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Russian-Indian Defence Co-operation Reaches A Deadlock

In the 2000s, Russia began to perceive India as a strategic partner for joint technical military projects. The reason behind Russia's thinking is clear: India had become the main buyer of Russian arms. The first experience of a project in this area was the joint development of a supersonic cruise missile called BrahMos. Then Moscow decided to ask India to collaborate on developing a new fighter jet and a new military transport aircraft. It also sold a cruiser-carrier to Delhi and leased out a new nuclear submarine. The two countries have even considered ideas of joint space projects but without any tangible results so far.

Recently, though, relations between the two countries have come under strain: contradictions and discontent are starting to show. India has already withdrawn from some joint aviation projects with Russia. Why did this happen? What are the foreign policy prospects of the Kremlin which, for many years, tried to build partnership relations with India, also in an attempt to strike a balance in its relations with China?

Aviation: A dispute on money and technology

Back in 2007, Moscow and New Delhi agreed to jointly create a fifth-generation fighter jet, based on the T-50, a Russian designed jet. In India, this project is called FGFA. Over the past ten years, India has invested USD 300 million in project development, but Russia is asking its partners for at least another USD 6.7 billion to implement the project. Perhaps this was exactly the goal of the Russian government: to make India take on a significant part of the financing for the Russian T-50, thereby tethering India to Moscow. In return, Russia promised to share both the aircraft technology and the related engines with India. And the technology transfer would nevertheless entail a long-term partnership between Russian developers with Indian producers. This would further bind Indian authorities and companies with the Kremlin.

The problem, however, is that the available characteristics of the aircraft under development, as well as the cost of each unit, were unsatisfactory for the Indian military. The main proponent of the project continuation in India is the state-owned company Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd. As regards the new engines, they are simply not yet ready: the prototypes of the Russian T-50 are flying with engines from the previous generation.

The reason for all these inconsistencies may lie in the general condition of Russia's aviation industry, which has undergone serious difficulties in trying to develop new technologies. For example, a new engine for the T-50 has been under development for almost 20 years. Quality problems also arise in the production of serial equipment. For instance, the 45 Russian Mig-29K deck aircraft delivered to India have serious defects and regularly break down, which hardly helps to strengthen the mutual understanding between the two countries.

The Russian-Indian project for the MTA, a military transport plane, ended much more rapidly. The practical work was launched in 2012, and finally discontinued as early as 2017. As in the case of the new fighter, the Russian programme for the development of the IL-214 aircraft was the starting point of that project (after India's departure, the aircraft was renamed IL-276). Apparently, it was going to be implemented in the same way: Indian money plus Russian technology. Considering that the project did not progress beyond drawings and exhibition mock-ups over the course of five years, one can come to the conclusion that the failed co-operation can be blamed onto the weakness of Russia's industry.

The project involving a supply of Russian light multi-purpose helicopters Ka-226T to India with subsequent localisation of assembly in India at a joint Russian-Indian enterprise has been much more successful. The key to success in this case is the presence of a machine that was finished a long time ago and went to mass production in Russia. Interestingly, these helicopters use French Arrius 2G1 engines. At the same time, both the manufacturer of helicopters ('Vertolyoti Rossii') and Rosoboronexport, which supplies them to India, were included in the new U.S. sanctions list.

This list was drawn up under the implementation of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, passed in August 2017. On the one hand, the U.S. law may be painful for Russia's helicopter deliveries to India but, on the other hand, it can trigger accelerated localisation of Ka-226T production in that country. It cannot be ruled out that Russia will try to use localisation as a mechanism to bypass American sanctions.

In parallel to the supplies, Moscow was interested in selling a stake in 'Vertolyoti Rossii' to India. However, while New Delhi is ready to buy Russian helicopters, it is not ready to invest money in Russia's state-owned companies (considering the uneasy experience with FGFA) or to take political risks with unclear benefits. All in all, it is one thing to buy Russian aircraft, quite another to pay for technology development on Russian terms and without guaranteed success.

The navy: Dissatisfaction and suspicions

In 2004, India bought a heavy aircraft-carrying cruiser called Admiral Gorshkov from Russia, and renamed it into Vikramaditya. In all respects, this ship is close to the Russian aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov and the aircraft carrier Liaoning, sold by Russia to China. The purchase was made on condition of thorough modernisation to be carried out by the Russian side. After numerous delays and problems, the ship was finally transferred to India in 2013. Since then, Russia has provided warranty and post-warranty maintenance of the ship, helping India to improve the infrastructure for such services.

Of course, this was not India's only purchase of naval weapons from Russia: diesel-electric submarines and frigates were supplied to India as well. However, from the perspective of Moscow's political goals, which presuppose building a long-term partnership with India, what played the key role was the supply of an aircraft carrier with attached weaponry and service contracts over decades of operation.

In 2012, India also leased the Russian nuclear submarine 'Nerpa' (Indian name: Chakra), armed with cruise missiles and torpedoes. Moreover, it is considering a lease of another nuclear submarine.

In addition, Russia expects to sell two more frigates to India, which it cannot finish building due to the unavailability of ship engines that used to be supplied from Ukraine, and French diesel generators. Indians have to buy the engines from Kyiv by themselves. In addition, they will get the opportunity to build two more similar frigates at their shipyard. In this case, the Kremlin uses technology transfer also as a political tool to strengthen its ties and to reduce risks for its military industry caused by Western sanctions. However, the high price of ships is a problem: more than USD 500 million for a ship without an engine, instead of USD 430 million for a finished frigate until 2014. Apparently, by playing around with prices, Moscow wants to compensate for the inefficiency of its shipyards.

It would seem that nothing can disturb this marine idyll, which is in stark contrast with the problems in aviation. And even the financial issues are quite manageable. However, November 2017 saw a scandal when Moscow accused New Delhi of admitting the U.S. military to a submarine which was used under a lease arrangement (but not owned).

The Kremlin's political interest towards co-operation with India cannot be overestimated in the context of its confrontation with the West and its ensuing need to balance relations with China. In other words, the story with the U.S. military on the Russian submarine should not cause serious harm in this case. However, the Russian navy still has several submarines built according to the same design as Nerpa/Chakra. They actually cover up for submarines with ballistic missiles. Moscow's nervous reaction to this situation is probably due not only to its insecurity about India as a tenant, but also in Russia's submarines.

As a result, it turns out that when it comes to military-technical cooperation projects with India, the Kremlin always seeks the role of the 'senior partner', which seems quite presumptuous in its current situation. But, at

the same time, it is very difficult for the Kremlin to achieve its goals given the inefficiency of the Russian military-industrial complex and Russia's political and economic institutions in general. Of course, India will remain the main buyer of Russian arms for some time, but Russia will not be able to translate this into a large-scale military-industrial partnership in the foreseeable future. Therein lies the deadlock.

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