



Prospects for Russia–India Relations in the Indian Ocean Region

Nitika Srivastava

ABSTRACT

The Indian Ocean can be a convergent and cooperative maritime space for India–Russia relations. Russia can achieve its ambitions to re-emerge as a “great power” and as an influential global player in international politics, while India can reinforce its dominance in the region. Since the 18th century, Russia has sought a presence in the Indian Ocean, and there is a long history of Soviet naval forces operating in the region. However with the disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), its influence was reduced dramatically. The increasing importance of the Indian Ocean to Russia has been driven by the fact that it is the home to two competitive economies – China and India – along with other emerging Indian Ocean Region countries. On the other hand, increasing Chinese activity, especially its ambitious One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative through the Indian Ocean Region, and Russia’s interest in joining the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) may have threatened India’s interests. While considering Russia–India relations, little has been explored beyond defence cooperation. Besides, India’s cold response to the OBOR initiative may lead to its marginalisation in the region.

In this context, an effective India–Russia political, economic and military collaboration in the Indian Ocean would be beneficial for both India’s security and Russia’s aspirations in the Indian Ocean.

Introduction

The Indian Ocean is an important strategic space that links Asia and Europe. The vital sea lines of communication (SLOC) that pass through it strengthen world economies.¹ Nearly 80% of the world’s seaborne trade in oil passes through Indian Ocean choke points. The strategic importance of the Indian Ocean means that major regional and extra-regional powers have deemed it crucial to maintain naval presence in the region. The US has its fifth fleet and allied strategic bases in the region. European countries such as Britain and France have also maintained their regional presence well beyond the colonial era. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) countries have also established cooperative agreements with several West Asian countries.² However, Russian presence has been conspicuous by its relative absence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

India, by virtue of its geographical position, has been a major power in the IOR for a long time. However, recent shifts of political and strategic alignments have placed

India's "traditional" and "time tested" relations with Russia under stress. The rise of China through its massive connectivity project, the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative, has the potential to change the economic anatomy of the region, coupled with the rising nexus among Russia, China and Pakistan. It is therefore important to understand these geopolitical changes, and analyse the manner in which they affect India's standing in the region.

Russia–India Relations

USSR–India relations date back to the Cold War period. India did not join any of the blocs, and formed a third collective of "non-aligned countries". However, India had a conspicuous leaning towards the Soviet Union, which decided to grant India a license as well as technical assistance for the production of military hardware, most notably the MiG-21 fighter aircraft.

The 1962 war with China resulted in a humiliating defeat for India. To counterbalance China in South Asia, the USSR placed greater emphasis on its relations with India. Eventually, the USSR decided to strengthen India's military capabilities, especially its air force, by supplying India with two squadrons of MiG-21s. In 1964, the Soviet Union declared that it would give "all possible military aid to India without any political conditions".³

In 1971, against the backdrop of the Indo–Pakistan war and the warming up of Sino–American relations, Indian foreign policy underwent a significant shift, leading to the Indo–Soviet Friendship treaty. This paved the way for India to obtain much-needed Soviet military equipment and technology, which were relatively cheap, yet very capable. India's increasing reliance on Soviet defence equipment led to some discomfort among the littoral countries of the Indian Ocean.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia inherited all its diplomatic relations, nuclear weapons and permanent seat on the United Nation Security Council (UNSC). In the formative years of the Russian Federation, relations with India were referred to as "traditionally friendly" and geographically important. The Indian armed forces have since become the largest importer of Russian armaments. Thus, relations between Russia and India have survived the test of time, and cataclysmic geopolitical shifts in the region.⁴

Post Cold War, both countries have had broadly similar perspectives on global issues. In 1994, the Declaration on the Protection of the Interests of Pluralist States was signed between Russia and India to address the threats posed by religious extremism, terrorism and separatism. Both countries have been concerned about Western domination, and the rise of China in the region. In the year 2000, the India–Russia Declaration of Strategic Partnership was signed, which enhanced levels of cooperation in the areas such as security, economy, defence, science and technology, and culture. In 2010, the strategic partnership was raised to the level of a "Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership".

In the field of defence, after some teething troubles, bilateral military relations progressed well and India acquired long-range maritime patrolling aircraft, a second aircraft carrier, and a nuclear-powered submarine, all from Russia. Despite these inroads, Russia claimed that its strategic interests were ignored when it came to India's security interests in the region.⁵ Russia has undoubtedly been the most consistent and reliable partner for India. Around 60–70% of Indian defence imports are from the Russian Federation.

Russia has also been supporting India in its bid for a permanent seat at the UNSC and membership of the Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and is also engaged with India in groupings such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russian Federation, India, China and South Africa) and RIC (Russia, India and China).⁶

History of the Russian Navy in the Indian Ocean

The Soviet Union had little interest in the Indian Ocean as compared to the Atlantic, Pacific or the Mediterranean. However, the British rulers of India in the 19th and 20th centuries harboured severe apprehensions, and took measures to defend the region from the Soviet Union's reach.⁷ In the initial years after independence, India made efforts to curb the presence of both the US and the USSR in the Indian Ocean, so as to establish its own predominant naval presence in the region. The Indian Ocean was important to Soviet strategists because it was the only maritime route connecting the European and Far Eastern regions of the USSR that was open all year. This encouraged the Soviet Union to abstain from any India-backed resolution at the United Nations (UN) calling for elimination of superpower rivalry from the Indian Ocean.⁸

Soviet presence in the Indian Ocean can be traced back to the late 1960s. Admiral Sergei Gorshkov, Commander-in-Chief of the Soviet Navy, visited India to explore the possibility of using Indian ports for refuelling and repairs by the Soviet Navy. He also carried with him offers for military naval sales. Four ships from Vladivostok made goodwill visits to six Indian Ocean countries – Sri Lanka, India, Kenya, Somalia, Pakistan and South Yemen.⁹

Subsequently, India's naval base at Vishakhapatnam was modernised with the help of the USSR.¹⁰ The presence of the Soviet Navy in the region also reduced the frequency of US warship visits to India, from 1971 to 1983.¹¹ In 1973, for the time, the Indian Ocean contingent of Soviet Navy carried out surveillance of the annual Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) naval exercise. It has been argued that Soviet naval deployment to the IOR was incremental through this period:

*The basic contingent of the Soviet naval units conducting routine operations of the Soviet Navy in the region usually used to consist of one destroyer, two destroyer escort, two minesweepers and an amphibious ship as well as a diesel submarine and seven auxiliary support ships, including a merchant tanker.*¹²

The collapse of the Soviet Union had major economic consequences for the Soviet Navy. The mighty Pacific Fleet was reduced to rust in ports. Eventually, cuts in the defence budgets caused serious constraints on Russian naval shipbuilding and operational activity. The Russian Navy lost its presence in the Indian Ocean, and even today continues to encounter major challenges in its attempt to regain its lost foothold. In the meantime, the sole superpower, the US, has become the predominant naval power in the Indian Ocean.

In 2001, the Russian government initiated efforts to revive the military-technical support for their ships at former military bases in the Indian Ocean, in Vietnam, Cuba and Seychelles. Russian activities in the Indian Ocean have since been exemplified by Moscow's participation in five joint exercises with India, known as the "Indra" series of exercises, since 2003. In July 2012, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogoz and Indian Defence Minister A.K. Antony agreed to a joint project for the development of the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile, to be built in India.

Russia has traditionally been India's largest arms supplier, but past disruptions and differences have led India to seek other sources, demonstrating a problem in Russia's approach to India that is of vital strategic interest. Despite these issues, India and Russia have a close military relationship, which spans a wide range of facets, from exercises and equipment to co-development.¹³

It is believed that the Russian Navy's antipiracy operations since 2008 were aimed to counter US involvement in the region.¹⁴ In 2015, a group of Russian Pacific Fleet warships held anti-air defence exercises in the Indian Ocean.¹⁵ However, presently, the Russian Navy's strength is nowhere near that of the Soviet Navy, and only a small number of its ships are able to deploy far from their ports for long periods.¹⁶

Potential of China's One Belt One Road

After giving a broad overview of Russia-India relations, as well as Russia's past and present naval activities in the IOR, it is pertinent to analyse the changing geopolitical scenario in the IOR that affects India's position, and encourages a better and deeper engagement with Russia in the region. In 2013, the Chinese government announced the "One Belt One Road" initiative, which consists of the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "Twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road" (MSR). It aims to encourage cooperation, common development and prosperity for the countries of Asia, Europe and Africa. It intends to shape Chinese domestic economic structure through connectivity and cooperation across the three continents.¹⁷ China's State Council issued the document *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road* in March 2015 which gives a comprehensive framework of OBOR initiative.¹⁸

The Indian Ocean is an important space in the MSR framework. MSR links China with Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean and Africa. The concept has its origin on land and in the sea-trading route that carried Chinese silk to Europe during the Han dynasty period. The MSR initiative symbolises a "masterstroke" of diplomacy by China and has created a model of Chinese statecraft for the future.¹⁹

China asserts that MSR has pure economic objectives and thus encourages the connectivity of sea trade through ports and related infrastructures. It affirms that port construction in the IOR would facilitate Chinese economic development as well as the development of other countries in the region.²⁰ So far, the MSR initiative in South Asia includes the construction of ports in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Myanmar and Bangladesh.²¹

India and the OBOR Initiative

India has been wary of the OBOR, for two important reasons. Firstly, it considers the initiative China's attempt to dominate the region, and, secondly, the project includes the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which disregards India's vital territorial and strategic concerns.²² However, ever since China launched the OBOR, most Indian economic analysts have regarded it as an opportunity to modernise India's old infrastructure and pave the way for speedy industrialisation and employment growth.

The undeniable truth today is that China has the finance capital and the technology, along with the overwhelming ability, to accelerate the development of smaller countries to unprecedented levels. It is also an irrefutable fact that the OBOR project would end

India's geographical supremacy over the rest of the South Asian countries. It is argued that by staying out of OBOR, India is choosing to only increase its isolation within South Asia, and moving towards the dilution of its regional stature. Experts are of the opinion that India should pass on this once-in-history opportunity to harness China's economic muscle for India's development.²³

The Russia, China and Pakistan Triad

Russia and China have enjoyed close economic relations since the signing of their natural gas agreement in 2014. China's OBOR initiative is an attempt to bring Russia into the economic and trading loop. The Russian Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov claims that Eurasia stretches from the "British Isles in the west to the Japanese islands in the east, from Arctic in the north to India, Iran and the Indian Ocean in the south".²⁴ The OBOR therefore covers all areas that concern Russia. China and Pakistan have come closer because of the CPEC, the project that connects Gwadar in Pakistan's Baluchistan province to Xinjiang in China. India has already objected to the project as it runs through the Gilgit-Baltistan region in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), which is claimed by India. Recently, in December 2016, Russia not only clearly stated its intentions to support the OBOR, but also proposed to connect its Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) project with it, alarming India. However, Russia has claimed that its relations with Pakistan will not affect its ties with India.²⁵ Whether this is actually the case, and India is able to prevent Russia from forming a deeper alliance with Pakistan, only time will tell.

By value, the US has superseded Russia as the largest supplier of military hardware to India. Therefore, Russia needs larger and diverse markets for its defence sales. Indian foreign policy has undoubtedly drifted in favour of the US in recent years, which has caused Russia to turn towards Pakistan. This vicious cycle of shifting geopolitical interests may result in new problems for India in the region.

Further, Russia, China and Pakistan have come together to highlight the emerging influence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Afghanistan and have asked the UN to lift its ban over six Taliban leaders. It is believed that Iran could soon join the triad. This is the first time that Russia, which had been India's traditional partner, has joined Pakistan and China, signalling the growing convergence of these countries over Afghanistan. Russia's abrupt decision to abandon India's deep-rooted concerns and anxieties with respect to terrorism emanating from Pakistan, and the destructive role played by it in fomenting terrorist acts in Afghanistan, has caused concerns in New Delhi. Also, this decision has given Pakistan an edge over India in Afghanistan's domestic affairs.²⁶ It has been argued that Russia's proximity to China may cause security as well as strategic challenges for India, especially in the South China Sea through which India hopes to reach out to Russia, Japan, Korea and the Pacific Ocean.²⁷

Scope for India–Russia Relations in the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC)

The OBOR initiative crosses the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC) which connects Russia and India through Iran. The project was initiated in 2000 and envisages establishing multimodal links from India to Europe. The transit and customs

agreement was signed in September 2015.²⁸ India has been working on important connectivity projects such as trade and transit corridors from Chabahar in Iran to Afghanistan. The Chabahar Agreement will enable India's access to the oil- and gas-rich Persian Gulf and Central Asia. Developing a port in Iran will offer an alternative access route to Afghanistan via Iran.

Port construction by India will also encourage the INSTC and its alliance with Russia. Iran's port will be the entry for moving freight between Iran, Russia, India and countries in Central Asia with an aim of increasing trade between major cities of these countries. Pakistan's naval base is located in the region, which remains a problem for India, and if Pakistan allows Chinese naval ships or submarines access at Gwadar port, this will further add to India's insecurities.²⁹

Common Goal of Multipolarity: The Way Forward

India and Russia commemorated the 70th anniversary of their diplomatic ties in 2017. The Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, highlighted that India and Russia have a common ambition for the 21st century and, thus, good relations with Russia was a key element of India's foreign policy. Russia-India relations span a number of sectors including defence, nuclear energy, space and energy security ties. However, in 2016, a series of major bilateral agreements with greater emphasis on economic ties were signed between India and Russia. Russia in its "Foreign Policy Concept" for 2016 has stated that

*it is committed to further strengthening its special privileged partnership with the Republic of India based on the convergence of foreign policy priorities, historical friendship and deep mutual trust, as well as enhancing mutually beneficial bilateral ties in all areas, primarily in trade and economy, with a focus on implementing long-term cooperation programmes approved by the two countries.*³⁰

After the Ukraine crisis, Russia has sought stronger relations with India and China. Both India and China complement Russia's aspirations for a multipolar world order. However, it can be argued that Russia's relation with China is a "marriage of convenience", because of mutual hostility towards the US. Both Russia and China are working on the strategic partnership, but with India it has a history of friendship since the Cold War.

India has been restrained in criticising Russia's intervention in Crimea, while China has been quite vocal regarding its support to Russia in the act, and has called for talks to find a political solution to the problems.³¹ This reaction from India is attributed to a number of reasons, such as its socialist sentiments from the Cold War days, a realist foreign policy based on economic relations, and, most importantly, India's ambition to make a multipolar world order in which Russia has an important role to play.³² This is probably the right way for India to revive and solidify its engagement with Russia in the region. The common goal of making a multipolar world, and the reinvigoration of historically friendly ties between the two countries, could be their strongest weapon against other rivals in the region.

Conclusion

There is a long history of Soviet naval forces in the Indian Ocean, but with the disintegration of the USSR, this has been drastically reduced. Recent years have, however,

witnessed a renewed effort by Russia to make its presence felt in the region, and to regain a foothold in the Indian Ocean. Russia is also seeking a key role in the OBOR project, which has the potential to elevate China to be a leader in the region.³³ Russia views its engagement with the OBOR as a means to accomplish its resurgence in the IOR. But the Russia, Pakistan and China triad, which is taking shape under the umbrella of the CPEC, is something that India would not want to face.

The historically close ties between India and Russia indicate that there is ample scope for building upon and advancing a bilateral relationship for mutual benefit.³⁴ It is not merely a “marriage of convenience”; rather, it is a relationship founded on years of friendship and cooperation. India and Russia may not have directly related objectives in the region, but they have two fundamental commonalities: firstly, the need to balance against the US or China taking centre stage in the region, and, secondly, the desire to evolve a multipolar world.

In this scenario, India must revive and solidify its historical relations with Russia in the region. INSTC and OBOR are two platforms through which Russia can regain its lost position in the region and, at the same time, deeper ties with Russia can assist India to balance against the rise of China and the US in the region. In this regard, India may also consider joining the OBOR initiative. Under the current circumstances, Russia may develop a partnership with India, Pakistan and Iran to facilitate its resurgence in the region. In this rapidly changing geopolitical landscape, it is time that India decided on its preferred path, and acted in a mutually beneficial manner.

Notes

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Notes on contributor

Nitika is a PhD candidate at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. She can be reached at nitikasrivastava07@gmail.com