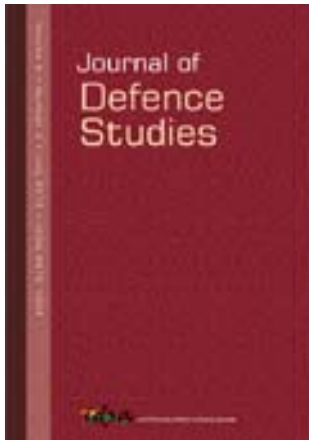


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## India-Russia Military Cooperation Which Way Forward?

*Rod Thornton\**

*This article considers the relationship—in defence terms—between India and Russia. It looks at the level of military cooperation and the nexus the two countries have created in regard to arms transfers and their joint research into, and production of, weapons systems. This relationship is, of course, one that is constantly evolving as different strategic and political pressures come to bear. The analysis here concentrates on the current standing of the defence links between Delhi and Moscow. Evidence is presented to show that, at the moment, Russia is keen for both political and economic reasons to see the relationship continue to grow. India, for its part, is not quite so enthusiastic. But this is, as this article argues, a relationship that does seem to offer significant advantages to both sides. It has come under strain, yes, but it makes perfect sense for it not only to continue, but also to actually strengthen.*

### BACKGROUND

India has traditionally looked to Moscow for its military hardware. In the initial post-independence period, India could not rely on Britain for its defence needs. London was wary of arming either India or Pakistan and thus fuelling further bitter conflict after 1947. The United States adopted the same attitude after the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965.<sup>1</sup> New Delhi therefore turned towards the Soviet Union and the generous offers it made in terms of arms transfers. The Soviets also provided equipment that was simple to operate and maintain, which suited clients such as

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India. And, as these defence links developed between the two countries, they came to be reinforced by the fact that both shared a sense of threat from China. So, given that such a close relationship had been built up during the Cold War era, it seemed natural, once the Soviet Union had become Russia in 1991, that the links should continue.<sup>2</sup>

#### THE INDIAN POSITION

The ties forged between India and the new Russia, however, have not been without difficulties. Post-Soviet Russia has not proved to be the most reliable of arms suppliers and there is still something rather patriarchal about Russia's attitude towards its Indian client. India, moreover, is now facing a China that is modernizing its own military at some pace, and Delhi is keen to try and match it. Thus the kind of weapons that Russia has traditionally offered—cheap and fairly simple—are no longer quite suiting Indian needs. This is especially so as India's burgeoning economy has not only created a better educated population but also produced significant investment in a high-tech industrial base. India can now afford top-of-the-range military equipment from abroad, has a military more capable of handling complicated weaponry, and is a country that can now indigenously produce military equipment of a fairly high standard. Today, therefore, what India only really requires from Russia are the high-end, cutting-edge systems that it cannot produce domestically. Having said this, if Indian buyers do see a need for such high-tech systems then they are no longer forced to buy only from Russia. India is currently the world's biggest spender on arms imports and, inevitably, its money talks. It can shop around and source military technologies from various countries. Moreover, there is the sense within the country that it should. The Indian military is seen by some as being over-reliant on Russian arms imports. The fact that roughly 60 per cent of the country's military equipment comes from this one source is taken to be something of a liability.<sup>3</sup>

Thus the relationship between India and Russia has moved on significantly since the Soviet times. Where once this link was one between a powerful supplier and a recipient with little leverage, the Indian side can now dictate much better terms or simply move on to other suppliers.<sup>4</sup> The dynamics have changed. So what exactly are India's best options now? How should it best satisfy its demands for defence equipment? Is Russia, in fact, still the best option?

### INDIA'S INDIGENOUS WEAPONS PRODUCTION

As with all independent states, India needs to feel that it has reliable sources of military hardware and reliable logistical support for that hardware. True reliability of this sort, though given the vagaries of international politics, can only really come if it is all sourced domestically. If not, a country like India can become the victim of foreign suppliers who cannot—or may not want to—continue to provide the necessary support. Thus as its economy has boomed, India has begun to look more towards developing the capacity to produce its own weapons. However, while New Delhi might want complete autarky in terms of weapons' production, it has to remain conscious of the fact that this can never really be achieved and that making any significant strides in this direction will take a long time. But India does not really have the luxury of such time. With its military spending being geared fundamentally towards dealing with the threat, however envisaged, from China, and with that country's current immense military spending producing such a dynamic expansion in military capabilities, New Delhi simply cannot hope to keep pace with any policy of 'going it alone'. It needs help. In India's arms race with China, as one Indian analyst put it, the country is 'not so much racing as running as hard as she can to stay still.'<sup>5</sup> The pressure to be an independent producer of a range of weapons systems—both low-tech and high-tech—has to be balanced by the pressure to field such systems quickly. The need is still there to take the shortcut and to procure from abroad. The obvious choice here would be the traditional supplier, Russia.

### BUYING RUSSIAN WEAPONS

The Russian Military-Industrial Complex (MIC) is still powerful within the country. Neither as large nor as influential as it was during the Soviet era, it still represents a major employer and source of both national pride and foreign revenue. But it has suffered since 1991 from a chronic lack of investment, particularly in terms of research and development. All that this sector has really been capable of turning out recently is updated models of old Soviet designs—from Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs) to fighter aircraft. There comes a point, however, when both foreign purchasers of Russian arms and the Russian military itself say that they need more modern equipment; mere upgrades just will not do anymore. This point has now been reached. The Russian military itself is currently looking abroad to buy even such basic equipment as APCs. In such a

scenario, countries like India are hardly going to want equipment the Russians themselves do not consider good enough.

Nevertheless, India still wants certain Russian defence products and it is still a market that matters enormously to the Russian MIC. Indeed, India is becoming ever more important to Russia as China, the traditional chief buyer of Russian military hardware, travels further down the road of indigenous weapons' production. The Chinese no longer require so many Russian imports. This has left India as Russia's biggest market for its weapons' exports. Some 25 per cent of Russia's arms sales revenue comes from India (i.e., \$3.3 billion spent by Delhi in Russia in 2011).<sup>6</sup>

Despite the fact that this market is so important, and the fact that leading political figures such as Vladimir Putin and Dimitri Medvedev have extolled the virtues of arms sales to India, the Russian arms manufacturers themselves have tended to be quite blasé in presuming that India will always be the customer they were in Soviet times.<sup>7</sup> That is, India will remain a ready buyer of Russian weapons no matter what. The view in the Russian MIC circles is that once the Soviet weaponry had been bought in the past by India, and doctrines and structures built around it—with training regimes put in place to operate and maintain it—then India would be locked into purchasing from the same source for a long time to come, i.e., from Russia. India was seen to be a captive market. There has thus been, on the part of the MIC, an attitude of treating Indian orders as if they were a given, and of not making any great efforts to satisfy the customer with high-quality products provided on time and on budget.<sup>8</sup>

Russian tardiness and inefficiency in this respect has been seen to major effect in the Indian order to buy and have refurbished the old Soviet aircraft-capable cruiser, Admiral Gorshkov (45,000 tonnes). Having sat idle since 1992 at Severodvinsk in northern Russia, the hull was bought by India in 2004. In what was originally a \$1 billion project, the Sevmash yard was to upgrade the vessel to become a true aircraft carrier, the INS Vikramaditya. This would then replace the Indian Navy's only carrier, the venerable INS Viraat (built originally in 1959 as HMS Hermes). The Vikramaditya should have been delivered three years ago, but it only began sea trials in the first week of June 2012.<sup>9</sup> Its cost has meanwhile risen threefold to about \$3 billion.<sup>10</sup>

India's building of its own aircraft carrier, the INS Vikrant, has itself been slowed considerably by the fact that Russia could not supply, as promised, the necessary grade of steel for its construction. India has

thus had to produce the steel domestically with concomitant delays in production. The Vikrant should finally enter service in 2016.<sup>11</sup>

Another case is that of the Akula-II class nuclear attack submarine, the Nerpa. Having been originally built for the Russian Navy, it was to be leased to India and handed over as the INS Chakra in 2008. Again, though, costly overruns have meant that it was finally delivered earlier this year.<sup>12</sup>

Simple after-sales service has also caused problems. Spare parts for Russian-bought weapons have not been supplied on occasion, leaving India having to scour the world markets for them.<sup>13</sup> There has even been a lack of basic civilities. Five Indian warships turned up at Vladivostok in February 2011 expecting to participate in a joint naval exercise (Indra, 2011) with the Russian Pacific Fleet. However, the Indian officers were told that the Russians could not actually take part because of 'technical reasons'. This snub left a bitter taste in the mouth of the Indian naval personnel.<sup>14</sup> The general view of this incident in Russia is that the exercise was in reality called off by the Russians in a fit of pique after India rejected the Mig-35 as a contender in a large ('deal of the century') order for fighter aircraft.<sup>15</sup> This contract appears to have gone (at the time of writing) to the French Dassault company.<sup>16</sup>

The fact that its newest aircraft was not competing in such a massive tender came as something of a shock to those Russians who believed that India was a captive market. It was now very clear that this was not the case. With the Mig-35, the Indian Air Force was being offered an aircraft that was not only not yet operational in the Russian Air Force, it was still suffering from developmental teething problems. New Delhi needs planes that are proven to be combat-capable. It was not going to buy Russian weapons simply to appease its ally.<sup>17</sup> India's position vis-à-vis its old partner has clearly changed.

#### LICENCE PRODUCTION

Another way for India to break away from its reliance on Russia as a source for arms has been to increase its licence production of Russian weapons. This provides a means of balancing the requirement for domestically produced systems, while at the same time ensuring a high degree of technological sophistication. Thus India initially bought the weapons it felt it needed from Russia and, once its armed forces had become comfortable with their operation, India's own MIC would then

arrange to licence-build many more of the same model, initially under Russian direction. As with any such licence-build arrangement, India has come to gain a greater control over the availability of the products and Indian scientists, engineers and technicians have come to develop the skills necessary for the later production of purely indigenous designs. Russia, for its part, is quite content to enter into licence agreements. It does not see India as a strategic rival and has faith in the country's willingness to keep to agreements and not, as Moscow claims the Chinese have done, to illegally make use of Russian intellectual property.<sup>18</sup>

Major licence-build projects include the assembly in India of the Su-30MKI multirole combat aircraft. (This is known as the Su-30SM in the Russian Air Force and will be its primary fighter aircraft until the T-50 comes into service.<sup>19</sup>) The T-90 Main Battle Tank (MBT) is also now built in India. This is the mainstay of both the Russian and Indian armoured forces, with the latter choosing it to replace their 2,000 or so T-72s. An initial order of 310 T-90s was placed in 2001 and Russia delivered all by 2006. In 2007, another order was placed to licence-build 347 of the upgraded T-90M in Indian factories.<sup>20</sup>

Major licence-build agreements are not only limited to those made with Russia. Indian shipyards are currently also building six Scorpene-class submarines under a licence from France.<sup>21</sup>

But licence production will take India only so far in terms of modernizing its military. Any state that attempts to establish its own indigenous defence industry quickly comes to realize—as both India and China have—that turning out someone else's designs is one thing, actually developing completely new weapons systems is quite another. Even 'cloning' those of other states (as China has tried to do with Russian equipment) is fraught with difficulty.<sup>22</sup>

What is really needed to design, manufacture and then field cutting-edge military technologies is investment in the type of research and production facilities that will lead to new designs moving seamlessly from the drawing board right through to the final assembly. But this is a hugely expensive enterprise. It requires a highly skilled workforce, the necessary machine tools, purpose-built factories, and, above all, a broad defence industrial base. Even in Western countries, large defence contractors having recognized these difficulties, have clubbed together both with domestic competitors and foreign firms to work synergistically on projects to reduce overall development costs. Such cooperation is clearly seen as the way forward in the worldwide defence sector. But India and Russia stand

outside the principal areas of defence cooperation that exist in Europe and the United States. It is difficult for them to join certain 'clubs' of international defence contractors. Therefore, it does make sense for them to come together to set in train their own mutually advantageous projects.

#### SYNERGIES

In order to get truly state-of-the-art systems off the drawing board, India needs Russian assistance. The Russians, for their part, need Indian help—particularly financial—in their own drive to modernize their military as Russia has fallen far behind the West in terms of many aspects of high-tech military hardware.

Cooperative ventures between the two countries began in 1998 with an agreement to jointly develop the Brahmos cruise missile. This missile can be launched from air, land or sea platforms, has stealth capabilities, and is probably the fastest cruise missile in service anywhere in the world. It is an example of what the two can achieve when they do cooperate. The BrahMos became operational in the Indian military in 2006. A new variant, the BrahMos II, should be ready by 2014 and can reach speeds of Mach 6.<sup>23</sup>

The other major joint venture has been the development of a fifth-generation fighter—the T-50 or, in its Indian designation, the Fifth-Generation Fighter Aircraft (FGFA). This \$35 billion project is designed to produce an aircraft analogous to the American F-22 Raptor. India was invited to become a partner in the development of the FGFA by Moscow in 2007 so that the Russian side could access both the Indian financial clout and certain niche capabilities that the Indians had to offer. Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) thus came on board with the Sukhoi company, the two firms already had experience of working together on the licence production of the Su-30MKI. The Indian investment of some \$6 billion in the project has allowed for enhanced research and development.<sup>24</sup> HAL also brings particular expertise in composite materials and electronics—notably in navigation systems and cockpit head-up displays.<sup>25</sup> HAL will additionally be responsible for designing the two-seat version of the aircraft preferred by the Indian side. Whereas the Russian Air Force sees its T-50s operating at relatively short ranges in a confined theatre of operations, the Indian Air Force is doctrinally geared to longer-range operations. This requires another pilot/navigator to reduce the stress and workload on a single pilot.



Progress has been made and the first Russian prototype flew in January 2010 (although with few on-board systems indicative of an actual fifth-generation aircraft). The contract now in place has Russia buying 200 single- and 50 two-seat variants, while India has gone the other way by ordering variants in the region of 50 single- and 200 two-seat models. The Russians should have an operational squadron by 2013 (although this is an optimistic estimate), and India should receive its first prototype in 2015.<sup>26</sup>

In December 2010, a further joint venture was announced between HAL and the Russian firm Ilyushin, to design and build a new medium-lift transport aircraft. Known as the Multirole Transport Aircraft (MTA; with a range of 2500 km and payload of 20 tonnes), this will be based on the existing design of the Ilyushin 214. This twin-turboprop aircraft is as yet still on the drawing board and its maiden flight is not expected before 2025. Again, the Indians have a long association with the Ilyushin company, having for some time operated the heavy-lift transport aircraft, the Il-76. Eventually, 100 of these MTAs/Il-214s will serve in the Russian air force and perhaps 35 in the Indian.<sup>27</sup> The Indian machines are needed to replace the Air Force's current ageing fleet of An-32s. If, however, the MTA/Il-214 is not ready on time India may be forced into buying more C-130Js from the United States. It already has six for use by its special forces.<sup>28</sup>

#### POSITIVES FOR INDIA IN THE COLLABORATION WITH RUSSIA

While a move such as buying American equipment has been quite rare for India until very recently, it is indicative of the fact that Delhi is now quite willing to source its military hardware from the US. Recent purchases have included 10 C-17 transport aircraft, 8 P-8 maritime patrol aircraft and 100 jet engines from General Electric to power India's new indigenous Tejas fighter.<sup>29</sup> For India, the temptation is always there to look less towards Russia and more towards the US for arms procurement. This is of particular relevance as the US has now begun what it sees as a strategic readjustment. It is currently taking a greater interest in Asian affairs—where it sees China as a source of potential threat—and is concentrating less on Europe and the Middle East (West Asia). The Americans' traditional regional allies—Australia and Japan—could now be joined by India.

However, the drawing in of India into a US axis, and away from a Russian one, also has its downsides for Delhi. Russia would naturally be

offended; and while India's military links with Russia do not cause undue concern in China, any increase in those with the US are very likely to ruffle feathers in Beijing. They will no doubt increase the fear in China that it is being 'surrounded'.<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, in terms of technology transfers, the Americans will never be as accommodating (no matter what rhetoric they may employ)<sup>31</sup> towards India as the Russians are and will continue to be. Moscow is desperate for Indian investment and know-how to move its own military technologies forward while Washington is not. And, India is well aware that any supply of American weapons and linked contracts for parts and after-sales service are always likely to be affected by the value-laden aspects of American arms sales (again, whatever the rhetoric currently emanating from US politicians may be).<sup>32</sup> Washington insists on end-user certificates, which they have been physically checking on.<sup>33</sup> Russia would never do this since it likes to be perceived as a 'friend' to its client states: one who will not impose restrictions on its customers and who will remain loyal to them, regardless of the shifting political sands. The current attitude of Moscow to the crisis in Syria is indicative of this. Russia wants to send out a message that it will stand by its allies even in a crisis. This is what other states reliant on Russian assistance—arms supplies included—want to hear and it is a major selling point for Russian weaponry. Washington is much more likely than Moscow to turn off the arms-supply tap if the diplomatic going gets a little rough.

Thus, a strong collaboration with Russia does offer India unique advantages. Firstly, if India really wants to develop as a regional military power of substance, in the short to medium term, then it does need to take the shortcuts to military modernization by seizing the opportunity of 'piggy-backing' on Russian expertise. Secondly, India cannot afford to sign too many contracts with overseas suppliers who may later come to apply political strings. Russia, despite all its faults as a supplier, will not do this.

India should maintain good relations with Russia. The spin-offs are there for Delhi if it remains understanding of its Russian partner. This is why Indian politicians and senior officers are always loathe to criticize the Russian side for the delays and cost overruns that seem to bedevil all of Delhi's contracts and joint projects with Russia.

Indeed, beyond the supply of arms and the development synergies, Russia can also offer facilities to the Indian armed forces that may prove vital to future Indian strategic intentions. For instance, in order to back

up its policies vis-à-vis Afghanistan (once the NATO combat troops have left), India would be greatly assisted by having its military aircraft operate out of two air bases in Tajikistan (at Ayni near Dushanbe and Farkhor near the Afghan border), which Indian engineers have already upgraded at a huge cost. The permission to operate from such bases would obviously be needed from Moscow given its close relationship with the Tajik Government.<sup>34</sup>

India would also be hard pushed to function effectively as a major military power without access to a satellite navigation system. Russia has its own version of the Global Positioning System (GPS) in something called Glonass (Globalnaya Navigatsionnaya Sputnikovaya Sistema). As the Russians themselves found out during their war with Georgia in 2008, the need for such a system for precision guidance (if nothing else) is vital for the efficient conduct of modern warfare. At the time of this conflict, however, Glonass lacked the number of satellites that would ensure its proper functioning. The Russian forces thus had to turn to the American GPS. But the Americans switched off this system in the region and hampered Russian operations.

Conscious that independence is needed with such an important force multiplier as a satellite navigation system, the Europeans have seen the need to develop their own (called Galileo). For a state like India, however, the cost of setting up the necessary array of satellites would simply be too exorbitant and it would also take too long to establish; even over the main zone of likely Indian operations. But India does need unfettered access to such a system. And, Delhi needs to be aware that the US may stymie any future operational use by the Indian military of the GPS if Washington does not approve of Indian actions (against Pakistan, for instance). Thus, in October 2011, when access to the (now functioning) Glonass military system was offered to the Indian defence minister, A.K. Antony, it was readily accepted.<sup>35</sup>

#### **FUTURE STRAINS**

There are bound to be further strains in the India-Russia defence collaboration. While some of these strains have long been apparent, some are just beginning to develop. There is pressure now, as noted from within the Russian General Staff, to buy less domestically produced equipment for its military and procure more from abroad. Many senior Russian officers are no longer content to be told by the country's MIC, a legacy

of the Soviet system, that they must accept whatever the MIC decides to produce rather than be supplied with what the military actually wants. To 'punish' the MIC, the Russian military has begun to look abroad (reflecting strained relations between the Defence Ministry and the MIC). There is evidence of this shift in the order placed by Moscow with France for four amphibious assault ships. The first two of these will be built in France and the other two in Russian yards under French direction (India, for its part, bought such a vessel in 2007 from the US—the USS Trenton, now the INS Jalashwa).<sup>36</sup> The Russian ground forces are also looking to buy APCs from Italy and drone aircraft from Israel (as is India from the latter). Additionally, the Russian Army wants to look abroad for a new MBT since the T-90 is seen as too dated. The Air Force, for its part, wants helicopters from France.<sup>37</sup>

As stated, the problem with such moves, in terms of exports to India, is that Delhi is now being offered the very same products that the Russian military itself does not want (such as the Ka-226 helicopter).<sup>38</sup> This hardly breeds confidence in what Russian firms are trying to sell.<sup>39</sup>

Such tension is but one example of the disagreements and points of contention that are, and will be, emerging in the defence links between these two countries. And the Russians will continue the delays, announce cost overruns, and prove themselves to be troublesome partners. And, Delhi will be frustrated. But it must also be remembered that any international defence relationship in any part of the world will be characterized by problems: nationalist sensibilities, the desire not to share technology, profit-and-loss calculations, strategic rationales, and realpolitik, all get in the way of any such relationship. It is never plain sailing. The Indian side must understand this.

#### **AN ENDURING RELATIONSHIP**

Despite all the trials and tribulations, Delhi does need to maintain close military cooperation with Moscow. Overall, the links do seem to work, and there are more opportunities on offer in the future. India has gained enormously from its relationship with Russia. It will soon obtain an aircraft carrier to match the one the Chinese have recently sent on sea trials (both vessels were originally built in the same shipyard in the Soviet Union). In the Nerpa/Chakra, it has gained a nuclear-powered submarine with the capability to launch cruise missiles (which may one day be armed with nuclear warheads). Within a few years it should take delivery of a

new transport aircraft with the arrival of the MTA. Such additions to India's arsenal have given and will give the country the capability to be a major strategic player in the Asian region. Additionally, other naval vessels, aircraft, and armoured vehicles have been delivered by Russia and India has produced its own versions of the Russian equipment. Russia has proved to be, and more crucially also promises to be in the future, a generally reliable ally. Yes, working with Russia can be frustrating, but all in all the positives seem to outweigh the negatives for India in the relationship.

And Russia too has gained. Indian orders have, in several cases, kept the Russian defence contractors in business and, therefore, still supplying arms to the Russian military. Indian finance has also allowed for enhanced research and development by the Russians that would not have been possible otherwise. Russian firms such as Sukhoi have gained technologies, skills and know-how from the Indian side.

India and Russia are tied up as partners and allies. Both are major powers operating rather independently on the world stage and both see China as a threat. It makes perfect sense for them to continue their mutually beneficial defence relationship. As Defence Minister Antony stresses, 'Russia remains India's number one strategic partner and, in many respects, there are no alternatives to cooperation with Russia in the foreseeable future.'<sup>40</sup>

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