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## India-Russia: Friends Forever

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It all began in 1955 with Indian Prime Minister Nehru's maiden visit to the erstwhile Soviet Union and Khrushchev's reciprocal trip to India same year. Since then, Indo-Russian ties have withstood every test of time. During this period of over half a century, both nations ferried through turbulent waters. But the relationship between Moscow and New Delhi was never adversely affected per se.

Though well on track presently, the ties went lukewarm during 90s. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kremlin's assistance to India suddenly stopped and India, already faced with its worst ever economic crisis, had to turn to the West to keep its economy afloat. Here on commenced the proximity between India and the US, with India liberalising its economy through New Economic Policy. While India was busy in combating socio-economic problems facing the country and strengthening its economic foothold by way of nurturing economic ties with the West, esp. the US, at the same time Russia was trying to put its house in order by gradually transforming itself into a market economy and a liberal democracy.

Bilateral ties regained momentum with the change of guard in Russia in 2000. President Putin's keen interest in taking ties ahead with its old ally and India's active reciprocal gesture to the "time tested friend" has made the relationship multi-dimensional. Notwithstanding the absence of any major area of strategic divergence, Moscow is wary of India's cosy relationship with the US. But then, in the era of globalization, international relations are not a zero sum game. India has tried its best to clear the air by repeatedly stating that its ties with other countries will not in any way impact the special relationship New Delhi enjoys with Moscow. Transfer by Kremlin, of

modern defence equipments and technologies to India are, in a way, means to keep New Delhi allied with Moscow. Another major factor guiding the Indo-Russian ties is the rise of China. Even though Russia and China have dramatically improved their ties since the end of Cold War and both now coordinate their foreign policies in tandem, Kremlin is worried by the dragon's growing influence in the global geopolitik. Thus, an undeclared attempt to 'contain' China is also behind unconditional defence and technological assistance to India from Russia.

Both have established and maintained landmark cooperation in the areas of defence, space and atomic energy. Since the very beginning, defence has been the key area of cooperation. India indeed owes its military capabilities to Russia to a great extent. About 70 percent of India's defence requirements are fulfilled by Russia alone. This cooperation has come a long way ahead from a buyer-seller relationship to joint research and development of defence technologies and equipments. Brahmos, the world's fastest cruise missile, is a living example. Russia has assisted India in building its first Nuclear Submarine, INS Arihant. Now both countries are jointly developing Fifth Generation Fighter Aircraft (FGFA) and a Multirole Transport Plane.

Space has been another area of remarkable cooperation between the two. India's first satellite Aryabhata was launched by the Soviet Union way back in 1975. Moreover, Russia provided India the cryogenic engines, required to put geo-stationary communication satellites into orbit, when India was denied such engines from rest of the world. The Russia Space Agency Roscosmos is helping India in its second Moon Mission Chandrayaan-2 apart from the proposed manned mission. If it wasn't enough, India has been offered access to the GLONASS, Russian competitor of the GPS.

Apart from that, energy has been another major area of collaboration ever since the Cold-War era. Soviet Union assisted India in developing nuclear energy. At present, Russia is building two nuclear reactors of 1000-MW each in Koodankulam and eight more are in pipeline. Energy cooperation has bright prospects since Russia is looking around for a permanent market for its hydrocarbons and at the same time energy-thirsty India needs a reliable source of oil and gas. Also, Russian and Indian petro entities are involved in joint exploration and extraction of hydrocarbons in both the countries.

Notwithstanding the above areas of excellent cooperation, there is still a long way to go, especially in business to business and people to people contact. Most of the bilateral cooperation, defence, space or energy, hitherto has been government driven. There is huge potential in business exchanges and investment in the areas of Pharmaceuticals, Telecom, Information Technology (IT) and Agriculture. Currently annual bilateral trade stands at about \$10 billion. During President Medvedev's state visit to India in December last year, the two have set a target of \$20 billion by 2015. Also there is great scope for cooperation in education. Right now, the number of Indian students in Russian universities is just about 5000 as opposed to over a hundred thousand each in Australia, UK and USA.

Russia has unequivocally supported India's increased role in global affairs- be it India's bid for permanent seat in the UN Security Council, membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group, cooperation in BRIC, RIC or SCO. Russian and Indian interests converge on almost all major issues concerning the world- be it terrorism, AfPak quagmire or Iran. In the wake of the rise of China & India, the resurgence of Russia and the resultant quest for a multi-polar world, the ties are bound to deepen further. As per the joint statement issued

on Medvedev's India visit- the relationship has been built up to the level of "special and privileged strategic partnership." This relationship is an ideal example of selfless, unconditional and sympathetic cooperation based on mutual trust and respect.