

India's Relations with USSR a Precursor: An Overview

Dr Abdul Azeem

PhD in Political Science, AMU, Aligarh, 202002, India

Abstract: *The study of India's relations with the USSR reveals that despite wide differences in outlook and policy great advance towards mutual understanding and cooperation was made. In spite of the earlier Soviet indifference and basic differences in Socio-political systems of the two countries, mutual relations improved markedly from 1953 onwards. There were many factors which demanded India to move closer to the USSR. India's attitude towards the USSR has been derived from its overall foreign policy objectives. In understanding and evaluating this attitude, it is therefore, indispensable to keep in view two important considerations: first, the assumptions, motivations, style, basic goals and the principles of India's foreign policy which governed her relations with other States in general; second, the specific goals which India sought to achieve in her relations with the USSR. It is the inter-relationship between the general and the particular objectives and the degree of their combination as well as contradiction that give us an idea of the various phases of India's relations with the USSR. Such an analysis, however, should not be restricted merely to the conceptual level. The interaction of such other factors as intimate geographical, historical and economic ties between the two States, the influence of external factors and the failure or success of Indian diplomacy at the international level should also constitute a part of the analysis.*

Keywords: India, USSR, Soviet Union, Disintegration, Defense, Yevgeny Primakov, Moscow

1. The Formative Years

Jawaharlal Nehru, popularly known as the architect of India's foreign policy, had a clear idea of what a country's foreign policy shall be. It must sub serve its interests, both economic and political. India under Nehru's leadership decided to expedite an historical process which by the very fact of India's independence was known to be well under way. India realised the difficulties, the non-self-governing people were facing in overthrowing the colonial rule. The achievement of freedom by India made it necessary for her to follow a policy of resisting colonialism throughout the world. The opposition to colonialism in turn is directed to lend help and support to the dependent peoples in the achievement of their freedom. This policy was manifested in the Asian Relations Conference, the Asian Conference on Indonesia, and in the meetings of the Colombo Powers which initiated the Bandung Conference. Nevertheless, a closer examination of India's foreign policy in this regard reveals that in everyone of these cases whether in her support to independence movements as in Indonesia or her hesitation to support them fully, as in the initial stages of the Suez Crisis, India's policy has been first of all a policy of protecting her security and other vital interests. India demonstrated selectivity in championing the causes of dependent peoples. She refused to condemn Soviet colonialism in Eastern Europe. India's attitude towards the Soviet colonialism was the product of the lack of experience with the Soviet Union as against the experience with Western colonialism. In fact, India's championship of subjected people was not based on moral grounds alone. It was part of India's strategy to safeguard India's independence and security.

In September 1954, the Soviet Union made an unexpected and dramatic offer to build a giant steel plant in India to help India and to develop its iron and steel industry. Nehru welcomed the Soviet offer and indicated India's readiness to accept the Soviet aid because Soviet help would "go a long way in the rapid industrialization of our country". He

also regarded the Soviet offer as a welcome alternative source for the supply of capital and machinery and also a bargaining counter to the West. On 2nd February 1955 the USSR and India signed an economic agreement providing the Soviet assistance for the construction of a giant steel mill at Bhilai. The agreement came at a time when a negotiation with Britain for another steel plant was bogged down on technical grounds.

USSR on Goa:

The Soviet support to India's claims on Goa had been made public from the very outset. During their 1955 visit, the Soviet leaders had expressed the hope that Goa would soon become a part of India. The Soviet President Brezhnev, who was on a state visit to India at the time of Goa operation declared in Bombay that the Soviet Union had complete sympathy for the Indian people's desire to liberate Goa, Daman and Diu from Portuguese colonialism. On 8 December 1961 the day the world learnt of the liberation Brezhnev assured a civic reception of firm Soviet support for the action. The Soviet Prime Minister Khrushchev sent a telegram to Nehru saying that the resolute action of the Government of India to do away with the outposts of colonialism in its territory was absolutely lawful and justified." He declared that the Soviet people unanimously approve of these actions. When the Westerners brought forward a resolution in the Security Council to censure India, the USSR blocked it with a prompt Veto. The Soviet delegate contended that his vote 'represented a victory for the true principles of UN Charter:

Today saw the expression of the will to defend colonial countries and peoples and their right to life, freedom and independence.

The Indian Government and public were greatly appreciative of the profound sympathy and understanding of its aspirations by the USSR. The Soviet stand on Goa certainly helped in drawing India closer to the USSR and helped in consolidating the friendly ties.

It may be said that a community of interests between India and the USSR resulted in the steady growth of friendship and mutual diplomatic support. India-USSR relations developed on the basis of mutuality of interests and similarity of actions and reactions to a variety of challenges to both. Though, for different reasons, both were interested in limiting the US presence in Asia, checking the arms flow to Pakistan opposing SEATO, CENTO and NATO, and at a later stage, containing China. Almost throughout this decade i.e. from 1953-1964, India had a sense of common purpose with the USSR. During this decade, the USSR remained India's principal source of strength in international affairs, as well as in her material needs. It goes to the credit of shrewd diplomacy of Jawaharlal Nehru that without entering into any formal treaty or alliance or giving the impression of being subservient to the USSR, he secured all from the USSR to suit the national interest of India. India under Nehru's stewardship always retained the freedom of action in her foreign policy.

Disintegration of Soviet Union

The sudden collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991 dealt a blow to India's foreign policy framework. Events happened with such rapidity for which India had not prepared itself. The shock was the more devastating as it was so unexpected and the collapse was so dramatic. India could not remain untouched of the consequences of the events taking place in international scenario. For India, the events in Soviet Union had been a major blow because changes in Soviet Union occurred at a time when India herself was going through a severe economic crisis and an internal turmoil of such a magnitude which changed the nature of the political complexion of India.

Even after the disintegration of Soviet Union the relations between the Russian Federation and India remained unchanged and there is a great scope for deepening the bilateral ties in future as well. The Indo-Russian relations are based on the strong foundations of good neighbourly ties, liberal political ideology, and convergence of national interests, geopolitical settings, economic opportunities and international interdependence.

Thus the 'collapse of the Soviet Union' leaves a vacuum in the international political system. The Soviet Union played an important role against imperialism and western expansionism. It supported national liberation movements and assisted in the development of several third world countries, which found themselves against the Western bloc of countries.

Some important steps were taken to sort out these problems as early as January 1993 by the then President Boris Yeltsin when he visited India. He tried to recreate the spirit of the Indo-Soviet friendship. During the visit he conveyed the impression that Russia put a high value on Indo-Russian relations. He described India and Russia as natural partners and that the Indian and Russian interests were identical. Significantly, he reiterated Russian support for India's position in Kashmir. At the same time India was turning again to Moscow with a long and expensive list for modern weaponry and hence emerged as the largest arm purchaser from Russia.

The collapse of the Soviet Union has affected India adversely in many sectors. Indeed, strategically speaking, the most important implications are in defense and military areas. India, as we know, was buying a very large number of military weapons, equipment and hardware from the Soviet Union. These included Mig fighter aircrafts, battle tanks, submarines etc. During 1986-90, according to one estimate, about 73 percent of the total value of arms imported by the Indian defense forces originated in the Soviet Union. Practical difficulties which confront Indian armed forces since 1991 include, replacement of the spare parts as well as replenishment of the existing stock. The matter assumed such a seriousness that the Defense Minister of India, Sharad Pawar, had to rush to Russia in September 1992 to bail out the armed forces of its immediate difficulties. At the end of the visit while there was some hope in the improvement of the situation, it was evident that ultimately India will have to explore alternate sources. Moscow, it is argued, may not be in a position to meet the Indian demands as paucity of funds may force Russians to close down their units. Besides, many of the Russian scientists and technocrats are reported to have left the country and got jobs in the Western countries where they are promised better salaries and employment opportunities. Whatever, existing military weapons and hardware are in stock in the member states of CIS. They would like to sell them in the Western markets in order to earn foreign exchange. Above all, one significant advantage which accrued to India in procuring armaments and equipment from the Soviet Union i.e., on credit, is most unlikely to be revived.

Although Russia has put forward a proposal of military collaboration with India, but the harsh reality was that Moscow did not feel the strategic need of India in the post Cold War era. As a matter of fact decline in the strategic significance of India to Moscow began with the improvement of relations between the Soviet Union and China. Moreover, when Gorbachev started giving priority to good relations with the West which was to provide loans and technologies, there was a sea change in the geo-strategic perceptions of the Soviet Union. When Russia was strategically integrated with Europe and China has ceased to be a socialist rival, need for a strategic consensus with India did not have the same relevance as in the previous two decades. In brief, diplomatically India cannot hope to depend on Russia to the same extent as she did on the Soviet Union.

Defense Ties:

Gradually the obstacles were overcome to an extent, and from 1997 onwards Russia was again on the way towards establishing a special position for the supply of defense-related equipment. India and Russia decided in March 1997 to continue defense ties into the 21st century and Russia offered a new air defense system and a \$10 billion military deal. Significant agreements were reached during Yevgeny Primakov's visit in December (1999) when cross-century defense relationship was formalized. Described as "cooperation 2010 Document" it envisaged partnership in research, development and joint production of sophisticated equipment besides incorporating other defense areas.

The Soviet Union was succeeded by the Russian federation and the people in Russia went through traumatic experience which has yet to end. Slowly and gradually the pieces are being picked and a surer policy is being established. It has certainly been a painful experience, the almost precipitous lowering of living standards, the fall in production, the amazing rise in unemployment and the equally amazing levels of corruption, the decline in central authority, the specter of the ugly face of the mafia, the increasing disparities and so on.

The worst is perhaps not yet over, but at least now there is a semblance of order and some re-establishment of central authority. The wheels of production have started moving although even the previous levels have not been achieved. At least foreign policy assumed some recognizable shape and Russia has begun to assert itself in a somewhat more determined manner with better coherence and purposefulness. Both Moscow and New Delhi are discovering that geopolitical realities do not vanish even in the winds of change.

The point does not need to be laboured that India had multifaceted and deep-going relationship with the Soviet Union which ranged from the political to economic and technological, and to strategic and security ties. It was a special and unique relationship. It was valuable to both countries for meeting hostile external challenges; certainly for India the Soviet Union constituted irreplaceable counterbalancing force in facing up to its regional and international concerns and an added source of strength in pushing economic and scientific development. India had received valuable assistance in establishing a basic industrial infrastructure.

The most concrete expression of the new thinking was provided during the visit to India of the then Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov in December 1998, when he told reporters that it would be very good if Russia China and India were able to form a regional bloc. A lot depends in the region on the policies of China, Russia and India, he said that India is a great power and our relationship is based on mutual interest and joint aspirations of the two countries for stability in the world. Primakov also reiterated the Russian stand that Russia supports India's claim to a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council.

Many developments had and were taking place to reveal the identity of viewpoints as well as long term convergence of interests between New Delhi and Moscow. The events involving Yugoslavia and Kosovo, the bypassing of the United Nations, the devastation of Iraq, the spread of religious fanaticism, the Kargil war all these happenings continued to bring them together.

A major change took place after the terrorist attack on Indian Parliament on 13 December 2001, the Russian Foreign Ministry warned Pakistan, in strict terms, to stop cross-border terrorism and create conducive atmosphere for bilateral dialogue and consultation. To jointly tackle the menace of terrorism, during the visit of Prime Minister Vajpayee to Moscow in November 2001, India and Russia signed the Moscow Declaration. 51 They set up joint

working group during the visit of President Putin to India in December 2002. Moscow strongly condemned the terrorist attack that took place on 26 March 2003 in the Nandimarg village of Kashmir, killing more than twenty people. Besides condemning the terrorist attack, the Department of Information and Press of the Russian Foreign Ministry expressed its support to the measures taken by India to stop the activity of terrorist forces.

Taking into account all these positive developments, it would be logical to emphasize the point that terrorism is one of the important contributory factors for perceptual convergence between the two countries. This convergence led Russia and India to support each other on their stands on Kashmir and Chechnya respectively. The Ministry of External Affairs in India praised the referendum of March 2003 in Chechnya, under the guidance of the Russian government as important for the restoration, normalization, rehabilitation and economic reconstruction of Russian Federation's Chechen republic within the democratic framework. Similarly, the Russian Foreign Ministry release after the general election in Kashmir in October 2002, said that, very fact of holding elections is an evidence of the striving of Delhi and the population of Jammu and Kashmir to restore the normal situation in the state. Despite the attempts of the extremist elements to frighten the population of Kashmir, they could not hinder the voting.

Putin's Visit

Putin's visit in December 2002 sealed a new special relationship between India and Russia. President Putin described that he was the best friend of India. A statement endorsed by Prime Minister Vajpayee, describing the Russian leader as a trusted friend of India. The Putin-Vajpayee summit produced a strong statement called upon Pakistan to fulfill its obligations by preventing infiltration of terrorists across the line of control and eliminating the infrastructure of terrorism as a pre-requisite for the renewal of peaceful dialogue. Russia unambiguously endorsed India's stand that the Shimla Agreement and the Lahore declaration provide the sole framework within which any India-Pakistan dialogue should eventually take place.

Significantly, on Iraq issue the two sides expressed complete unanimity of views, opposing unilateral use of force and supporting a comprehensive settlement of the issues only through political and diplomatic efforts under the UN aegis.

2. Conclusion

To sum up it can be concluded that there is a great scope for deepening the Indo-Russian relations not only to create conditions for improving the socio-economic conditions of their people but also to play an important role in shaping the future world order. The unipolar world order which came into existence after the break-up of the Soviet Union can be replaced by the multipolar world order if India, Russia and China came closer to each other to counter the Anglo-American hegemony. This relationship is equally marked by the absence of any national irritants, no border disputes, and no negative legacy of history. The identity of their views on the political and economic order and on major international issues ensures that their 'strategic partnership' would

contribute to play the role in shaping the 21st century world order.

References

- [1] Manorma Kohli, India Quarterly, A journal of International affairs, Vol. LVII, No.3, July-September, 2001, Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi, p.85.
- [2] Satyendra Kumar Singh, "The World in Transition Post-Soviet Split Over," Kanishka Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi, 2002, p.3.
- [3] Shri Ram Sharma, "Indo-Soviet relations 1972-1991 A Brief Survey" Part II, Discovery Publishing House, New Delhi 2003, pp93-94.
- [4] Bill Keller, "Collapse of an Empire" The New York Times, 27 August, 1991.
- [5] V. D. Chopra, "Indo-Russian Relations, Prospects Problems and Russia Today" Kalpaz Publications Delhi 2001, pp.25-26.
- [6] See V.P. Dutta, "India's Foreign Policy in a Changing World", Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1999, pp.65-91.
- [7] Supra no. 3 pp. 109-110.
- [8] See Paran Chopra, "The Crises of Foreign Policy," p.120.
- [9] Supra no.3 pp.105-106.
- [10] Supra no.1 pp.87-88.
- [11] The Times of India, New Delhi, 5 August, 1991.
- [12] Supra no.10, p.91.
- [13] Jagat S. Mehta, "Non-alignment: Mission Accomplished,"
- [14] The Indian Express, New Delhi, 3 September, 1991.
- [15] Rahul Roy Chaudhary, "Indian Navy: Arms in the Future",
- [16] The Indian Express, Chandigarh, 11 October, 1991.
- [17] The Times of India, New Delhi, 4 September, 1992.