

Why India cannot afford to delink from Russia for its defence needs

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Maj Gen (Dr) GG Dwivedi, ret'd

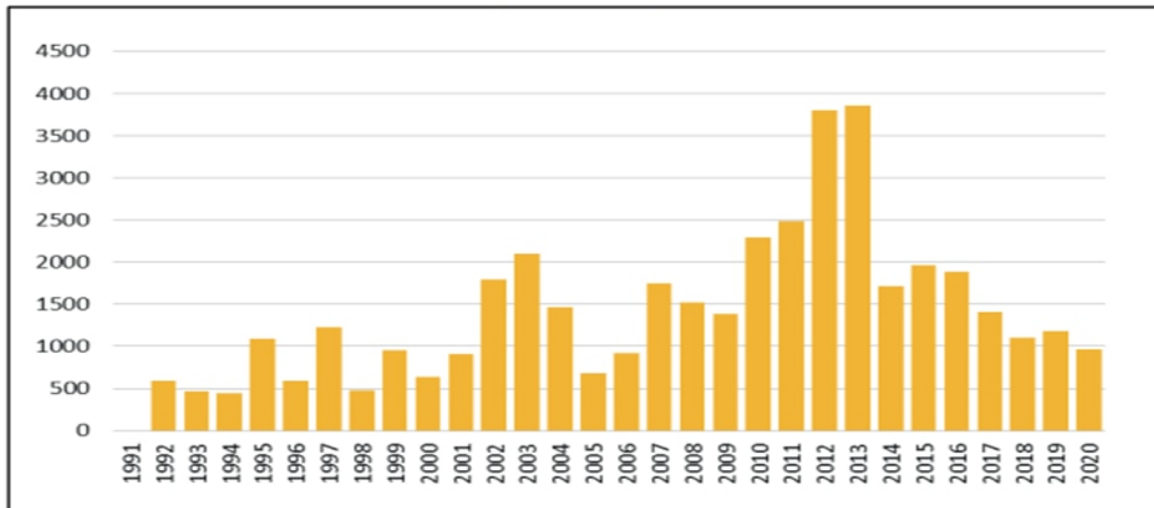
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India has a time-tested relationship with Russia since the Soviet days. Under the spirit of "India-Russia Strategic Partnership" signed in October 2000, India has consolidated defence and military-technical cooperation with Russia in a long-term perspective. Currently, around 70 percent of India's military arsenal is of Russian origin. According to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Russia is the most important suppliers of defence equipment to India, commanding nearly two-thirds share of the latter's total arms imports.

Indian Army's 'Main Battle Tank' (MBT) force comprises predominantly of Russian T-72M1 and T-90S tanks. Indian Navy's sole operational aircraft carrier INS Vikramaditya is a refurbished Soviet-era ship and its fighter fleet comprises of 43 MiG-29K. Of the 10 guided-missile destroyers, four are Russian Kashin class and six of its 17 frigates are Russian Talwar class. Indian Navy's sole nuclear-powered submarine is on lease from Russia; besides eight of the 14 other submarines are of Russian origin-Kilo Class. The Indian Air Force 667 FGA (Fighter Ground Attack) fleet is 71 percent of Russian-origin. All the six air refueling tankers are Russian-made Il-78.

Value of Arms Import from Russia 1991-2020

(Value in US Million \$)



Source: Andrew S. Bowen, "Russian Arms Sales and Defense Industry" Congressional Research Service, October 14, 2021

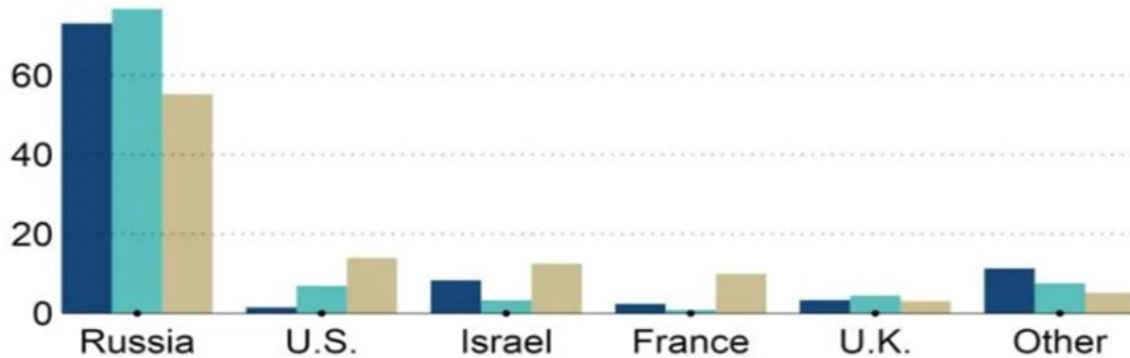
In 1991, about 70 percent of Indian Army armaments, 80 percent of its Air Force systems and 85 percent of its Navy platforms were of Soviet origin. However, of late India's dependency on Russian arms has reduced because of diversification of defense procurement from countries like the USA, Israel, France and Italy. Besides, under the "Make in India" initiative, the nation is moving towards self-reliance in the field of defence. According to SIPRI, India's arms import fell by 33 percent between 2011-15 and 2016-20. During 2016-20, Russia accounted for nearly 49 percent of India's imports while French and Israeli share was 18 percent and 13 percent, respectively. Purchase of Russian arms by India has dropped significantly, although there is planned defence procurement from Moscow by Delhi in the coming years.

Indian arms suppliers since 2002 to 2019

India's arms suppliers

(In percent of total)

■ 2002-07 ■ 2008-13 ■ 2014-19



Source: Kapil Kajal, "India's arms import embargo hits makers in Russia, US and Israel" *Nikkei Asia* August 14, 2020

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Over the years, Indo-Russian military-technical cooperation has evolved from a 'buyer-seller' framework to one involving joint research, development and production of advanced defence technologies and systems. There are number of joint projects that are underway, key ones being:-

- Four Grigorivich-class stealth frigates, of which two are to be built in India for around \$4 billion.
- Joint production of 200 Kamov-226T light utility helicopters of which 140 would be built in India at a cost \$1 billion.
- Of the five S-400 Triumf air defence systems part of \$ 5.5 billion deal, only one has been delivered and remaining four are in the pipeline..
- Four Admiral Grigorivich Project 1135.6M Frigates,
- Leasing of one more Project 971 'Akula' (Schuka-B)-class nuclear powered submarine (SSN)
- Provisioning of 20,000 Kalashnikov AK 203-7.62x39mm assault rifles; 601,427 to be locally built under license at Amethi arms factory.
 - Additionally, India had concluded assorted deals with Russia to provide varied missiles, including man-portable 'Very Short Range Defence Systems' (VSHORADS), ammunition and ordnance stores. India was also in advanced stage of discussions with Russia to procure 464 Russian T-90MS-MBTs and 12 Sukhoi Su-30MKI to be built locally at HAL.
 - [Russia-Ukraine War LIVE updates here](#)
 - Wide array of sanctions has been imposed by the USA and NATO partners on Russia in the wake of war in Ukraine. This will adversely affect Russia's domestic defence industry, seriously constraining its capacity to meet the export orders; in turn will have far reaching implications for India, given its heavy dependence on Russia. India also faces the prospects of sanctions under CAATSA (Countering America's Adversary Through Sanctions) in case it goes ahead with procurements from Russia as highlighted above. Although so far USA has

not invoked CAATSA against India with respect to S 400 Triumf air defence systems procurement deal, the situation could drastically change in view of Ukraine crisis. India's export order of \$375 million BrahMos to Philippines would also be affected as it is joint venture between Russian NPO Mashinostroyeniya (NPOM) and Indian Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO).



Russia and India signed a USD 5.43 billion contract for the supply of S-400 in October 2018

- Keeping in view the security imperatives, Delhi cannot afford to delink from Russia for its defence requirements. Going in for alternate sources of procurement of critical weapons equipment is unthinkable in view of the current tense situation on the borders, with hostile neighborhood. Political astuteness and deft diplomacy will be required to navigate through the emerging complex situation that has serious security ramifications for India.
- *(The author is a War Veteran, former Assistant Chief Integrated Staff; currently Professor Strategic and International Relations)*