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Research Article

Defence Diplomacy and Strategic Partnership: Assessing India–Russia Defence Cooperation Since 2000

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Abstract

India-Russia defence cooperation is among the most stable strategic relations in the modern day. Defence cooperation since the signing of the Declaration on the India–Russia Strategic Partnership in 2000 has extended beyond the conventional business-to-business model and has grown into a multidimensional partnership with the integration of defence diplomacy, joint military exercises, co-production, technology transfer, research and development, and strategic dialogue. Although India has been moving towards a diversified defence procurement policy, Russia still remains its key defence partner, owing to decades of institutional trust, interoperability of military platforms, and readiness to impart advanced defence technologies. However, in the twenty-first century, the partnership has faced many challenges due to the changing geopolitical landscape, India's increasing strategic ties with the West, the rise of China's military prowess and the impact of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. This paper discusses the history of Indian-Russian defence cooperation from the year 2000 onwards using the lens of defence diplomacy. It states that defence trade has been increasingly diversified, but defence diplomacy has enhanced the trust and stability in the region. It concludes that cooperation in the field of defence production, technological development and strategic coordination will play a decisive role in shaping the course of the India–Russia strategic partnership.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Russian defence cooperation has enjoyed one of the longest partnerships in the world, based on mutual trust, strategic convergence and continuity of institutions. It was during the Cold war era that the Soviet Union became India's prime military supplier and always backed the Indian government on international issues such as Kashmir and the Bangladesh liberation war of 1971 (Pant, 2019). The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 caused a brief pause in bilateral defence relations as Russia faced domestic political and economic problems. However, both nations began to improve their strategic relations in the late 1990s.

One of the turning points was in October 2000 when the Declaration on the India–Russia Strategic Partnership was signed by India's Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Russia's President Vladimir Putin. This paved the way for annual summit meetings and made defence cooperation the mainstay of bilateral ties (MEA, 2000). Defence cooperation has since grown beyond arms transfers to also involve technology transfer, licensed production, joint military training exercises, defence research, intelligence sharing and defence technology and innovation.

Defence cooperation has evolved over the past few decades. Defence cooperation, traditionally defined as arms procurement and military assistance, has evolved into a more comprehensive concept of defence diplomacy which uses defence institutions and defence interactions as tools of the foreign policy to foster trust, prevent conflicts and drive strategic cooperation (Cottey & Forster, 2004). Defence diplomacy between India and Russia has proven to be a valuable tool in ensuring strategic trust and adjusting to evolving regional and international security developments.

But the strategic landscape that India–Russia defence ties operate in has become more complex. The defence imports have become more diversified in India and the imports are increasing from France, Israel and the USA. At the same time, Russia has been making tremendous investments in its strategic relationship with China, and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war and the imposed Western sanctions have had an impact on the world's defence supply chains (SIPRI, 2024). These have had a considerable impact on discussions about the future of India–Russia defence cooperation. Based on this background, this paper looks at the developments of the India–Russia defence cooperation since the year 2000 using the prism of defence diplomacy. It examines the ways in which military cooperation has enhanced bilateral strategic relations, and pinpoints the current challenges to the partnership.

2. Defence Diplomacy: A Conceptual Framework

Defence diplomacy has become an integral part of modern diplomacy in addition to conventional diplomacy, and is defined as an instrument of foreign policy through military institutions. Defence diplomacy is defined as the process of building confidence, conducting strategic dialogue, promoting interoperability and establishing long-term security cooperation through peaceful engagement, rather than coercion, as is done in military diplomacy (Cottey & Forster, 2004).

Andrew Cottey uses a broad definition of defence diplomacy, in which defence resources and military cooperation are used for diplomacy in a peaceful way to help deliver foreign policy goals, not through armed conflict, but through dialogue, joint training, education, military exchanges and defence cooperation (Cottey & Forster, 2004). Likewise, Gregory Winger (2014) claims that defence diplomacy has grown into an essential tool in the statecraft toolbox in an age of multipolarity and complex security threats. Defence diplomacy has several facets, such as:

- a. High-level military exchanges;
- b. Joint military exercises;
- c. Defence industrial cooperation;
- d. Military training in education;
- e. Technology transfer;
- f. Intelligence cooperation;
- g. Humanitarian and disaster relief;
- h. Maritime security cooperation.

In India, defence diplomacy is a part of the strategic autonomy of the country in the context of foreign policy. India aims to build diversified defence partnerships, instead of formal military alliances, that will guarantee decision-making independence and enhance national security (Tellis, 2021).

Likewise, defence diplomacy is seen in Russia as an effective means for asserting geopolitical influence, enhancing strategic cooperation, promoting multipolar international order, and boosting defence trade (Lo, 2015). Therefore, India and Russia have come to an understanding in using the instrument of defence diplomacy to increase bilateral strategic trust without tying up into treaty arrangements.

India-Russia defence relations are, therefore, a textbook case of defence diplomacy in which defence is used both as a tool of foreign policy and as a vehicle for technology cooperation and geopolitical balancing.

3. Evolution of India–Russia Defence Partnership since 2000

The Declaration on Strategic Partnership in 2000 completely reorganized bilateral relations. While the earlier defence cooperation was largely drawn mainly to arms transfers, the new one was based on long-term strategic cooperation and institutionalizing the annual summit meetings between the leaders of both countries (MEA, 2000).

Defence cooperation was one of the key areas of bilateral relations, along with energy, scientific and technological cooperation and international coordination, as outlined in the declaration. Defence policy dialogue and long-term planning were further institutionalised through the continuation of the Annual meetings between the India–Russia Inter-Governmental Commission on Military and Military – Technical Cooperation (IRIGC-M&MTC).

Russia continued to be India's primary supplier of military equipment, providing almost 70 per cent of India's defence imports in the first decade of the twenty first century (SIPRI, 2024).

Major acquisitions included:

- a. Sukhoi Su-30MKI multirole fighter aircraft;
- b. T-90 main battle tanks;
- c. Mi-17 helicopters;
- d. Talwar-class stealth frigates;
- e. Kilo-class submarines;
- f. Aircraft carrier INS Vikramaditya;
- g. Akula-class nuclear-powered submarine leased to India.

In comparison with a few Western defence suppliers, Russia proved itself to be very keen on transferring the advanced technologies and allowing the licensed manufacturing in India. The manufacturing of Su-30MKI at the Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) was one of the biggest cases of defence technology transfer by the Russians.

In 2010, both countries elevated bilateral relations to Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership, a testament of increasing political confidence and defense cooperation between both nations (MEA, 2010).

As time went on the focus of defence cooperation gradually moved from procurement to joint design and manufacturing. It was a move that was in keeping with India's 'Make in India' initiative launched in 2014 to increase the indigenous production of defence-related goods while simultaneously continuing to collaborate with foreign experts and technology providers (Ministry of Defence, 2023).

4. Defence Trade and Military–Technical Cooperation

Defence cooperation continues to be the cornerstone of India–Russia strategic ties. Between 2000 and 2024, India has been one of the biggest bilateral defence partners for Russia with bilateral defence transactions valued in several tens of billions of dollars (SIPRI, 2024). A unique feature of India–Russia military cooperation has been Russia's ability to offer technologies that are not available from a number of Western suppliers. Under the licensed production agreements, India could produce sophisticated platforms, and build local industrial capability.

The Su-30MKI is one of the most important programmes; it is still the backbone of the Indian Air Force. The aircraft, which was produced under licence by Hindustan Aeronautics Limited, combines Russian airframes and Indian, French and Israeli avionics, showcasing the flexibility of Indo-Russian technological cooperation (Pant, 2019). Likewise, the acquisition of aircraft carrier INS Vikramaditya has made India's navy much stronger even though it was delayed and has incurred cost overruns. Russia also rented out a nuclear-powered attack submarine (INS Chakra) to India, thus putting India among the few countries that have such sophisticated naval ships outside the list of permanent members of the United Nations Security Council.

India's purchase of the S-400 Triumf air defence system, which is one of the most sophisticated long-range air defence systems in the world, is another significant milestone. In spite of the potential of U.S. sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), India still reached out to the agreement because of the strategic autonomy

and national security priorities that it attaches to it (Tellis, 2021). India-Russia military ties go beyond sales of arms. These military deals illustrate the nature of military cooperation between India and Russia beyond arms sales. It is a strategic relationship that involves technology sharing, operational interoperability and institutional trust over the long term.

5. Joint Research, Development and Defence Industrial Cooperation

The most significant change in India-Russia defence cooperation since 2000 has been the change in the nature of the defence cooperation from buyer–seller to collaborative research, development and co-production. This development is a continuation of the trend towards defence diplomacy via industrial cooperation and technological cooperation.

The best example of such collaboration is the BrahMos Aerospace Joint Venture (BAL) that was formed in 1998 between India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and Russia's NPO Mashinostroyeniya. BrahMos has come a long way since its inception in the pre-2000 era and emerged as one of the most prominent symbols of bilateral defence cooperation in the twentyfirst century. The supersonic cruise missile has been inducted into the Indian Army, Navy and Air Force and has proven the feasibility of joint research, co-development and co-production of the missile between the two nations (DRDO, 2023).

The BrahMos programme is unique as it relies on the propulsion system of the Russian people, the guidance systems, software integration and manufacturing capabilities of the Indians. It also helps India's aim to boost defence exports with the missile being exported to friendly foreign nations. This is a significant step from dependence on imports to joint innovation and export-oriented defence production.

India and Russia have also been working together on missile development, modernization of its tank force, naval shipbuilding, helicopter manufacturing and maintenance, repair, and overhaul (MRO) facilities. These projects add to India's ongoing push for indigenous defence manufacturing and maintaining access to cutting-edge Russian technologies.

6. Joint Military Exercises and Defence Diplomacy in Practice

Although the focus of India–Russia security relations has always been on defence trade, the twenty first century has seen more attention paid to defence diplomacy which has promoted joint military exercises, strategic dialogues, military education and institutional cooperation. These engagements have boosted confidence and strengthened interoperability and further solidified the strategic partnership beyond arms sales.

The one of the most important events of defence diplomacy was the INDRA Joint Military Exercise, which was launched in 2003. INDRA started as a bilateral naval exercise but has slowly been expanded to include participation from the armies, navies and air forces of both countries. The drill is on counter-terrorism, peacekeeping, maritime security, anti-piracy, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief (Ministry of Defence [MoD], 2023).

The changing dynamics of India–Russia security cooperation have been reflected in the evolution of INDRA. In the past, the focus was on traditional military interoperability, but more recent editions have started to discuss non-traditional security issues like terrorism, cyber-issues, maritime security and hybrid warfare. The cooperation not only helps to boost operational compatibility, but also builds trust between the armed forces of the two countries on a strategic level.

The institutional dimension has also been a key factor in promoting defence diplomacy. The India–Russia Inter-Governmental Commission on Military and Military-Technical Cooperation (IRIGC-M&MTC) is held on an annual basis to discuss issues related to defence cooperation, track the progress of current cooperation projects and explore future potential defence cooperation projects. Strategic dialogue has been effectively institutionalized through regular meetings between the Defence Ministers, military commanders, national security advisors and military chiefs and has minimised uncertainties in bilateral relations (MEA, 2023).

Another facet of defence diplomacy is military education and professional exchanges. Indian military officers receive specialized training in Russian defence institutions and the Russians receive training in India at its specialised institutions and seminars. These exchanges enable the sharing of knowledge, networking and institutional familiarity. Cooperation at Navy level has also grown immensely. Russia has been helping India in the area of naval modernization by leasing its submarines, building frigates and providing technological support. The importance of maritime cooperation has been increasing in the current geopolitical context of increasing competition in the Indo Pacific and the Indian Ocean region. Russia's main strategic interest is Eurasia, but both nations have an interest in freedom of navigation, anti-piracy and maritime stability.

It's a constructive approach to defence diplomacy, in terms of confidence-building, transparency and crisis management. The defence cooperation between India and Russia is flexible and not bound by formal military pacts and can go both ways as both countries can act in accordance with their own foreign policies without any compromises in strategic engagement. This is similar to India's strategic autonomy and its desire for diversified partnerships without commitments to alliances (Tellis, 2021).

7. The Russia–Ukraine War and Its Impact on Defence Cooperation

The Russia–Ukraine conflict that erupted in February 2022 has created a new geopolitical landscape for defence cooperation between India and Russia. Western sanctions against Russia caused disruptions in financial transactions, logistics, supply chains and defence production, posing fresh challenges for India's long-standing military partnership with Moscow. Russian-origin military platforms continue to be a vital part of India's armed forces. While Russia accounted for 36-40 per cent of India's defence imports from 2019 to 2024, the share of the country from Russia has reduced from the previous decades (SIPRI, 2024). As a result, continued maintenance, spare parts,

ammunition and modernisation continue to be vital for the operational readiness of the Indian Armed Forces.

Payment mechanisms between the two countries were complicated by the imposition of the sanctions. The limitations imposed on the international banking structure forced the use of other payment alternatives, such as the national currencies and other financial mechanisms. However, these challenges were met with political will from both sides to maintain defence cooperation in a flexible and diplomatic manner. The other effects of the war have been the delays in defence deliveries. It was the fact that Russia had to fulfil its military needs that caused some disruptions in certain military platforms, components and modernization projects. These delays helped to further reinforce India's resolve to speed up indigenous defence production under its Atmanirbhar Bharat campaign as well as push for diversifying defence procurement.

Indian's stance in the Ukraine conflict also reflected India's policy of strategic autonomy in the diplomatic arena. India did not take the step of outright condemning Russia in multilateral platforms, but continued to promote the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, dialogue, and peaceful conflict resolution (MEA, 2022). This has allowed New Delhi to maintain its strategic partnership with Moscow, despite maintaining good relations with western countries. The Ukraine conflict has thus imposed new limitations on the cooperation without significantly changing the strategic fundamentals of India-Russia defence cooperation. Instead of ending the partnership, India has tried to move towards diversification while keeping continuity.

8. Challenges to India–Russia Defence Cooperation

Although bilateral relations in defence are robust, there are certain structural challenges that have emerged in the last two decades. The first challenge is India's diversification of defence procurement. The first challenge is associated with the diversification of defence procurement in India. India has been growing into an active buyer of the latest defences from France, U.S.A, Israel and elsewhere since the early 2000s. Significant deals like the Rafale fighter aircraft, Apache attack helicopters, Chinook transport helicopters, P-8I maritime patrol aircraft and MQ-9B drones demonstrate India's efforts to break its over-reliance on a single supplier (SIPRI, 2024).

Second, Russia has been building up strategic relations with China, leading to concerns in Indian strategic circles. Amidst ongoing tensions with China along the border, Moscow is increasingly expanding its military cooperation with Beijing, particularly in the field of advanced fighter aircraft, missile systems, and joint military exercises. As India continues to face tensions with China over the border, Moscow is strengthening its defence ties with Beijing in various areas such as advanced fighter aircraft, missile systems and joint military exercises.

Thirdly, there have been delays in the implementation and escalation of costs of various Indo-Russian defence projects. Technical, financial or administrative problems affected some programs like INS Vikramaditya, FGFA (Fifth Generation Fighter Aircraft) and some naval modernization programs.

These experiences have bolstered the idea that India must be more technologically self-sufficient and diversified.

Fourthly, changing global geopolitics has put pressure on India's strategic decisions from outside. The United States' Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) has raised doubts over the acquisition of the S-400 air defence system by India. The procurement continued, but with the threat of sanctions, the complexity of managing multiple strategic partnerships grew (Tellis, 2021).

Last, but not least, technology change requires new challenges. The era of modern warfare has turned to a focus on artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, cyber, quantum technologies and space security. To be able to continue to support the India–Russia partnership in defence, it is necessary to build cooperation in these new technological areas and not only on traditional military platforms.

9. Future prospects and emerging opportunities

Though the challenges are there, the India – Russia defence cooperation still holds a lot of strategic importance in the contemporary world. Future cooperation is likely to rely more on technological cooperation, defence industrial integration and joint innovations than on arms transfers. Co-development and co-production is a possibly interesting field. The BrahMos missile programme is a case in point of how defence innovation can be achieved through collaboration. The cooperation may include hypersonic weapons, high-tech air defence systems, artificial intelligence, unmanned systems, and space-based defence technologies, among others.

Make in India and Atmanirbhar Bharat initiatives add to the potential avenues of increasing defence manufacturing in India. Russia has offered support to India in the form of localisation of production and formation of joint ventures and strengthening technology transfer for India's domestic defence manufacturing sector. Another space for cooperation is in the U.S. and foreign Maintenance, Repair, and Overhaul (MRO) facilities. With India having a vast fleet of Russian-made machinery, maintenance facilities in the country can help lower operating expenses, enhance readiness, and contribute to sustainable operations.

In addition to bilateral cooperation, India and Russia have been actively coordinating in multilateral platforms like BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Russia–India–China (RIC) dialogue. Herein, these forums serve as forums for strategic consultations on terrorism, cyber security, energy security, regional stability and reform of global governance institutions. Other areas where there can be increased cooperation and collaboration for the partnership include defence exports to friendly third countries, peacekeeping training, maritime security, Arctic research and emerging technologies. Increasing these levels of cooperation would lessen reliance on conventional procurement and further strengthen strategic trust.

10. CONCLUSION

Since the signing of the Declaration on Strategic Partnership in 2000, India–Russia defence cooperation has undergone a

significant transformation. Defence diplomacy, technology transfer, joint research and development, military exercises, institutional dialogue and industrial cooperation are some of the various aspects that have transformed the nature of the relationship between a buyer and a seller into a strategic partnership. Defence diplomacy is a suitable tool for analysing this change. India and Russia have forged one of the longest military, institutional and joint defence cooperation partnerships in the world through persistent military action, organized dialogue and joint defence initiatives. The depth of bilateral defence cooperation is reflected in such ventures as the BrahMos joint venture, the INDRA military exercises, the Su-30MKI military aircraft licensed production, the procurement of the S-400 air defence system and other defense agreements. However, the alliance is encountering significant obstacles due to India's shift towards diversifying its defence sector, Russia's increased alignment with China, advancements in the technology of modern warfare and the geopolitical ramifications of the Russia-Ukraine crisis. The developments, instead of tarnishing the partnership permanently, are prompting both countries to reimagine the cooperation in technological innovation, indigenous production, resilience of supply chains and strategic flexibility. In the years to come, the cooperation between India and Russia in the field of defence will not be based on the number of arms but on the quality of collaborative innovation. Whether the partnership will be a primary element of Eurasian security in the emerging multipolar world order will depend on the development of new technologies, growing cooperation between industries, defense diplomacy, and growth of political trust.

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