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Russia: An all-weather defence partner

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This article is based on the editorial **“Russia: An all-weather defence partner”** that appeared in the Hindu Business Line on 3 July 2019. It highlights the importance of Russia in India’s strategic interest.

In March 2019, India signed an Intergovernmental Agreement (IGA) with Russia to lease another of its **Akula-Class attack nuclear submarines (SSN)**. The agreement has invited a serious reaction from the USA over India's defence relationship with Russia. Russia is in the middle of economic sanctions imposed of USA under **CAATSA**, USA has also been critical about India-Russia **S-400 Triumph deal**.

During the Cold War, Indo and US were referred to as estranged democracies or as described by David Malone: The blind man and the elephant trying to understand each other. But this strategic realignment by India should not be at the expense of neglect of Russia, as Russia is an all-weather defence partner of India.

What is the importance of Russia for India?

- After the end of the cold war, it became imperative for India to look westwards and by the start of the 21st century, the USA and India turned into strategic partners.
- But it can be said that the idea and inspiration for India did come from technological strides made by the US, however, its implementation was done with the help of Russia.

- In early 1966, India's Atomic Energy establishment started a feasibility programme on naval nuclear propulsion. India approached the US for its quest to develop marine propulsion.
 - But the US disapproved India's plea due to its broader policy of nuclear non-proliferation and arms control, and the need to maintain a strategic balance in South Asia.
 - Also, the sanctions imposed on India after the 1974 nuclear test further deserted India of high-end technology exposure from the western countries
 - In this scenario, Russia agreed to help India's indigenous nuclear submarine programme. It also acquiesced to leasing India its first nuclear submarine.
 - India had leased an Akula-class SSBN from Moscow in 2012. Rechristened as Chakra in the Indian fleet, it will continue to serve the Indian Navy until the commissioning of the new Akula submarine, most likely by 2025.
- The US only provides non-lethal defence technology(which can't be used in event of war against Pakistan) like C-130 Super Hercules, C-13 Globemaster, P-8i Poseidon etc, while Russia provides high-end technology like Brahmos supersonic missile, 5th generation fighter aircraft Pak Fa, S-400 anti-missile system.
- While India has diversified its defence procurement from Russia to Israel, France, US etc but still India is dependent on Russia for spare parts as India's current defence infrastructure is heavily Russian dominated.
- Though Russia is not a superpower like it used to be in Soviet-era but in current times Russia has resurged, with its engagement in Afghanistan, Syria it has outsmarted the west. In this scenario, Russia remains a formidable player in international relations.
- Also, Russia's support for India is critical for UNSC reforms and support on Kashmir.
- Further sanctions on Russia have led to tactical convergence between Russia and China. If India gives in to American pressure vis-a-vis Russia, it will further push the convergence between Russia and China which may be not in India's favour.
- Also, an independent Russia is essential to keep Asia's geopolitics in balance, especially given the rise of China.
- Russia's role is very critical for the success of the International North-south Corridor and India's access to Central Asia.
- Russia has signalled that if India can exercise its sovereignty in the diversification of defence partners then Russia also has other options(engagement with Pakistan), which may not be in India's interest.
- India can benefit from hi-tech cooperation with Russia in the fields of artificial intelligence, robotics, biotechnology, outer space and nanotechnology and energy sector and other areas of critical technology

Way forward

- India must promote a mutually beneficial trilateral cooperation between Russia, China and India that could contribute towards the reduction of mistrust and suspicion between India and China.
- India today is in a unique position where it has favourable relation with all great powers, India must leverage this position to help in building a peaceful world order.
- India can also build upon and benefit from increase of trade between India and Russia.

Russia's closeness with China and Pakistan is tactical, mainly induced due to western sanctions, whereas Russia-India partnership is strategic. Russia always saw India as balancer that's why Russia facilitated India's inclusion into SCO and formation of RIC doctrine.

But if India didn't take proactive measures vis a vis Russia, and if Russia and China convergence continues to grow. In this context Russia can't act as a balancer for India against China. So India must very carefully conduct its foreign policy which is based on a long term policy, as Russia and India friendship is a win-win situation for both.

Drishti Input

Contemporary geopolitics presses the need for strategic convergence between India and the US, but it should not come at the expense of neglect of Russia by India. Comment.