

## Indo-Russian Strategic Relations under Putin

Surat Khan\*

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### Abstract

*Trust, mutual understanding and compatibility, and common interests in the international system remained the pillars of Indo-Russian relations for seventy years. It brought them closer to each other to cooperate in the areas of defense, trade and technology. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, both New Delhi and Moscow experienced a low-level relation, but since the coming of Putin, relations between the two have taken a new turn. Besides strategic cooperation, the nations joined hands to make policies for better diplomacy, multipolar world, countering insurgencies, climate change, technology and defense cooperation and terrorism. Besides this strong partnership and common interests, Indo-Russia is facing multiple challenges, particularly in the wake of changing dynamics in Asia politics. This research intends to analyze the history of the indo-Russian strategic partnership with a specific focus on Putin's era.*

**Key Words:** Soviet Union, Diplomacy, Multipolar world, Terrorism

## Introduction

Post-Independent India was tilted towards Communist bloc in the initial years. Nehru, who was the first Prime Minister of India, was deeply influenced by the 1917 Russian revolution and even planned to change its economic policies per socialist contours. As decades passed, relations between both remained time-tested and stable for the last seventy years. Both have recognized each other's importance and considered it beneficial to cope with certain economic, political and strategic challenges.

Just after the Indo-China war in 1962, both countries have signed bilateral agreements under which Soviet-supplied India aircraft and air-fighters. It was further consolidated from 1970 to 80. Russia propounded the idea of the Asian security, and enhance its interests in the Indian Ocean. The Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation of 1971 proved to be a turning point for both India and Russia. It was an alliance in which it was decided that mutual consultation will be carried out of either country is attacked. It has not only to enhanced cooperation but "acted as a guarantor of regional peace. The treaty may have been replaced by its modern version, but its legacy continues to underpin the burgeoning strategic partnership between India and Russia"(Mohanty, 2011). In the late 1980s, Delhi has received a wider range of advanced and sophisticated weapons

The fall of the Soviet Union and its disintegration into 15 sovereign states created a situation of chaos and anarchy. Soviet faced a near collapse and breakdown in its administrative system. These changes deeply affected the strategic relation of India with Russia. But things shifted dramatically after the coming of Vladimir Putin as the president of Russia. The Putin era is generally termed as a period of transformation for the Russia-India relations. Since his time, a partnership between India and Russia took a new turn. Besides strategic cooperation, the nations joined hands to make policies for better diplomacy, multipolar world,

\*PhD, Department of Political Science, University of Peshawar, Peshawar, KP, Pakistan. Email: [suratkhan81@yahoo.com](mailto:suratkhan81@yahoo.com)

countering insurgencies, climate change, technology and defense cooperation and terrorism. Russia is among those states that vividly supported Indian inclusion in the nuclear Supplier Group and for a permanent seat in the United Nation Security Council. Russia under President Putin remained a reliable supplier of frontline defense equipment and strategic weapons to India at reasonable prices. The recent successful conclusion of S-400 missile defense pact is a case in point. It is an important addition to the Indian's military hardware, and it shows how much Russia considers India an important strategic and defense ally.

To wrap up the introduction it is pertinent to mention that based on the basis of deep and strong historical ties, and the recent major developments under Putin era, Indo-Russian relations' core pillars remained strategic partnership and military, economic, political cooperation, and reflects confidence and trust. It is expected, under the common interests and challenges, that Moscow and Delhi will strengthen their old traditions of friendship in the future.

## **Research Questions**

1. What are the areas where India and Russia have common interests and ambitions?
2. What are the major challenges in the Moscow and New Delhi partnership?
3. What will be the future of Indo-Russia relations?

## **Significance of the Research**

The basis for Indo-Russian strategic relations is trust, mutual understanding and compatibility, and competing interests in the international system, which brought them closer to each other to counter security-related issues. The Putin era is generally termed as a period of transformation for the Russia-India relations. Since his time, a partnership between India and Russia took a new turn. Besides strategic cooperation, the nations joined hands to make policies for better diplomacy, multipolar world, countering insurgencies, climate change, technology and defense cooperation and terrorism. This paper, while studying in detail the areas of convergences and challenges of Indo-Russia relations, will add a new dimension to the existing literature.

## **Methodology**

The research is based on qualitative and analytical methods. For this paper, the researcher has consulted secondary data comprising of books, research journals, magazines, articles and newspapers. The collected data was analyzed and conclusions were drawn by using the dependency theory in the theoretical framework.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Path-dependence is a relevant approach that can provide an important explanation of why. India and Russian maintained robust relationships throughout the last seven decades. It explains why the decisions made today are based on the knowledge and experience of the past. Decision and choices are conditioned by history. Path-dependence doesn't mean past dependence, it predicts future prospects. Russia and India relations will dominate the area of defense in the coming years.

## **Literature Review**

The basis for Indo-Russian strategic relations is trust, mutual understanding and compatibility, and competing interests in the international system, which brought them closer to each other to counter security-related issues (Stobdan, 2010). The security dimension of India shaped the strategic relations between Delhi and Moscow. The 1954 defense agreements between the US and Pakistan provided with the Soviet an

opportunity to establish strategic relations with India. The 1962 Sino-Indo has further strengthened ties and supplemented by a high-level military exchange (Achuthan, 2010).

In 1962, relations between Sino-Russia has touched the lowest point and Moscow was looking for an alternative. India was the best option and the fitted into space exactly. The US refused to provide sophisticated weapons to India, and Soviet for its own strategic benefits filled that gap (Nirmala, 2001).

The entire spectrum of Indo-Russian relations is based on military and strategic cooperation. The 1965 war between Pakistan and India and imposition of sanctions by the US provided an opportunity for Delhi to become the principal importer of arms and military equipment (Tatiana, 2010). For Delhi, Russia is the country it cannot afford to ignore. It is the only state with whom India has mutual strategic compatibility and deep military partnership for decades. Both countries have cooperated in the fields of nuclear, defense and heavy military industry sectors for their strategic interest (Lansford, 2002). After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the ice that froze the relations started melting down when Yeltsin visited Delhi. He said that India and Russia are 'Natural Partners', but he will never establish relations in a way inimical to detrimental to the interests of the third party in the region (Sangeeta, 2016). Since the inception of Putin, ties between Delhi and Moscow have achieved many milestones in their strategic partnership. In his first visit, in 2000, he signed the 'Delhi Declaration on Strategic partnership'. He said that "the history of our relations between our countries shows that what can be achieved if goodwill and mutual confidence are the cornerstones of the common cause" (Gaur, 2001). The distinctive feature of the two states' strategic ties is that it has a deep and strong political foundation. The relation, under Putin, is based on military cooperation, regional security and technological assistance. While cooperation in other fields remained limited, the strategic partnership gone deeper and deeper. Russia remained a permanent alternative to counterbalance United States and pressure and sanction (Business Line, 2018). Although, relationships today hinge only on military and technological assistance, where Russia is supplying 60% military and strategic equipment. This deep dependency can create problems because Moscow may not be in a position to satisfy the Delhi demands. India has deep reservations over Russia-Pakistan growing partnership, and Russia is worried about US-India deep relationships (Godbole, 2018).

## **Indo-Russia Relations: Areas of Convergence**

### **Multi-Polarity**

Both India and Russia have a long history of cooperating for world peace and stability. They are working together for solving outstanding issues such as global terrorism, the Syrian crisis, chemical weapons and climate change, through international and regional forums such as BRICS, SCO and G20. "India and Russia believe that it is necessary to consolidate the multipolar world and multipolar relationship", says Narendra Modi after his meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Delhi sees Moscow as an important partner in achieving stable, peaceful and multipolar world order. The regional character is manifested in their cooperation in multilateral forums. Indian Premier stated that "it is necessary to cooperate in the regional organization in regional organizations and venues, for example, the SCO, ASEAN, and G20 (TASS NEWS AGENCY, 2018).

After the Sochi meeting, in May 2018, between Russian President and Indian Prime Minister, both vowed to work together for a strong multipolar world, "and agreed on the importance of building a multipolar world order" (The Hindustan Times, 2018).

Russia-India-China, commonly known as RIC, urged to strengthen multilateralism and to bring reforms in the international forums such as the UN and WTO. They agreed to enhance efforts for the open global economy. The three leaders shared their view of expanding cooperation to steer the global economy in a way that can help the world. Other issues of mutual interest were discussed and agreed they three countries should "work together on terrorism, promotion of peace and stability in regional crisis, disaster relief and humanitarian assistance (Dipnanjan, 2018).

As for issues of international concern, both India and Russia share their views. It includes the Syrian crisis, Iran nuclear deal, chemical weapons and climate change. Regarding the issues of Syria, Delhi is supporting the stance of Moscow. India welcomes the Astana process which was initiated to solve the Syrian crisis, and "voted on the favour of a Russian-Chinese proposal on Syria at a session of the Organization for Prohibition of Chemical Weapons" ([Dipanjan, 2018](#)). It supports the inclusive settlement and asks for humanitarian assistance for the stability of Syria. Both are on the same page on the issues of Iran nuclear pact. Both Russia and India refused to abide by the sanctions imposed by the US on Iran. On global international issues, there are commonalities between the two and both have rejected "west's politicization of organization for the prohibition of chemical weapons and India acknowledged the early completion of full destruction of chemical weapons" (Bhadrakumar, 2018). Both show opposition to the placement of weapons in outer space as a result of the United States move to establish 'US Space Command' in the Pentagon. Delhi and Moscow showed firm support for the Paris agreement on climate change.

### Interests in the Indo-Pacific Architecture

Indo-Specific, originally, a geographic concept that represents two regions of the Pacific and India Ocean. It is a new concept and, but its importance increased in the contemporary era because of the geostrategic competition among different great powers. Ten years ago, Gurpreet s. Khurana, who was a marine strategist and director of the New Delhi National Marine Foundation, used the term "Indo-Pacific strategy" ([Gurpreet, 2018](#)). Recently, in 2017, the concept of Indo-Pacific has gained momentum, and multiple are involved to dominate the region for various reasons. Although, Indo-Pacific means the Indian Ocean and not specifically India, "it is impossible to think about the Indo-Pacific without considering the role of India" ([The Hindustan Times, 2017](#)).

India has remained a country having outstanding national interest and it is considered to be the most important actor in the Indo-Pacific region, it has multiple ambitions; to enhance its interest in the Southeast-Asia; to expand its influence in South Asia; and to increase its military, economic and strategic interest. Russia, who remained a loyal partner of India for decades, has manifested its growing interests in the Asia Pacific, specifically in the Indo-Pacific region. Both countries want to keep anyone from dominating the region, and to keep it open for free trade Indian Prime Minister stated that "both countries have common interests in cooperating on terrorism, developments in Afghanistan and Indo-Pacific" ([Report, 2018](#)).

Delhi and Moscow supported the idea of establishing regional security architecture, and their policy is based on the non-bloc principle, principles of open, equal and collective security.

Moreover, India views Russia as an alternative to balance the role of the US, China, because India wants cooperation based on multilateralism and not the dominancy of any single country. Russia engaged in the Asia Pacific to increase influence against the US and its allies. The two sides agreed on the non-bloc security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region and "there are strong desires on both sides to strengthen their enduring friendship of Russia and India where geopolitical formulation like Indo-Pacific hold significance" ([India Observers, 2018](#)). India and Russia have engagement and cooperation for the eradication of piracy, trade and safe shipping.

India, Iran and Russia are working to strengthen the North-South Transport corridor that was launched in 2000. The INSTC is a passage that connects the India Ocean with the Persian Gulf through Iran to Russia" (Iranian TV, 2018).

It is a long route that comprises of rails, roads and water passages. The corridor will possibly reduce the time and cost by 40% and will increase the trade and economic activities between Russian and India. Analysts are of the view that the new corridor is a response of India to China's Belt Road Initiative (BRI). Furthermore, India is making efforts to put in place the maritime route that will connect Chennai (India's major city) and Vladivostok (Russia's major port in the Pacific). This will enable the cargo and goods to reach

from India to Far East Russia within 24 days in comparison to 40 days. This route will give new opportunities to India to invest in the area full of natural resources, gold, minerals and diamond.

## **Economic Cooperation and Trade**

India and Russia have an important relationship when it comes to trade and the economy. The partnership has strengthened with time, especially under Putin. Delhi to Moscow trade acquired a new pace and significance after 2000 with the agreement of the Declaration on the Indo-Russian strategic partnership. This partnership was evolved and replaced with "Special and Privileged strategic partnership in 2010. The areas of cooperation that were proposed in these agreements are agriculture, infrastructure, medicine, transport and science and technology.

Over the last few years, trade remained at about \$6 billion. As per data available, India's export to Russia increased from 0.94 billion US dollars to 1.9 billion US dollars from 2007 to 2017, which grew by 20%. Russia's exports to India observed a hike from \$2.5 billion in 2007 to 5.7 Billion dollars in 2007. "In 2017 the total bilateral trade was \$10.17 billion" (Report, 2018). The major imports from Russia are jewelry, gem, petroleum products, iron and steel. India's exports to Russia generally include pharmaceutical products, coffee, tea and chemicals. India has a total investment of 13 billion USD in Russia, and the latter has a total investment of 18 billion dollars in 2017. The "two ways bilateral trade have already crossed \$30 billion targets, and both want to enhance this figure to \$50 billion by the year 2025" ([The Diplomat, 2018](#)).

## **Energy, and Technology**

Russia and India are cooperating to develop and strengthen their energy sectors. In the last few years, both countries have implemented large-scale projects in energy sectors, particularly in nuclear energy, Oil and Gas. Energy emerged as the second-largest area of cooperation between countries after the defense.

The core area of their partnership is nuclear-energy, especially after the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency decision regarding the entry of India's-Specific" safeguards agreement, and removal of restrictions on the export of nuclear materials to India by the Nuclear Supplier Group, in 2008. As per reports, the total "installed capacity of India's nuclear power plants is expected to reach 63 GW by 2032, up from the current 6.2 GW" (<http://www.world-nuclear.org>).

Rosatom, the Russian-state-owned nuclear energy company, is the only foreign company that established nuclear power units on India. It has constructed the first stage of Kudankulam nuclear power project in the district of Tamil Nadu, and the second stage just begins in 2017. "Both nations are searching for a new site to host six more Russian-designed nuclear power units" (Rosatom, 2017). As per vision to strengthen the cooperation for peaceful and useful uses of Atomic energy between Delhi and Moscow, Russia will construct more than 12 nuclear power units in India by 2020.

As for as Gas and oil are concerned, India is the third-largest energy consumer, and Russia is the key exporter to natural resources. Both countries need to complement each other. The contracted volumes of oil and gas are enough to cover about 10 percent of the gas and 5 percent of the oil. In 2012, Gazprom, which is the largest Russian company that carries extraction and production of Gas, has signed agreements with the GAIL, which is India's No. 1 Gas company. As per rules, Gazprom "will supply 2.5 million tones LNG to India, and the delivery is set to begin in 2018. Moreover, in 2015, Rosneft, the Russian leading oil company, 10 years' agreement with Essar, the global Indian-based conglomerate group which controls energy resources. As per the agreement, "Essar will deliver 100 million tones crude oil to Vadinar refinery, the oil terminal in India" (Rosneft, 2015). The deal is \$12.9 billion, and it will take the inflow of direct investment of Russia to India to the new heights.

In the field of technology, specifically the defense equipment, Russia and India hold deep relations, and both have bilateral cooperation based on mutual trust that will grow further. Moscow remained the key

supplier to India in terms of arms, ammunition and heavy weapons. Russia is exporting about 60% of military equipment and technology to India. In July 2018, both countries have decided to upgrade the bilateral defense system. The joint statement states that; "we will upgrade and intensify military cooperation, through joint manufacture, co-production and co-development of military hardware and military spares" (Economic Times, 2018).

During the 17 summit, Delhi and Moscow signed an agreement for the construction of Frigates, the modern defense navies, and the formation of joint ventures to manufacture the Ka-226T helicopter in India. During the 19<sup>th</sup> annual summit, the two sides agreed on the supply of S-400 air defense technology worth \$5 billion. Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that "Russia's cumulative investment in India amounts to about \$4 billion, while Indian businesses have invested twice as much as in the Russia economy---about \$8 billion"(KSENIA, 2017).

Other than defense areas, Russia is investing in the fields of IT, energy corridors, space, and deep-ocean technology to unearth natural resources. In 2016, both Russia and India signed MoU for the establishment of ground measurement gathering stations, and both are searching for the possibility of cooperation in manned space flights. Indian Prime Minister said that "Russia has always been with us in the development of the journey of India. The next goal is to send an Indian astronaut in Gaganyaan with the help of Moscow (NDTV, 2018).

## **Indo-Russia Relationship: Challenges**

### **Pak-Russia Rapprochement: Indian Concerns**

Relations between Pakistan and Russia have experienced an improvement in the last few years, especially after the initiation of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The relations are based on mutual interests and common ambitions. In 2015, Russia signed to deliver Mi-35 to Pakistan and expressed a desire to "invest \$2 billion in the North-South gas pipeline project"(Ghani, 2018). Pak-Russia trade jumped 82% in the first six months of 2018, and "Moscow is helping with the 1.100km gas pipeline linking Lahore to Karachi" (Jafry, 2018). Both countries have conducted military drills in 2016, and 2017 respectively. Furthermore, Islamabad and Moscow signed agreements in August 2018 through which Pakistani soldiers will receive training in the military institutions of Russia.

Friendly relations between Pak-Russia is an irritant for Delhi. "In a partnership of Russia, China and Pakistan, India can be the biggest loser (Global Times, 2018).

At the times, when India is trying to isolate Pakistan in the wake of Mumbai, Uri attacks and to cope with Kashmir insurgency, a joint cooperation between Islamabad and Moscow is not in India's interest. Russia's reluctance to postpone its military exercise with Pakistan due to Indian concerns clearly indicates a major shift in the Moscow towards South Asia. Russia sidestepped the issue of Kashmir. Putin views that issue as bilateral and stated that "it was up to India to assess whether Pakistan was fueling terrorism in Kashmir". Anyone, having a basic understanding of the Indo-Russian ties knows the importance of Kashmir issue, and it was Russia that vetoes Pakistan's stance regarding Kashmir in favour of India. Praising the efforts of Islamabad in countering terrorism, Putin stressed that "I believe Pakistan is taking immense steps to stabilize the situation in the country" (First post, 2018). In response to these developments, India's ambassador to Russia said that "Russia's military cooperation with Pakistan which is a state of sponsoring terrorism as a matter of State policy is a wrong approach and it will create further problems" (Valuwalk.com, 2018). Close cooperation between Russia and Pakistan can thwart the ambition of India to become regional hegemony.

### **Sino-Russia Entente: Implications for India**

In the world where new powers and alliances are emerging, Sino-Russia relations will definitely determine the politics of the future. There are multiple areas of common interest between the two emerging powers,

and they are coordinating through the UN Security Council, BRICS, and SCO to maintain and strengthen the multipolar world. Both are giving an alternative to the viewpoint of the West. Moscow thinks that despite nuclear superiority, it can't equalize the conventional forces of Beijing. Similarly, China fears that if Russia joins the Western bloc, it would get isolated and encircled. To avoid the possibility of being confronted with each other both are "trying to bind their nations together through a web of military, economic, energy and social ties" ([Nandan and Uma, 2015](#)).

Both have re-started their cooperation in the field of military and defense and China received Russian weapons worth \$2 billion from 2011 and 2013. Russia is developing its Eastern Military District and established "Vostok", the Unified strategic command, for defending the Sino-Russian border. In September, both China and Russia have conducted an unprecedented military drill, in which 300,000 soldiers and helicopters took part. Both have held many joint military exercises but "the inclusion of 3,200 Chinese troops. Along with 30 aircrafts, into the Russian military maneuvers gives these exercises an altogether new dimension" ([The Diplomat, 2018](#)).

Russia delivered around US\$15 billion worth of weapons to the Chinese in 2017. Russia's export of Su-30 30MKK fighters and especially the Su-35, and S-400 air defense system will disturb the military balance between China and India.

The Russia-China growing partnership in terms of defense and arms is not free of costs for India. For New Delhi, this poses real threats and challenges. India's option is limited and it has either to cooperate with China and Russia and to balance the two by siding with the United States. If India chose the latter, coordination between Russia and China on international forums will squeeze her options. New Delhi cannot afford to lose either Russian or US. Russia has started cooperation with Pakistan due to China's influence despite India's reservations. Russia is at the forefront for advising India not to confront the Belt and Road Initiative, and CPEC.

### **China Pakistan Economic Corridor: An irritant for Indo-Russian Partnership**

The most disturbing factor for to India was the decision of Russia to support the China Pakistan Economic Corridor, "and Moscow has not just declared strong support for the China-funded project but also announced its intention to link its own Eurasian Economic Union project with CPEC" ([BUSINESS RECORDER, 2017](#)).

The first thing is that CPEC passes through the controversial area claimed by both India and Pakistan, and both are fighting for its control. Secondly, the attacks on Indian bases in Uri, Pathankot and Kashmir were displayed by the Modi Government as the epitome of blame game policy. He accused Pakistan of being involved in the attacks and sponsoring terrorism and left no stone unturned to isolate it. Thirdly, it will diminish the Delhi's hegemony in the Indian Ocean and the strait of Malaka.

India thought that other countries aside, Russia will support him, and would act as an aggressor towards Pakistan. But things happened oppositely and Russia emerged as an unpredictable friend of Pakistan, especially in the wake of CPEC and Gwadar Port inauguration. Russia firmly supported and backed the projects, giving Indian policymakers sleepless nights. As per reports published by the high-level Indian authority, it is stated that "Moscow is no longer see India as a reliable friend or partner. Indeed, by seeking common cause with India's regional adversaries, including by supporting the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and engaging with the Pakistan-backed Taliban, Russia is challenging India's core interest" (India Times, 2018).

### **Russia Engagement with the Taliban in Afghanistan**

Russia is busy to engage the Taliban and bring them to the negotiations table. Nonetheless, Moscow is doing so for its own political and strategic interests and benefits. It has growing concerns about the ISIS and

other terrorist groups in Afghanistan. To have a peaceful settlement, it has conducted two high-level meetings with the Taliban leaders in Moscow in November 2018. Russian Foreign Minister stated that "the conflict cannot be resolved by force, no matter which strategies foreign capitals may approve" ([Kashish, 2018](#)).

On the other hand, India has reservations over this engagement of Moscow with the Taliban. Taliban have a record of hostility towards Delhi and are enjoying good relations with Islamabad. India ministry issued a stance which states that "We don't see any downward trend in our bilateral relationship... but it is clear that India has been disturbed by recent events"(Akhilesh, 2016).

India wants the continuity of US presence in Afghanistan to support the interests of Washington, and her presence will provide a net of objective security to the region in the backdrop of the Taliban's control. New Delhi thinks that as a result of US withdrawal, the Taliban may emerge as an influential political actor that can hamper her interests in Afghanistan, Central Asia and in the region as a whole. Moreover, given "India lobbying for continued NATO presence in Afghanistan, Russia is likely to garner the support for its narrative through the SCO" ([Kashish, 2018](#)).

### **Conclusion: Futuristic Perspective**

In the wake of the major shift in the political environment of Asia, the question looms over the future of Delhi and Moscow relations, particularly in the wake of China's rise, Indo-US growing strategic partnership and Pakistan-Russia cooperation. Scholars and analysts are of the view that India's tilt towards the US and Russia's growing partnership with Pakistan can thwart the seven decades-old partnership between New Delhi and Moscow in the future. But it is not so. During their last meeting in 2018, both Modi and Putin have made efforts to ward off these growing apprehensions in their relations. In concluding the \$5.43 billion S-400 defense system, India signaled that despite its strategic and military cooperation with the United States, New Delhi will remain dependent on Russia in the fields of missile technology, buying of arms and submarines. The deal also shows that India will demonstrate an independent foreign policy towards Moscow despite the threat of US sanctions.

In the future, both India and Russia will rationally play their cards without putting all their eggs in one basket. On one hand, India will continue to balance its relations with Washington in the Indo-Pacific and with Russia in Eurasia. New Delhi will maintain its ties with the US to avoid sanctions, to counter China's rise in the region and its strong relations with Pakistan. It will seek common goals and interests with Moscow. Russia, on the other hand, will keep pushing India's entry into the Nuclear Supplier Group and will help New Delhi in the fields of defense, economy and technology. Moreover, Moscow will keep the policy of bilateralism with both China and Pakistan in the future that will prove to be a real test for the Indo-Russian relations. But the world is expecting no enmity and breakup in Moscow and New Delhi partnership in the coming years.

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