India and Russia celebrated last year, sixty-five years of diplomatic relations. In February 2013, Indian President Pranab Mukherjee stressed upon the legacy of the Indo-Soviet relationship, which is widely regarded as formative and influential during the early years of Indian independence, especially in the sectors of defence production and early industrialisation. In that speech, he was reacting to the one-day visit Russian President Vladimir Putin made to New Delhi at the end of last year. The visit was a much anticipated event, having been rescheduled from October, when it was first slated to take place. At the time, detractors seem to have blamed this upset on a failure to negotiate key issues ahead of the presidential visit; in the end, the Russians cited the President's reasons of health. Yet, the anxiety surrounding the visit indicates the disappointment about irresolvable issues on each side. Indeed, this bilateral relationship is a closely-watched one in New Delhi, and the recent past has been reason for much dismay for those rooting for closer ties with Moscow.

To a certain extent, the tide seems to have turned with President Putin's visit. While in India in December last year, President Putin signed a USD 2.9 billion deal, while simultaneously making a statement about the Indo-Russian strategic partnership and his will to facilitate what he called "responsible leadership and collective action in the international arena". The itinerary of mutual cooperation has always included an emphasis on the fields of defence and space, with new ventures being more comprehensive. While in Delhi, the President signed off on memoranda facilitating an Indo-Russia Joint Investment Fund, worth USD 2 billion, a pilot project aimed at delivering Global Navigation Satellite System (GLONASS) as a viable alternative to the American Global Positioning System (GPS) and on the military hardware side, contracts were signed for the supply of 71 Mi-17 helicopters and 42 Sukhoi-30 MKI fighter jets.
Earlier this year, Russia’s Mikoyan warplanes manufacturer had delivered to India the first bulk of its MiG-29K carrier-based fighters, under a contract signed in 2010. Mikoyan will deliver a total of 29 fighter jets in addition to 16 MiGs that joined the Indian air fleet in 2009-2011. In 2012, India remained Russia’s No. 1 partner in the amount of military-technological cooperation. A rather controversial taint on this record was the delay in the delivery of the aircraft carrier INS Vikramaditya/ Admiral Gorshkov with a doubling in its estimated costs. The Indian establishment has taken a strong view on this delay, with Defence Minister A.K.Antony publicly discussing the possibility of seeking financial damages from Russia at a later date.

On cooperation in space, the GLONASS project had been accompanied by the joint development of the Chandrayaan-2, a joint lunar exploration mission proposed by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and the Russian Federal Space Agency (RKA), slated for launch via a Geosynchronous Satellite Launch Vehicle (GSLV) in 2013. However, technical difficulties have stalled this partnership entirely - when Roskosmos's Phobos-Grunt Mission to Mars failed, it was not possible for them to deliver a lander for Chandrayaan-2 anymore; the ISRO was to deliver the orbiter and the rover and now are going the whole hog independently. The Russian pull-out from this project has set it back by a couple of years, at the very least.

With the traditional avenues of defence and space cooperation experiencing a setback, the focus has been expanded to accommodate bilateral economic cooperation. It is a stated objective of the Presidential visit to sell an investment target of USD 20 billion doubling the current trade figure by 2015. This seems an achievable target considering trade grew by 30% in 2012, yet Indo-Russian bilateral trade lags far behind Indo-US or Sino-Russian figures. The Sistema Shyam Teleservices Ltd. controversy provides an account of the systemic shifts within both countries that will have to be accommodated within their bilateral relationship. Talks for a free trade agreement are also underway that might provide a much-needed fillip on this account.

On energy cooperation, again an area viewed most favourably with potential for future cooperation, the Koodankulam plant seems to have been plagued with controversy both due to the protests against its construction and then again, vis-a-vis the waiver of the civil nuclear liability for units 3 and 4 of the plant. Although the project seems to have moved past these hurdles, the resultant unease on both sides regarding India's position on issues of international engagement versus the need to engage with domestic concerns did come to the fore during this time. Looking to the future, it is desirable that India invests in the opening up of the Arctic as those energy reserves are made available. GAIL's cooperation with GazProm is already a step in the right direction.
Although the possibilities are many, the particularities of the India-Russia bilateral relationship on closer inspection betray the lack of imagination that invariably accompanies consistency. Both Presidents Putin and Mukherjee have gone to great lengths to emphasize the comprehensiveness of the bilateral tie as a marker of the "remarkable convergence" of the strategic interests of its partners. It has also been clarified on many an occasion that neither the arms deal signed by both countries is China-centric, nor has the ebb and flow of the Indo-US relationship affected Russia's ties with India. It is true that Russia overtly supports India on multiple international platforms such as at BRICS and at the UN, also supporting India's bid for a permanent seat at the Security Council. Indeed, President Putin has consolidated the overtures made by Yeltsin in his time as President. In reciprocity, India has gone on record to keep Russia assuaged of her friendship despite her new-found comfort within other bilateral ties.

Where Russia has expressed an interest in deepening her commitment to the relationship, it might be useful to take the initiative - in SAARC, and also through more direct cooperation in the political field, India could contribute expertise to a Russia that is looking to modernize itself. One such area of interest for the Russians is that of inter-parliamentary exchanges, where India's robust (if chaotic) experience in parliamentary democracy can be on offer. For Russia, a deeper engagement with India could hold the key for a larger investment in the Asia-Pacific - in building ties with Japan, South Korea and Australia, Russia has much to gain economically and diplomatically. Perhaps, a version of India's Look East policy applies to traditionally Euro-centric Russia. The uneven keel of Sino-Soviet relations is often the most visible marker of Russia's relations with greater Asia. Yet, if Russia were to move out of the Cold War mindset, then it would be possible for her to imagine Asian powers, not as erstwhile recipients of aid but as corridors of security (India, China) and models of modernisation (Japan, South Korea).

The India-Russia relationship is at a time where their engagement with each other is not necessarily as deep in tenor as it is wide in scope. This impasse will only end if the litany of cooperative measures incorporates a drastic new turn.

Sources


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