

**POST-SOVIET ASIAN POLICY:
RUSSIAN DIPLOMATIC ACTIVITY IN CHINA AND INDIA (1991–1999)**

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Abstract: This article is an attempt to revisit the Asian policy of the Russian Federation in the Post-Cold War era. More specifically, the aim of this article is to determine the origins of Moscow's current strategic alliances with China and India in a historical trajectory from 1991 to 1999. To this end, the article focused on Russian diplomatic activities, state visits, cooperation strategies and signed agreements within this timeframe. Then, in the context of these diplomatic efforts, the article discussed how the priorities of each government could affect these initiatives with a focus on their national concerns, geopolitical imperatives and global strategies. Following these discussions, the article concluded that a revival of global status was at the heart of Russia's Asian diplomacy. Moreover, it was concluded that while foreign relations with China and India had emerged from two different historical processes, the common interests and imperatives that were mutually perceived by these states were crucial in reaching strategic agreements and shaping post-Soviet alliances.

Keywords: *Soviet Union, Cold War, India, China, Russian foreign policy, post-Cold War era*

INTRODUCTION

Russia's relations with Asian countries have demonstrated stable development over the years. In this regard, the purpose of the current research is to revisit the Asian policy of the Russian Federation in the Post-Cold War era to find the origins of current strategic alliances between Russia, China and India. The significance of this research lies in the growing importance of Asia as an economic and military sphere of influence where Russia, China and India seek to shape and promote a multipolar system despite their differences. On the other hand, a review of recent diplomatic activities suggests that the so-called "pivot to Asia" has also become a spearhead of Kremlin's reinvigorated Eurasian policy [Lukin (2016); Mankoff (2015)]. In the following discussions, this article argues that the depth of current relations is due to the generally stable and forward-looking initiatives that Russia pursued under Boris Yeltsin (1991-1999) to form a coherent Asian policy.

Historically, the collapse of the Soviet Union unleashed a myriad of mixed assessments and sentiments across the world, especially among the Western political thinkers who speculated about the fate of former USSR territories and its spheres of influence. In this environment, however, Russian foreign policy underwent a transformation. In Eurasia, the roots of alliances were slowly forming, the fruits of which were to be seen in the first quarter of the 21st century. In this sense, the early post-Soviet environment played a significant role in directing Russian regional policies. In terms of priorities, Moscow's relations with Asian partners seem to have been initially overshadowed by the so-called Atlanticist approach

advocated by the elites in Russian foreign ministry [Tsygankov (2012); Tsygankov (2016)]. In the framework of rapprochement with the West, the Atlanticists emphasized economic relations with liberal democracies on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Their goal was to facilitate the transition from the Soviet command economy to a liberal market economy following Western models and advice. In fact, Boris Yeltsin, the first democratically elected president of the Russian Federation, endorsed such a policy in his 1991 inauguration speech by asserting that “we are turning to the world community with pure intentions in order to win new friends but not enemies, and to establish honest and civilized relations with other states” [Inaugural Speech by Boris Yeltsin (1991)]. However, Yeltsin’s turn to the West was evident even before his presidency. During a press conference on September 7, 1991, he had stated that Russia is “a country in a transitional period, which wants to proceed along a civilized path, the path along which France, Britain, the United States, Japan, Germany, Spain and other countries have been and still are proceeding” [Breslauer (2002): 144].

Therefore, what is loosely regarded as Atlanticism in the analysis of Russian foreign policy was the ruling ideology in the early nineties [Ambrosio (2005)]. Nevertheless, as will be discussed later, this approach gave way to a more nationalistic and assertive foreign policy towards the end of the century. During this period, Russia’s domestic transformation was coupled with challenges including the 1993 constitutional crisis and the First Chechen War (1994–1996), which provoked the criticisms of Western governments regarding the management of these crises. On the other hand, the serious conflict of interests with the West over the enlargement of NATO, the Yugoslav Wars (1991–2001) and military escalations in the Middle East prompted Russia to devise an independent policy and reaffirm its influence globally where it was possible.

In what follows, this article will revisit some of these epoch-making diplomatic activities focusing on two important Asian countries, namely China and India. As will be discussed later, this aspect of Russian foreign policy underpinned a steady development that continues to affect strategic alliances in Asia and beyond.

Russia and China: Foundations of a strategic partnership

There is a consensus among the observers of international relations that the relationship between Beijing and Kremlin progresses within the framework of a strategic partnership. The fall of the Soviet Union in late 1991 created new possibilities or, as some scholars have debated, “an axis of convenience” in Sino-Russian relations that were hardly conceivable before [Bobo (2009)]. Previously, the relations between the two sides were not warm due to the so-called Sino-Soviet split which manifested doctrinal divergence and geopolitical tensions. In this particular case, the post-Cold War era seemingly removed some of these barriers even though the two sides needed to engage in a long-term process to properly address the remaining disputes. On the other hand, lessons to be learned from the disintegration of the Soviet Union had also affected the policies of the Chinese communist system and its internal mechanisms. For instance, Xi Jinping, the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party described it as a “cautionary tale” stating that an important cause of the disintegration showed that “the struggle in the field of ideology was extremely intense” which in his opinion led to “confused thinking” and “historical nihilism” [Tiffert (2019)]. But as stated previously, ideological and geopolitical differences, including border disputes

between the two powers could no longer hamper the development of relations. Thanks to this new paradigm, Boris Yeltsin visited China four times, three of which took place during his second presidential term in 1996, 1997 and 1999. This frequency itself may show the significance of relations in that timeframe. In what follows, two key aspects in the development of Russia-China relations will be briefly discussed. There is a general understanding in the literature that it was impossible for the two states to reach the current level of relations without properly addressing these aspects of bilateral interest. The aim of this discussion is to situate the strategic partnership in a historical trajectory that began in earnest in 1991.

1. The Sino-Soviet Summit of 1989: origins of defense diplomacy with China

With the demise of the Soviet Union, Russia-China cooperation grew significantly in military and technical areas to such a degree that China (along with India) soon became a major customer of Russian military equipment. However, the expansion of military cooperation evolved in a political context. More specifically, it resulted from new geopolitical and economic compulsions which the new Russian Federation felt immediately in the post-Cold War era. According to some scholars such as Vasily Mikheev, Russia could no longer hold the traditional view of China as a “potential enemy” and, instead, China was seen as “a great and prosperous neighbor” with whom Russia could establish long-term and mutually beneficial relations [Mikheev (1997): 166].

Historically, one should note that military ties were developed in the late 1980s. In this regard, one of the significant events in the contemporary history of China was the massive protests of 1989 in Tiananmen Square. The suppression of these protests by the Chinese government provoked a wave of international criticism and brought sanctions including an arms embargo against China. Partly due to these sanctions, China considered importing weapons from the Soviet Union and then its successor state. In 1990-1992, China ordered and received a considerable number of weapons and military equipment such as Mi-17 helicopters and a variety of Russian-made air-to-air missiles [Jyotsna (2000)]. Therefore, military cooperation set the stage for a strategic relationship which led to the meeting between the Russian Defense Minister Pavel Grachev and his Chinese counterpart Chi Haotian in November 1993. The two sides solidified defense cooperation by signing a five-year defense agreement based on which they could increase number of military attachés who were stationed in Moscow and Beijing. Following this historic agreement, the military relationship between the two countries deepened and was symbolically consummated in December 1996 by the sale of Sukhoi SU-27 fighter aircraft and other military technologies to China [Parrish (1996)]. This important deal had been signed during the Soviet period. However, China was only able to receive the aircraft after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. As a result of this defense diplomacy, China became one of the major importers of advanced military equipment from Russia by the early 2000s [Brown (2023)]. Within that timeframe, Russia’s crisis-stricken economy needed further revenue streams and the development of defense cooperation could facilitate arms purchases from China.

One may also view this development from another perspective. Historically, it can be an example of how political instruments such as sanctions can influence strategic-military ties. In mid-May 1989, Mikhail Gorbachev traveled to Beijing to attend the Sino-Soviet Summit. It was the first official meeting between the leaders of the two countries since the 1950s. At this

long-planned summit which was closely monitored by Western governments, the Soviet president met with important figures such as Deng Xiaoping, Li Peng and Zhao Zhiang [Garver (1989)]. In sum, the parties emphasized the development of friendly ties including party-to-party relations within limited means while emphasizing the independence of each state in foreign policy [Vamos (2010): 100]. However, this summit progressed under the influence of Tiananmen Square protests to such an extent that some of the pre-planned ceremonies had to be canceled and attempts were made to postpone the meetings [Liu et al. (2004)]. In retrospect, what was politically significant was perhaps Gorbachev's refusal to comment or interfere in the internal affairs of China, lest it could jeopardize his reception in Beijing and his ultimate aim which was the normalization of relations [DNSA Collection (1989)]. In this sense, Gorbachev's cautious approach in the presence of Chinese leaders set the cornerstone in the development of relations between the USSR successor state and China which, as this article argues, displays the roots of the current strategic partnership between these two military powers.

2. Border disputes: lessening geopolitical tensions

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union and China heavily fortified and militarized the areas surrounding their borders with missile sites. These fortifications were coupled with the mobilization of civilian population from the border regions in anticipation of border skirmishes. With this background, the 1989 Summit also set the precedent for mutual talks about a major dispute between the Soviet Union and China which was the tension along the border. In this connection, the two sides agreed on a plan to reduce the number of troops stationed in critical regions [DNSA Collection (1989)]. It should be noted that Russia and China share a long border which measures roughly 2615.5 miles and was initially demarcated in 1991 after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. During the Soviet era, border tensions had become a point of friction even leading to military clashes in 1969 [Yang (2000)]. In 2001, however, they were able to circumvent this obstacle by signing the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation. The treaty that serves as an instrument for a range of strategic agreements emphasizes economic cooperation, military assistance and geopolitical alignments. At its core, however, it seeks to guarantee peaceful relations between China and Russia.

However, this strategic achievement was also a product of Russian diplomatic activities during the 1990s. The point of departure can be seen in Boris Yeltsin's first official visit to China on December 23, 1992, during which meetings were held with Zhao Zhiang, the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party and Yang Shangkun, the president of the People's Republic of China. The settlement of border disputes was a major question in these talks even though it was posed within a collection of interests. Yeltsin who had arrived in Beijing with an entourage of 100 Russian officials was later quoted by Western media stating that Russia must "open a new era in relations between Russia and China" [Wudunn (1992)]. The Communist elites in China may have viewed the Russian president with mixed feelings of admiration and caution particularly in that he was partly responsible for overthrowing the Communist system in Russia. In fact, the context showed an ideological rift which could be problematic. In this respect, Gilbert Rozman indicates in his seminal analysis of Sino-Russian relations that the Chinese were at that time "desperately defending communism's so-called fundamental principles if not its historical contents" whereas "Russia was blaming

communism for its troubles” [Rozman (1997): 396]. However, relations continued and the Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin visited Beijing on May 29, 1994 which enabled the two sides to reach an agreement about the Sino-Russian border. Shortly after, on July 12 of the same year, the defense ministers of the two countries signed an important agreement to manage border security and avoid accidental clashes which could lead to border tensions. In a reciprocal fashion, the Chinese authorities pursued the same diplomatic efforts. In December 1996, Chinese Premier Li Peng visited Russia which contributed to the deepening of relations. The visit of this high-ranking Chinese official, who was known to the Western media due to his role in suppressing the Tiananmen Square protests, had a wide reflection in the American media. For instance, an article written by the New York Times in December 1996 concisely described the aims and achievements of Li’s visit. In this way, the objective was to conclude the agreements that the Chinese and Russian officials had discussed seriously during Yeltsin’s first visit. According to media outlets, reaching a formal border accord to reduce the number of troops along the Russo-Chinese border was still the first priority [Associated Press (1996)]. However, the talks also highlighted the agreements to boost bilateral trade, increase arms sales to Beijing, build a gas pipeline from Siberia to China and pursue ambitious energy projects such as the construction of a nuclear power plant in the Chinese province of Jiangsu which is still an important aspect of Russian-Chinese energy cooperation. Therefore, as reflected in the media, Li Peng’s visit focused on four areas: geopolitics, defense-military cooperation, trade, and energy agreements. Arguably, strategic cooperation between the two sides has continued to evolve chiefly along these lines.

Accordingly, Russian diplomatic activities were crucial in removing an obstacle which hindered the development of relations with China. As stated previously, these meetings and agreements reflected the growing desire of the Russian Federation to balance the American hegemony and introduce multipolarity in international politics. As scholars have debated, this was also a desire shared by the Chinese [Turcsanyi (2023); Lampton (2024)]. With respect to what was discussed above, there is a tendency in the literature to classify the Russian-Chinese relations of the 1990s into three epochs ranging from “good neighborly and mutually beneficial” relationships established in December 1992, the so-called “constructive partnership” in September 1994 and the “strategic partnership” which was forged in April 1996 [Xia (2000)]. Altogether, the trajectory which has evolved through these epochs may explain the current state of affairs in Sino-Russian relations.

Russian approach to India: A special relationship

Presently, India is a fast growing economic power with considerable political strength in international equations. Here, the article argues that the depth of the current relationship between the Russian government and India should be traced to mutual diplomatic efforts in the 1990s.

In the terminology of International Relations, special relationship is a familiar term in Winston Churchill’s famous 1947 speech that praised Anglo-American relations. Nevertheless, this term no longer fits the Atlanticist view and often highlights similar relations between other states. For example, China’s relationship with Pakistan and even North Korea, which is a legacy of the Cold War years, is sometimes described using this term. On the other hand, Russia’s relationship with Armenia and Serbia has been described

similarly. On this basis, some have argued that the relationship between Russia and India can be a special relationship in every respect [Gvosdev (2013)].

Gorbachev's foreign policy set the cornerstone for Russian-Chinese relations in the late 1980s and, as this article has argued, Yeltsin's initiatives cemented them throughout the 1990s. However, compared to the ties with China, the relationship with India emerged from a different historical process. As some researchers have pointed out in different years, the Soviet Union and India enjoyed relations at a strategic level during the Cold War even though India tried to distance itself from the bipolar order of that era by promoting the so-called Non-Alignment Movement [Ahmar (1989); Donaldson (1972); Vojtech (2010)]. Historians usually trace the formal relationship between the two governments to April 1947, months before India's independence on August 15, 1947. Therefore, a great deal of research has been devoted to the depth of Soviet-Indian cooperation. In a nutshell, however, Joseph Stalin's statement in 1953 may clearly show the importance of these relations. Addressing the Indian officials, Stalin had asserted that "we" the Soviets would not consider India as an enemy and "this will continue to be our policy and you can count on our help" [Addy (2018): 245]. Arguably, this vision of Stalin holds the essence of the relationship between the two states that continued during the Cold War and even after the demise of the Soviet system. Therefore, one may assume that maintaining or perhaps developing relations with India was a less problematic task for the USSR successor state. Nonetheless, the historical records may show uneven patterns.

As with the Sino-Soviet settlement, relations with India were also predicated on Gorbachev's new foreign policy. In particular, his first state visit to a Third World country in late 1986 was reserved for India. Indeed, both governments anticipated such an undertaking to boost relations. Earlier, in May 1985, Rajiv Gandhi, the new Prime Minister of India, had traveled to Moscow on his first state visit. In this connection, the Indian scholar Rejaul Karim Laskar has concluded in his review of Gandhi's diplomacy that both leaders had a corresponding and even similar outlook on world affairs [Laskar (2014)]. Historically, the Indian foreign policy of this period should be viewed in a larger horizon not least because India's relations with China and the United States were also improving. Therefore, in this sense, maintaining or improving relations with India was not an easy task for the new Russian Federation in the post-Cold War environment.

In an effort to restore Russian global role, Yeltsin visited New Delhi in January 1993. In this case, Russia had encountered yet another constraint which arose from the political atmosphere in India and could overshadow efforts to develop strategic relations with the country. As mentioned earlier, Yeltsin's government and his foreign minister Andrei Kozyrev initially attempted to pander to the West and especially the United States early in the 1990s. The relationship with Washington was of such importance that Yeltsin and Kozyrev were repeatedly criticized on the homefront for neglecting the interests of Russia against the demands of the American government. Additionally, one should note that India (along with North Korea, Pakistan and perhaps Israel) joined the ranks of states with nuclear weapons in the post-Soviet environment. Naturally, this process could present diplomatic constraints for the Russian Federation in that the Bill Clinton administration had imposed sanctions on India for its nuclear ambitions and ballistic missile program. In that framework, military cooperation or the supply of sensitive technologies to India could trigger Washington's punitive actions. Nevertheless, as the records show, the Russian government was determined

to deepen relations with India and supply advanced rocket engines which were to be used in India's controversial space program. To reflect this determination, news outlets such as the Washington Post highlighted Yeltsin's outspoken criticism of the United States regarding the sale of technology to India and considered it a sign of Moscow's decision to adopt a more independent foreign policy. Therefore, in the context of relations with India, Yeltsin's words were highlighted saying that "no other state can command such a great nation as Russia to terminate its obligations" [Hiatt (1993)]. Today, Russia is considered the largest exporter of arms to India and the two governments work closely in areas such as the space program. However, as discussed earlier, this cooperation depended at the time on the persistent diplomatic activities of the Russian government. Therefore, this context gave Yeltsin's visit to India a special meaning which the media addressed with great fervor. For instance, in an article published in the New York Times, journalist Sanjoy Hazarika quoted Yeltsin's remarks that "we do not plan to backtrack" and echoed his expectation that the US government would react to Kremlin's decision with "common sense" and "sensitivity". Earlier, Yeltsin had supported his government's consensus "to move away from a pro-Western emphasis" which showed once again that his visit to India was part of Kremlin's new "purposeful Eastern policy" [Hazarika (1993)]. In this way, the new relations with India were so important that Kremlin had decided to oppose the restrictive measures of the United States and some western governments which had emerged in the form of their Missile Control Regime. Therefore, in hindsight, Yeltsin's visit was not only symbolic, but was a critical part of Russia's new strategy to balance American hegemony. On another level, military cooperation is now a fully developed aspect of the special relationship between India and Russia. But one should note that India encountered disruptions in the supply of weapons after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In this respect, in an article distributed by the United Press International (UPI), journalist Brahma Chellaney reported on the "high-powered" delegation that accompanied Yeltsin during his visit. His key companions were Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev, Minister of Economy, S. Y. Glaziev and Defense Minister Pavel Grachev. According to the press, when Yeltsin was asked about his plans to supply arms to India, he stated that "the defense minister has come just for that purpose" [Chellaney (1993)] once again taking a position that compromised the American interests in that affair.

However Yeltsin's visit to India was also crucial in another formative direction. As stated previously, due to economic pressure, the Russian Federation struggled to obtain financial resources during the 1990s. Paralleling the case of relations with China, the question of 'resource' was a major driver of Russian foreign policy towards India. In this case, India's debt repayment, which had been caused by the country's massive military purchases from the Soviet Union, was a matter of dispute between the two sides, not least because the value of the ruble had greatly decreased and trade with the Soviet Union had been conducted in rubles [Chellaney (1993)]. Therefore, Yeltsin's visit and the ensuing diplomatic contacts can now be considered from two angles. First, one may consider the strategic imperatives within that historical timeframe. In one way, the efforts of the Russian government and Yeltsin's visit were crucial at that time because of the need to replace the Indo-Soviet Peace and Friendship Treaty of 1972. This treaty had determined the relations between New Delhi and the Kremlin in a bipolar and ideological environment. Therefore, it was to be replaced with a more pragmatic agreement based on the imperatives of the post-Soviet environment. Simply put, the bilateral strategies of the two governments needed a reshuffle. Secondly, the Government

of India was not only aware of this new situation but had also prepared itself to take proportionate steps.

In India, P. V. Narasimha Rao served as Prime Minister from 1991 to 1996. In terms of foreign policy, Rao proposed a new strategic perspective remembered today as the “Look East Policy”. As the name suggests, the policy emphasized the development of relations with ASEAN nations. Strategically, the aim of this policy (also known as Act East policy today) was to develop multifaceted cooperation with Southeast Asian countries and find a way into China’s traditional sphere of influence [Bajpae (2023); Thongkholal (2011)]. Like Russia, the Indian government had strategic ambitions based on the country’s unique geographical location, its geopolitical imperatives and the new world order. In the final analysis, although both governments tried through diplomatic activities to maintain most of the agreements reached previously, the Indian government was required to give increasingly more prominence to regional agreements. This was due to the fact that India had lost the support of a major international ally after the demise of the Soviet Union.

In June 1994, Rao became the first high-ranking Indian official to visit Moscow in the post-Cold War era. Before the visit, the UPI summarized its general aims by quoting an Indian foreign ministry spokesperson. In this way, the prime minister’s visit was expected to facilitate the areas of cooperation in supplying military spare parts, providing space technologies, economic initiatives and especially regional politics [United Press International (1994)]. In brief, the aim of this visit was to complete and elucidate the goals that the Russians had set earlier. Interestingly, as the Indian authorities were making preparations for Rao’s visit to Moscow, Youri F. Yarov, the Deputy Prime Minister of Russia, was visiting India to address the remaining uncertainties in previous agreements. In this connection, Yarov claimed that discussions between the two governments were still evolving within a long-term perspective [United Press International (1994)]. From this point of view, it can be assumed that Moscow and New Delhi were determined to resolve their differences in order to cement strategic relations that would define the level of cooperation in the new century. In terms of scheduling, the records show that Rao visited Moscow shortly after visiting China and the United States in the same year. As indicated earlier, as far as India was concerned, the Americans and Chinese had emerged as serious competitors for Russia. This may also highlight the difficulty that the Yeltsin’s government encountered in maintaining and strengthening relations with New Delhi.

This being said, the extensive diplomatic efforts of India and Russia were ultimately successful. In 1997, these efforts led to the conclusion of a ten-year agreement to enhance military and technical cooperation, which has made India a large market for the Russia military industries [Bedi (1998): 16]. Moreover, in October 2000, the Russian diplomatic activities led to the signing of the Declaration on the India-Russia Strategic Partnership that was perhaps the main achievement of this historical process.

CONCLUSION

Investigation of the stable development of Russian diplomatic relations with China and India in the post-Cold War era, we can assert that these relations became the foundation for current strategic relations with these countries and an important aspect of Moscow’s global strategy. In this sense, Russia’s Asian diplomacy shows the attempt to claim a global role by pivoting

to Asia. With a review of diplomatic records such as state visits and bilateral agreements, it can be concluded that although the blossoming of these relations is a 21st century phenomenon, its roots were defined by the Russian government's Asian policy throughout the 1990s. As regards the relations with China, Russia's post-Cold War diplomatic activities aimed to move beyond the ideological differences arising from the Cold War era and overcome geopolitical obstacles such as border tensions in order to secure long-term economic and military cooperation. Regarding the question of India, Russian diplomatic activities were based on maintaining and promoting the preexisting alliances and adopting an independent policy. In this sense, Kremlin's Eurasianist approach resembles the "Look East Policy" of the Indian government in the same historical timeframe. Based on the records that document these diplomatic activities, in both cases, Russia's independent foreign policy grew early in the post-Soviet environment and brought significant achievements by the end of the 1990s.

In conclusion, while the sum of relations with China and India had emerged from two different historical processes, the underlying similarities in Russian, Chinese and Indian global strategies were crucial in the realization of diplomatic achievements, mutual agreements and post-Soviet alliances. In other words, Russia's success in securing long-term strategic cooperation with these states was not only boosted by Kremlin's foreign policy initiatives, but also by the imperatives that were mutually perceived by these states. The significance of this comparative review therefore lies in the fact that it can situate the roots of current strategic alliances in a historical trajectory with antecedents that elucidate Russia's Asian policy. This policy is an important paradigm in the international politics of the 21st century and emphasizes the status of India and China as powerful and independent poles.

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