India’s Non-Alignment

At the time the bipolar world order disappeared in 1991, successful economic reforms were introduced in India, which helped launch a serious discussion about the place and role of this nation in the world. A key to understanding India’s current politics lies in its features, such as independence in foreign affairs, non-alignment with any global political powers and the principle of freedom of action and choice.

Still, during the last decade there has been more and more talk about India’s drift towards the United States. Although New Delhi denies that it has been buying more US military supplies; strengthening economic ties and staging joint military drills with greater frequency with the United States, and that the number of visits by US officials of various ranks to India and vice versa has increased, many have become convinced that the USA is India’s preferred new partner. American media outlets and politicians have been open about the fact that Washington is aiming to isolate India from Russia and China, and is trying to establish partnership ties with it. In July 2019, US lawmakers amended the Armed Controls Export Act to give India an opportunity to become a partner on par with other NATO allies, which, from Washington’s perspective, will help bring India even closer to the United States. Earlier, nations such as Israel, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand had been granted a similar status. With the aforementioned goal in mind, in 2016, the United States declared India to be a Major Defense Partner (MDP), a unique position for this nation, which, from Pentagon’s viewpoint, solidified the progress made in facilitating trade in
military goods and sharing of new technology with India “at a level commensurate with that of its closest allies and partners”.

At present, we can see that a number of analysts are of the opinion that India’s “drift” towards the United States is happening at the expense of Russia’s ties with the former (Russia is a successor to the Soviet Union, which sheltered India during the Cold War era). Although there is some truth to such a viewpoint, it does severely underestimate the significance of cooperation between the two countries in strategically important spheres such as the nuclear power and military technology sectors, and overestimates the zero-sum game aspect of New Delhi’s relationships with Moscow and Washington.

In the meantime, the extent of recent bilateral cooperation between Russia and India in various areas clearly shows that the dialogue between New Delhi and Moscow was and still is ongoing. Currently, the term that can be best used to describe the relationship between Russia and the Republic of India is a “special and privileged strategic partnership”. And President of Russia Vladimir Putin said as much during his official visit to India in 2018. There are annual bilateral meetings involving high-level officials as well as sessions of intergovernmental commissions charged with fostering collaboration between India and Russia in civil and military spheres.

The level of cooperation between the two countries when it comes to sharing technology for manufacturing arms and military equipment is unprecedented. No other nation collaborates with India in this sphere as closely as Russia does. Approximately 75% of India’s weapons were made in either the Soviet Union or Russia. At present, Russia and India are collaborating on a number of initiatives, including the BrahMos complex, the Fifth Generation Fighter Aircraft (FGFA, being jointly developed by both nations), and licensed production of Sukhoi Su-30 aircraft and T-90 battle tanks. In December 2015, the two countries signed an internal-government agreement on establishing a Russian-Indian joint venture to manufacture Russian Kamov Ka-226T helicopters in India, which became the first initiative in the military sector of the Make in India program. In March 2019, both nations opened a plant to produce Kalashnikov rifles in the town of Korwa in India. In addition, new high-tech products and systems, designed and developed jointly by the two countries, keep appearing. Aircraft carrier Vikramaditya, nuclear-powered submarine Chakra and BrahMos cruise missiles are all indicative of the scale of cooperation and of the high level of trust between both nations.

With assistance from Russia, India finished putting together its first squadron (called Tigersharks) of Sukhoi Su-30MKI fighter aircraft that can be armed with BrahMos missiles (both the planes and the weapons originate in Russia). So now India has a wonderfully effective “tool” capable of taking on any opponents at sea, including carrier strike groups. According to a statement made by an official spokesperson of the Indian Air Force, the squadron will be responsible for a vast region: from the Indian Ocean to the Suez Canal.

Despite great opposition from the United States and Washington’s threats to impose sanctions against India, the latter confidently agreed to a contract to equip the Indian Armed Forces with Russia’s S-400 Triumf anti-aircraft missile systems. And the first batch will be delivered to India by the end of 2021.

In addition, Russia hopes to sign an agreement on the supply and licensed production of Igla-S (a man-portable air-defense system (MPADS)) with India before the end of 2020.

In the first half of 2024, the Republic of India will receive two Talwar-class frigates (Project 11356), which are being built at Kaliningrad’s Yantar Shipyard in Russia. As planned, two more frigates will be constructed at an Indian dockyard. In fact, both sides have already started preparations for building the ships at Goa Shipyard Limited.

According to official sources, India has purchased more than $15 billion worth of military equipment from Russia in the last three years. And if we consider all the goods that Russia has agreed to supply to India since 1991, their value amounts to around 70 billion US dollars.

In December 2019, India and Russia staged a bilateral military exercise together, Indra-2019 (the designation is a combination of the countries’ abbreviated names). Incidentally, the two nations hold other joint military drills. In September 2019, Indian servicemen took part in Tsentr-2019 (Center-2019), an international strategic command post exercise, which was held at eight Russian training grounds and in the Caspian Sea.

It is also important to remember that Russia is the only foreign nation that is facilitating the development of India’s nuclear energy sector. While nuclear power companies of other nations are still lamenting the passing of the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act, Russia’s Rosatom has chosen to move forward. Currently, an ambitious project to build 12 nuclear power blocks by year 2025, capable of generating more than 13,000 megawatts of electric power, is
Due to the two nations’ ongoing efforts to cooperate in the energy sector, Russia offered India’s Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC), Oil India Limited and Indian Oil Corporation Ltd. a chance to invest approximately $5 billion in a project aimed at developing promising oil and gas fields in East Siberia.

All of these examples show that the relationship with Russia is still important for India. However, we must admit that there are far greater opportunities to be derived from these ties than are currently being taken advantage of. India has always been and remains a good friend to Russia, and Russia as well as India play a key role on the world stage: to maintain the global order. And both nations are making a concerted effort to create a new framework to ensure security and equal cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region.

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