India-Russia Defence Relations - US Concerns

What is the issue?

- India-Russia defecnce relation has been a cause for concern for the United States.
- In this context, here is how India's defence ties with Russia evolved and an assessment of its inevitability.

How did Russia evolve as India's defence partner?

- In early 1966, India's Atomic Energy Establishment started a feasibility programme on naval nuclear propulsion.
- Homi Bhabha initiated the programme.
- This was primarily on the expectation that the US Atomic Energy Commission (USAEC) would assist in India's quest to develop marine propulsion.
- [Marine propulsion would demonstrate India's impressive capabilities in the field of nuclear energy.]
- However, the U.S. was wary of sharing its naval reactor technology with other states. Thereupon, the programme languished for almost 15 years.
- India's nuclear scientists and the Indian Naval engineers struggled to design and develop a viable reactor system for naval propulsion.
- In addition, the sanctions regime imposed after the 1974 Peaceful Nuclear Explosion in India made the task more difficult.
- Having technological challenges with the indigenous efforts, Indian government turned to Russia for assistance.
- In the early 1980s, Russia agreed to help India's indigenous nuclear submarine programme.
- It also agreed to leasing India its first nuclear submarine.
- This led to the beginning of Indo-Russian cooperation in naval nuclear submarines.
- So clearly, the idea and inspiration for naval nuclear propulsion for the Indian Navy came from the technological progress made by the US.
- However, its implementation was done with the help of Russia.

What was the U.S.'s role in this regard?

- U.S. was not very happy with the collaboration between Russia and India on

nuclear submarines.

- Indian Navy was prepared to take over its first nuclear submarine from the Soviet Union in 1987.
- But, the US put immense pressure upon Russia to defer the lease.
- So in November 1987, even when the process of transfer was almost complete, Soviet naval high command barred the Indian crew from boarding the submarine.
- It resulted in a major diplomatic standoff between New Delhi and Moscow.
- However, during the cold war, the US' disapproval of the Indo-Russian nuclear submarine cooperation was primarily based on nuclear non-proliferation and arms control policy.
- The necessity to maintain a strategic balance in South Asia was also a priority then.
- Eventually, after the end of the cold war, Indo-US relations entered into a period of strategic embrace.
- So, Washington largely ignored the technological partnership between New Delhi and Moscow thereafter.

What are the recent developments?

- In March 2019, India signed an Intergovernmental Agreement (IGA) with Russia.
- It was agreed to lease another of its Akula-Class attack nuclear submarines (SSN).
- The nuclear submarine will join the Indian Navy in 2025.
- India had earlier leased an Akula-class SSBN from Moscow in 2012.
- Rechristened as Chakra in the Indian fleet, it will continue to serve the Indian Navy until the commissioning of the new Akula submarine (2025 likely).

What are U.S.'s present concerns?

- India's Intergovernmental Agreement (IGA) with Russia has invited serious concern from the U.S.
- Indo-US relations have strengthened significantly in the last quarter of a century.
- U.S. has also made significant presence in India's defence market, which was once an exclusive preserve of the Russian defence industry.
- The resultant market competition and the rising tensions between U.S. and Russia have made things hard for India.
- As U.S. attempts to punish Russia through sanctions, it has increasingly become intolerant of India's arms deals with Russia.

How does the future look?

- Continued Russian assistance is vital to India's indigenous nuclear submarine programme.
- Therefore, the US' disapproval will only marginally affect India's decision-making.
- The concerns are unlikely to give in to the US demands for revising India's defense relationship with Russia.
- India also has a more considerable geostrategic interest in this regard.
- If India gives in to U.S. demand, it would further push Russia to strengthen ties with China.
- Notably, an independent Russia is essential to keep Asia's geopolitics in balance.
- In all, Indo-Russian defence cooperation, especially in the naval nuclear domain, will continue to prosper irrespective of US concerns.

Source: The Hindu

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