DefExpo India 2020: Military Cooperation between Russia and India is as Good as Ever

For some time now, India has been one of the main importers of Russian weapons and military equipment. According to the data provided by the Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation of the Russian Federation, India has ordered $70 billion worth of Russian military goods since 1991. And at present, the South Asian nation’s interest in weapons from Russia continues to grow. One of the reasons for this state of affairs is the tense climate prevalent in the region in recent years.

Historically, China has always been India’s key economic and political rival, and aside from a battle for influence between the two, there are also territorial disputes plaguing their relationship. In recent years, the PRC has begun to compete for dominance in Asia-Pacific as well as the Indo-Pacific, boosting its economic presence in these regions and attempting to push the United States out of there. India has also felt China’s increasing dominance in countries, such as Sri Lanka and Nepal, that it has, for a long time, viewed as its own sphere of influence. In addition, the PRC has been actively strengthening cooperation with Delhi’s key rival – Pakistan, a country that is practically always on a brink of war with India. All of these developments are a serious source of concern for India, which have pushed it to boost its defense capabilities and cooperate with other countries competing against China, such as, first and foremost, the United States. And Americans, in turn, would like to have India in its vanguard during the confrontation with the PRC. But India, which has, for many decades, adhered to the principle of non-alignment (with any military alliances, for instance) and grew accustomed to putting its own interests first, does not wish to become too dependent on its Western partner in, among others, the military industrial sector. Hence, aside from the United States, India needs another supplier of high quality weapons.

Another reason why India prefers to cooperate in the military-technical sphere with Russia is its ongoing (for several
years now) “Make in India” initiative, in accordance with which all of the most important products for this nation should be manufactured in its territory. As a result, not only does India expect its partners to sell it goods and equipment but also share their manufacturing technologies. It is not easy to win such trust from the United States. Russia, on the other hand, has helped its partners establish licensed production facilities in their territories on more than one occasion.

Currently, Russian T-90S tanks and Sukhoi Su-30MKI fighter aircraft are being manufactured in India. In addition, Indo-Russian joint ventures to produce the latest version of the Kalashnikov rifle and Kamov Ka-226T helicopters have already been established in the South Asian nation. BrahMos missiles, designed by Russian and Indian engineers, are also manufactured in India.

Therefore, Russia is an optimal and long-trusted partner for India in the military-technical sphere. Moreover, India’s need for defense imports from Russia is very high, which is evidenced by trade volumes between the two countries in the military sector. As mentioned earlier, from 1991 to 2019, India purchased $70 billion worth of defense goods from Russia, which averages out to annual spending of $2.4 billion. However, in reality, India spent more than $15 billion from 2017 to 2019, in other words, its annual expenditure on Russian military products has equaled more than $5 billion in the last 3 years. In addition, India clearly showed its interest in Russian weapons in 2018, when Russia secured a contract to supply a batch of S-400 anti-aircraft weapon systems to India. And the latter chose not to cancel the order despite pressure from Washington and the threat of US sanctions, which hangs over any nations that purchase S-400 systems.

So Russia’s military industrial complex is preparing for another surge in cooperation in the military-technical sphere between Russia and India.

One important platform that Russia uses to introduce its military products to Indian and foreign partners is DefExpo India, an international military exhibition of naval, air and land systems.

DefExpo India 2020 was held in February of this year, in the Indian city of Lucknow.

A number of Russian companies that are part of Russia’s military industrial complex took part in the exhibition and included Rosoboronexport, Almaz-Antey, UralVagonZavod, Russian Helicopters and others. They showcased more than 500 weapon and military equipment exhibits at DefExpo India 2020. As usual, Russian defense goods generated a great deal of interest among the event’s attendees.

Remotely controlled weapon station AU-220M from UralVagonZavod became one of the most interesting Russian exhibits on display. It is a remotely controlled artillery gun with a versatile range of weapons for “land, water, and sky”. It can be installed on a tank, an infantry combat vehicle, a ship and even a plane, or it can be used as a standalone artillery gun. If used on a battle field, it can significantly lower the number of potential casualties from your side during especially challenging missions. The idea of conducting military operations remotely by transforming a conflict into something resembling a computer game captured people’s imaginations a long time ago. Hence, it is not surprising that AU-220M attracted the attention of many of the exhibition’s visitors.

Yet another interesting piece of news from DefExpo India 2020, aside from the AU-220M demonstration, was the announcement made by representatives of Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd (an Indian aerospace and defense company) about their readiness to continue the work on the design of the fifth generation fighter jet with their Russian partners. This is a truly important development for the military-technical cooperation between the two countries.

The initiative has been in existence for quite some time. In 2007, the Russian Federation and India signed an agreement to jointly design and develop a new fighter jet based on Russia’s Sukhoi Su-57. The project was called the Fifth Generation Fighter Aircraft (FGFA). Work on it began in 2010. Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd and Russia’s Aviation Holding Company “Sukhoi” were responsible for the initiative. But, in 2018, India withdrew from the project. The aforementioned and several other developments prompted some media outlets to report that the military-technical cooperation between India and Russia was starting to decline. But then the Indian side began to talk about reviving the FGFA initiative. This, in combination with India’s increased spending on Russian military goods and purchase of S-400 systems mentioned earlier, all of this shows that any talk about reduced levels of military-technical cooperation between Russia and India is more than premature.

During DefExpo India 2020, other interesting announcements were made about India’s plans to manufacture more Russian tanks at the licensed production facilities, and to modernize existing tanks with the help of Russian experts as well as the intentions of joint venture India Russia Helicopters Limited to take part in a tender to supply its new
multi-role helicopter to the Indian Navy, etc.

2020 has just begun but it is already clear that the military-technical cooperation between Russia and India will be active and fruitful this year.

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