Russia and India: Prospects for a Strategic Partnership

For many decades, Russia and India have been conducting close military-technical cooperation (MTC). However, the aggravation of Russia’s relations with the United States, also a close Indian partner, has recently made it more complicated. The United States is trying to pressurize India to reduce its interaction with Russia, for example, to refuse to buy Russian S-400 anti-aircraft missile systems. This pressure includes both lucrative offers and warnings about sanctions Washington imposes against countries which conclude significant deals with the Russian military-industrial complex. Periodically, the media reports that the Russian-Indian military-technical cooperation is already on the decline because collaboration with America is more important for India due to the growing threat it has from China, which is gaining power throughout the Indo-Pacific region (IPR).

The threat exists indeed, which is confirmed by the Indian-Chinese border conflict that occurred in May 2020, during which, according to available data, 20 Indian soldiers were killed. Given that the US is now also in very strained relations with China and considering the level of presence in the IPR of the US Navy, cooperation with Washington is of great importance for New Delhi.

However, there is no real decline in India's cooperation with Russia. Moreover, both sides express great interest in its development.

The importance of Russian-Indian relations for both sides is underlined by regular contacts between the two countries at the highest level and other manifestations of mutual understanding and goodwill.

On June 24, 2020, a unit of the Indian armed forces took part in a parade in honor of the 75th anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War, held on Red Square in Moscow. Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh attended the event.

On July 2, 2020, a telephone conversation took place between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The latter congratulated Putin on a successful all-Russian vote on amendments to the Russian Constitution. Putin responded in thanking Modi for the participation of the Indian military in the Victory Parade. The two leaders confirmed a mutual intention of Russia and India to continue to strengthen their privileged strategic partnership and close cooperation, both bilaterally and within the framework of various international organizations.

Early in September 2020, Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh revisited Moscow. He met with his Russian counterpart Sergey Shoygu. During the meeting, Shoygu said that India and Russia are equal partners in world affairs and supporters of multi-polar and democratic international relations, strict compliance with legal norms, and the pivotal role of the UN. The Defense Ministers discussed Russian-Indian military and military-technical cooperation, and, like during the June conversation, the leaders of the two countries declared an immensely privileged strategic partnership existing between Russia and India, which both States plan to strengthen.

According to available data, in October 2020, Vladimir Putin intends to personally visit India at the head of a high-ranking Russian delegation to participate in the annual Russia-India summit.

Thus, Russian and Indian politicians' statements do not indicate any decline in the military-technical cooperation of the two countries. As for the real situation, it is such that about 60% of the equipment at the disposal of the Indian armed forces is of Soviet or Russian origin, and the Russian Federation's assistance is necessary at least for its
Also, one of the essential features of modern technological cooperation with India is the need to take into account its "Make in India" program, adopted by the government of Narendra Modi shortly after he came to power in 2014. The program's goal is that India eventually has its own technology and production capacity to provide the country with all necessary high-tech products and minimize dependence on foreign suppliers to the greatest possible extent. According to "Make in India," when India enters into an agreement with another state on military hardware, it requires that the production of the necessary military equipment should be approximately 75% localized on Indian territory.

The USA is unlikely to agree to such an agreement. The Americans are compassionate about their copyrights. According to the official version, the violation of American intellectual property rights by Chinese high-tech companies has become one of the main reasons for the current USA-Chinese conflict.

For many states that value their technological secrets, such conditions are unacceptable. However, Russia, which, like few other countries, has something to hide in this area, supports "Make in India" and meets Indian demands. This is probably due to the high level of trust established between the two countries over decades of cooperation, and the tremendous mutual economic and political benefits that this cooperation brings.

As mentioned above, India needs Russian assistance in maintaining the functionality of its existing equipment. Today, Moscow and New Delhi are finalizing a new universal intergovernmental agreement on joint production in India of almost all the spare parts required for various types of weapons such as aircraft, helicopters, air defense systems, and naval equipment.

According to official data, the value of Russian-Indian contracts that the parties have to fulfill is almost $15 billion.

Therefore, real figures and events do not indicate a regress in the Russian-Indian military-technical cooperation either. Moreover, the partnership demonstrates the movement from the sphere of military technologies to broader military collaboration. So, in July 2020, it became known that Russia and India are working on an agreement allowing access of military ships and aircraft of the two countries to military airfields and ports of each other for refueling and maintenance. Therefore, both countries may need to deploy a certain number of their military personnel on the partner country's territory. In other words, we are talking about bringing Russian-Indian military cooperation to a new level.

There is an opinion that India is equally in need of developing military cooperation with both the US and Russia. As mentioned above, the USA, with its fleets in the Pacific and Indian Oceans and experience of the Vietnam War, can help India in the event of further deterioration of its relations with China. However, now the threat to India comes not only from China. Another long-standing opponent of India is its western neighbor, Pakistan. As with China, India has territorial disputes and armed conflicts with Pakistan. During the truce, India was repeatedly attacked from Pakistani territory by terrorists with links to terrorist groups in Afghanistan, which borders Pakistan. And right now, the terrorist threat to India is multiplying due to the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan. Now, having lost a powerful enemy in the face of the United States, the Afghan and Pakistani terrorists can focus their efforts on India. It would seem that in this instance, too, India can count on the United States' help, which has been fighting in Afghanistan for the past 19 years. However, the Americans failed in defeating Afghan terrorism. Yet, the Russian military, who had also fought in Afghanistan in 1979-1989, managed to stabilize Chechnya's situation and made a significant contribution to the Daesh terrorist group's defeat (the Daesh are banned in Russia) in modern Syria. For several decades, Russian soldiers have maintained peace and security in Tajikistan, and they can be considered real experts in the fight against terrorism in this region with all its specifics. It should be noted that the fight against international terrorism is also an essential topic in the Russian-Indian negotiations.

So, we can conclude that India needs cooperation with Russia just as much as with the United States, which is confirmed by actions and statements by Indian politicians. Hence, the Russian-Indian military-technical cooperation will continue to develop in the coming years and for decades to come.

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