mutual interests and politics led both states to recalibrate their relation so as to not lose old, trusted partners and simultaneously maintain strategic autonomy. This research qualitatively analyzes the structural drivers in the relation of the two states in the background of S-400 missile defense deal concluded in October 2018.*

Introduction

Russian President Vladimir Putin visited India at the start of October for the 19th Annual Bilateral Summit in Goa. The Summit has since, been in the headlines because of the signing of \$5bn defense deal which will have significant bilateral, regional and international impact. The S-400 surface-to-air defense system is a highly advanced system with the ability to shoot down 80 targets simultaneously within a 400km range (Pandey, 2018). Rajiv Nayan, defense expert at the Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses think-tank said, "India needs to look after its strategic interests. An air defense missile defense system was the need of the hour.

* Lecturer, Department of International Relations, Women University Mardan, KP, Pakistan.
Email: khan.sahar123@yahoo.com

† MS Scholar, Department of Political Science, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, Mardan, KP, Paksitan.

‡ Junior Research Fellow, Humanity Research Council, Islamabad, Pakistan.

The US has said that going ahead with the deal would attract sanctions - but Delhi cannot be seen coming under pressure," he told the BBC.

Russia has been India's all-weather friend and strategic partner for some 70 years. Russia is India's largest military supplier making up 70% of its imports. India has been firmly supported by Russia for its bid to United Nations Security Council, membership of Nuclear Suppliers Group and Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Both have partner up for BRICS and RIC (Russia, India and China) like multilateral initiatives to strive for a multipolar world order (Kugiel, 2013). The mutually beneficial relationship has been through various wars, crises and end of cold war but has remained largely unchanged. In 2010, this relationship was elevated to Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership. However, for a decade or so, the two countries have been drifting away from each other and seeking new friends and partners. India has become a close nuclear and defense partner of USA, being groomed as a regional hegemon by West. Similarly, Russia has become heavily dependent on China economically and politically while sharing the dream of an ending US unipolarity. Russia has also been breaking ice with India's biggest adversary, Pakistan.

In this scenario, the recent defense deal is a landmark in India and Russia relations, ushering a new era in 70 years relations. It was the need of time and international politics that both states concluded this deal as to not lose old, trusted partners and maintain their strategic autonomy. This paper will analyze the Indo-Russian relations starting from the cold war strategic partnership to the common interests in post-cold war world. It will shed light on the factors which brought distances between these two age old friends. In present situation, the systemic changes and power relations have been the most important factor on bringing India and Russia together for their own economic and strategic needs.

As the time tested saying of International relations goes, there is no permanent friend or enemy in IR, only permanent interests. This research will use the structural realism perspective to examine the Indo-Russian partnership. The origin and evolution of the partnership during the Cold War was driven by necessity of survival in anarchic world by joining hands against common threats and fulfilling self-interest through each other. The under discussion defense deal is also an effort by both states to decrease their over-dependence on other states and keep each other away from their respective adversaries. The time-tested friendship will be revived because the international system and its power distribution are in flux and both states will be benefited from this deal militarily and economically in the face of structural changes.

In his remarkable work, *The Origins of Alliances*, Walt (1986) writes that balancing against powerful state is common in states; however, in the unusual conditions when the other state is too powerful and no reliable ally is present, then the first state will go for bandwagoning. This proposition can very well explain India's post-cold war foreign policy. With the fall of Soviet Union and U.S

becoming the sole superpower, India was left with no other option but to join hands with U.S to protect and forward its national interests. Another concept given by Walt is that proximate threats cause balancing response as in the historical words of Kautilya “Neighbor of my neighbor is my friend.” (Arthashastra, 1965). This is true in the case of the new balance of power that is emerging in Eurasia. India and Russia are re-calibrating their old ties to keep a check on Chinese power.

A number of systemic factors and geopolitical interests have resulted in Indian drift towards US and warmer Russian relations with China and Pakistan. Tellis and Mohan (2017) emphasized on the prospective economic benefits from United States which will advance Indian national and regional development and attaining a prominent global position. Similarly, in Dec 2016, Russia announced its support for China’s Belt and Road Initiative, linking it with its proposed Eurasian Economic Union. India has concerns over Russian support for CPEC but Russia has claimed that its relations with Pakistan will not affect its ties with India (Parashar, 2016). Some scholars like Topychkanov (2016) feared that India might lose its trusted ally Russia if it failed to reach out to it through a proper diplomatic channel and satisfy its growing suspicions. Thoker and Singh (2017) have called the emerging Russia, China and Pakistan nexus a Gordian knot for India. Russian rapprochement with Pakistan will have significant geostrategic repercussions for India’s vision for future role in the region. According to them, the balance of power is in flux in the larger Eurasian region with new allies and relations being formed.

Therefore, the economic and geopolitical compulsions of the 21st century make it imperative for India to seriously review its old ties (Kundu, 2011). The rapid rise in Chinese influence has pushed other powers down the hierarchy of power. Russia has an important role to play in India’s bid to regional hegemony (Brown, 2015). The common goal of making a multipolar world and the reinvigoration of historically friendly ties between the two countries could be their strongest weapon against their rivals. For Indian realist policy makers, Russian cooperation and re-vitalizing Soviet Era partnership is now essential to move forward in South Asia and larger Asian strategic environment.

According to (Rajagopalan, 2019), India has six options in the current environment where China is on a path to upset Asia’s geopolitical balance “*staying unaligned, hedging, building ingenious military power, forming regional partnerships, aligning with China or U.S*”. India is currently deploying a combination of non-alignment and hedging- prominent in Modi’s multi-alignment policy. India is adamant on giving up its strategic autonomy and historically neutral status in favor of any formal alliance or camp. It is garnering advantages from the sole superpower US to achieve greater material and moral status by positioning itself as the next hegemon of Indo- Pacific region and competing with China. On the hand, it is partnering with China, Russia and other growing economies in BRICS, SCO like organizations to end U.S hegemony. India is fully using the regional and international environment for its own interests.

Sahni (2007) has elaborated eight core drivers of modern Indian foreign policy- strategic autonomy, status transformation, role in shaping global order, access to technology and regimes, access to energy resources, regional imperatives, continental role and its diaspora policy. These end goals of India cannot be achieved by allying with one side. India is hedging both sides smartly to gain benefits and still be major friends.

Indian post-cold war foreign policy is “realigned but not allied” (Chiriyankandath, 2004), complementing the reality of present international system. India has great stakes in a multipolar world and has been part of initiatives to this end but in short-term it is not blind to the superpower status of U.S. Therefore, India has been compartmentalizing its relations with Russia and the U.S. Despite U.S declared support for India and multiple significant agreements, India is not yet officially in U.S camp. Apart from some factions, the larger Indian society is not very keen on Indo-US relations and perceives age-old ally Russia as netter strategic partner. Pant and Joshi (2017) has added the Trump’s Presidency and his erratic behavior as a factor in the anxiety of New Dehli. The resurging Russian military and political power is well-suited to India’s own ambitions.

Having analyzed substantial literature on the Indo-Russian relations, it can be deduced that there are gaps in research in some areas. First, multiple authors have examined the historical ties and main factors in Indo-Russian relationship, however there is lack of latest research on the subject after the signing of the significant S-400 missile defense deal. Second, the common interest of both states in strategic autonomy and a desire for a greater role in the regional and global affairs has been undermined. Third, the systemic influences regarding the Indo-Russian Defense have not been factored in the debate. Lastly, the impact of this latest development on the regional and global geopolitical alignments is a new dimension on the subject.

Hypothesis

Indo-Russian S-400 missile defense deal will revitalize the turbulent bilateral relations.

Research Questions

1. How does the Indo- Russian strategic cooperation originated and evolved till today?
2. What have been the main drivers of Indo-Russian strategic partnership?
3. How the latest defense deal between India and Russia will re-vitalize their relationship?

Methodology

The paper will follow qualitative methodology for research. The historical ties between India and Russia will be seen with an analytical lens to work out the main drivers of this partnership. Together with the current status of inter-state relationship and regional and international dynamics, the latest missile deal will be examined. The data will be collected through historical research, books, mutual agreements and latest news.

Evolution of Indo-Soviet Strategic Co-operation

Relations between Russia and India have survived the test of time and cataclysmic geopolitical shifts in the region (Kundu, 2003). The Soviet Union granted India "irreplaceable counter-balancing force in facing up to several seen and unseen challenges" (Pant, 2013). The official diplomatic relations were commenced in 1947. Officially India was a member of non-aligned movement, but Nehru was inclined towards Soviet Union due to systemic considerations. After Pakistan joined the US led anti- communist alliance, India naturally sought Soviet Union which supplied it with military hardware and technical backing (Srivastava, 2017). Another major factor was the Sino- India boundary dispute and subsequent 1962 War. In 1964, the Soviet Union declared to give the "all possible military aid to India without any political conditions" (Graham, 1964).

Military and technological cooperation has been in the forefront of this growing relation amidst the changing national, regional and global dimensions. Soviet has been the architect of Indian Air force and Navy. Soviet expertise and transfer of technology assisted Indian domestic industries. Soviet Union concluded the Indo-Soviet Friendship Treaty in 1971 which was used evoked during 1971 Indo- Pakistan war, ultimately leading to the creation of Bangladesh. India gained confidence in at international forums where it was firmly backed by USSR e.g. its veto on Kashmir issue in United Nations Security Council.

Common Interests in Post-Cold War Era

The 1990s was the most turbulent decade in Indo- Russian relations. The Soviet disintegration was a huge blow to bilateral relations as well as India's most trusted alliance. All kinds of military, technical, economic and cultural cooperation hit a pause. The new Russian state retreated from global engagements to rebuild its domestic and social life. Russia was hopeful that with the end of communist era, the US and West will welcome it with open arms and will recognize its place in the world. Contrary to Boris Yelstin's expectations, the West gave a cold shoulder to Russia. After this bitter experience, Russia also realized the importance of its old ally and both states started to rebuild the relation on the basis of common

political and normative worldview. According to Anthony (1998), the Russian global arms export had declined sharply from \$25 billion in 1987 to \$2-3\$ billion in 1990s. India repaid its debt from Soviet Era in full and continues ordering huge arms supplies from Russia.

Both states faced identical new threats and challenges and reaffirmed their vow to combat it through peaceful means by signing various treaties. After coming to power in 1999, President Putin didn't underestimate India's importance and assistance in hard times. In his first visited India in 2000, he succeeded in finalizing billions of worth of arms deals- tanks, fighter aircraft, aircraft carriers, securing deals for strategic bombers and agreement on technology transfer (Boese, 2000). He signed the "India Russia Declaration of Strategic Partnership" which was alleviated to "Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership" in 2010. Russia in its "Foreign Policy Concept" for 2016 has stated that:

It is committed to further strengthening its special privileged partnership with the Republic of India based on the convergence of foreign policy priorities, historical friendship and deep mutual trust, as well as enhancing mutually beneficial bilateral ties in all areas, primarily in trade and economy, with a focus on implementing long-term cooperation programmes approved by the two countries.

Post-Cold War, the role of trade, investment and technological advancement has been prioritized in national and international security discourse. India and Russia had a trade volume of \$10 billion in 2017 ("India, Russia aim for \$30 bn bilateral trade by 2025: Russian diplomat", 2018). India and Russia always had trade relations but it has never been at the forefront of bilateral relations. Compared to their trade with China and US, the trade potential has not been fully exploited. Nonetheless, major bilateral agreements relating to economics and trade were signed in 2016 (Srivastava, 2017). In the energy sector, India is a huge consumer market which can be provided with hydrocarbons by Russia, but the geographical distance has made any breakthrough impossible.

Seeking Strategic Autonomy and Re-calibration of Relations

Sino- Russian relationship is a perfect example of modern interdependent relations. The bilateral trade is ever increasing, expecting to hit the \$100bn mark soon (Russia-China trade volume exceeds expectations, hitting \$84bn, 2018). Both are major players with ambitions of global leadership and ending U.S dominance. Russia accepted its Eurasian destiny when the West refused to embrace it after the end of Cold War. The recent sanctions in post Crimea situation have drawn Russia more closely to China. Russia sold around US\$15 billion worth of weapons to the Chinese in 2017, according to Rosoboronexport, the Russian agency responsible for military exports (Elmer & Zhen, 2018). Both states have been members of

Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS to formulate a parallel institutional framework where non-Western states will have more representation. Along with Iran, Pakistan and Turkey, a new regional bloc will play a significant role in world politics.

Despite sharing commonality of interests, Russia has some serious reservations about China. China is increasing its security profile in Russia's declared sphere of influence, Central Asia. It is also heavily involved in development and infrastructural projects with regards to its Belt and Road Initiative. In the fast melting Arctic, Russia and China are collaborating for resource extraction but greater Chinese presence will challenge Russia's sovereignty in the region. Similarly, Russia needs Chinese investments to develop its eastern Siberian region but China is changing its demography by settling Chinese over there which is concerning for Russia. Russia's over-dependence on China, especially in economic terms, is going to create a power asymmetry between the two neighbors, which will make Russia a mere junior partner of China. Even though both states recognize the need for cooperation in present international environment; unfulfilled expectations and a few wrong steps will disrupt the balance in this relation.

In the post- independence era, India and U.S has had an estranged relationship due to various reasons such as India's non-aligned stance, U.S closer ties with rival Pakistan, post- colonial resentment for the Western states, mutual lack of interest in peaceful engagement and India's nuclear aspirations in 1970s. However there came a drastic change in the international environment with the collapse of Soviet Union- India's largest arms importer and longtime partner. India had to reformulate its foreign policy and the future course of action as U.S ascended to the sole superpower status. In the face of structural obligations and dominance of realist paradigm in foreign policy, India began opening up economically and politically to West and specifically U.S.

India has achieved a major US partner status in 21st century under three successive Presidents. According to the “Trends in International Arms transfers, 2017” report by SIPRI, the U.S arms exports to India grew by 550% between 2013 and 2017 (Wezeman et. al, 2018). It is the second largest arms supplier to India now, accounting for nearly 30% of its military imports. US is robustly backing India in the Indo- Pacific as a new regional power in order to counter rising China and achieve peace in Afghanistan.

There have been growing anxiety in New Delhi and Moscow over the each other's changing strategic orientations. India is concerned by the close Sino-Russian ties and by extension Russian warming relations with Pakistan which manifested itself in the form of defense deals and diplomatic support. On the other hand, Russia is not keen on India's unprecedented partnership with U.S and strategic engagement with its other allies such as Japan and Australia. Despite

continuous progress in bilateral relations, Russia claimed that its strategic interests have been ignored in Indian regional security calculus (Cohen, 1989).

Nonetheless, in today's emerging multipolar world, India and Russia will need each other just like the cold war era. Both states have long history of cooperation, goodwill and no inherent conflict of interest. It is the requirement of modern international system to develop relations with a number of different states, without any discrimination and effect on another, in the pursuit of one's own interests. It seems like India and Russia has also understood this basic principle that they can freely pursue their bilateral relations and continue strategic partnership despite creating new friends and partners around the globe. Both states also need each other to maintain their strategic autonomy (India- US) and avoid heavy dependence (Russia - China) on other states. India and Russia has to okay an important role in restructuring the world order and creation of new norms and institutions where they will be given more power and recognition.

The Game changer S-400 Missile Deal

A new phase in Indo- Russian defense cooperation is mutual development and sharing of technology, the latest example of which is the purchase of S-400 missile defense systems to operationalize by 2020 (Lystseva, 2017). The \$5.43 billion deal for five advanced S-400 Triumf surface-to-air missile squadron was inked during President Putin's visit to India at the start of October 2018. This missile system will significantly enhance Indian defense capability vis-à-vis China and Pakistan. The S-400 is the most advanced and sought-after long-range missile defense system. Indian Air force had been facing lack of fighter squadrons which was hampering its defense capabilities. According to Times of India (India Russia S-400 missile deal: All you need to know, 2018) IAF Chief BS Dhanoa said, "No country is facing the kind of grave threat that India is confronted with. Intentions of our adversaries can change overnight. We need to match force level of our adversaries."

With the Indian military set to induct five battalions of the S-400 air defense system into service in the early 2020s, a number of the new weapons systems are likely to be deployed near the hotly disputed territory of Kashmir and the Indian-Pakistani border where the bulk of India's forces are currently stationed. The S-400 is set to be a game changer in the balance of power between India and Pakistan, with its deployment seriously undermining the Pakistani position. The weapon's 400km range when deploying highly precise 40N6 hypersonic missiles in particular poses a considerable threat to Pakistani aircraft deep into the country's territory. Deployed to Himachal Pradesh, the S-400 will provide India with coverage over almost all of Kashmir, while deployed to Jalandhar it would allow the Indian military to shoot down Pakistani jets over Islamabad itself. Should India choose to deploy the system as far west as Amritsar, the S-400 will be able to

threaten Pakistani aircraft over Peshawar? Pakistani territory is long, but not deep, and this plays into Indian hands.

This deal is not only a landmark defense deal which will have serious regional security implications vis-a-vis China and Pakistan, but it has implicit message for the regional and global powers as well. First of all, it is a symbol of strong Indo-Russian linkages in times where many speculations about the future of relationship are being made. Second, West's efforts to isolate Russia have seen a setback now that a major player is closely working with it. Thirdly, India has sent a message that it will stick to its multi alignment policy and that closer U.S relations will not affect its old friend, Russia.

Fourthly, by selling its missile system to both China and India, Russia has shown that it is not taking sides between the two Asian powers. Russia's interest lies in selling its weapons only by diversifying its arms market to avoid reliance on China or India alone. Fifthly, Pakistan also needs to sit back and reflect on its relation with Russia, as this missile system can be deployed against Pakistan if the need arises. Russia is India's old friend and largest arms exporter just like China is Pakistan's; the foremost priority of both Russia and China will be their respective partners and then relations with other states. Pant and Joshi (2016) seems correct in their analysis that a tightened balance of power is emerging in South Asia and larger Eurasian region with better defined poles.

Conclusion

US response to Indo- Russian S-400 missile deal is evident of India's significance in US eyes. President Trump said that India will soon find out American response to its \$5.4 billion missile deal. India is most likely to receive a waiver from CAATSA by Trump administration or some bargain deal to get away without any punitive measures. U.S knows that interfering in Indian domestic or foreign affairs will result in backlash and negative reactions from Indians. India finalized the deal with Russia, knowing full well that U.S has imposed sanctions on Russia related transactions. The deal has been a symbol of India's strategic autonomy and declaration of freedom in conducting its foreign and strategic affairs without the interference of any state.

The long-lasting Indo- Russian relationship cannot be comprehensively analyzed from one dimension as many complex factors guide this relationship. India and Russia have no mere "marriage of convenience", it is a historically nurtured time- tested partnership based on commonality of interests. The recent divergence in strategic outlook and forging new relations can be considered a minor hurdle if both sides accept the reality of today's international relations and structural compulsions. The landmark missile defense deal may be attributed to the future strategic thinking and continuing partnership of both states.

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