

Indo-Soviet Trade Military Dimensions

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THERE have recently been considerable discussions about the trade between India and the Soviet Union. These have been mostly related to the items which enter into trade, trade balance which has of late grown heavily in favour of India and requires reduction, and, especially, the rupee-rouble system of barter without involving any other foreign exchange. There has been practically no mention of the military aspect of the trade relations. And yet this aspect is of considerable significance.

THE PERSPECTIVE

An attempt to examine Indo-Soviet trade in a military perspective would look rather cosmetic at first sight. One main reason is of course that the relevant statistics are not issued—and perhaps should not be issued being of a sensitive nature. However, the task could not be described simply as barking up the wrong tree.

One can burrow back into the Indo-Soviet relations in the post-war period and collect authentic pointers from historical facts which bear upon the current situations. One could wade through Defence Ministry reports and defence budgets for material. The three wars India has fought have opened chinks into the military and also inspired a number of generals and defence officials to bring out first-hand reports. Some official policies cannot but reflect what is happening, for instance to the sources of arms supplies or build-up of forces or financial implications. More recently, there has been wide-ranging dialogue on Indo-Soviet trade links, which is informative.

All these supply the imperatives of arms transactions which are just as important as sheer figures in the balance-sheet.

USSR REPLACES THE WEST

Trade follows contacts. How come that it was the Soviet Union which came to occupy a pre-eminent place in India's political, economic and military life? That place should have rightfully belonged to the British, or perhaps the Americans. After all the

British had withdrawn with amity, even grace, leaving behind a legacy of arms, equipment, organisation and techniques of the forces with which India was familiar. Americans had supported India's struggle for independence and even had a finger in India's military-industrial complex—the Hindustan Aeronautics Limited. But both these nations were ousted by the Russians who, like the proverbial camel, inched into India's tent, and have stayed.

There are at least two reasons for this changing of the boats, militarily speaking. One, the alliance strategy of the United States: the day it signed the SEATO Pact with Pakistan it was alienated from India, and the alienation has persisted. And two, neither Britain nor any other state of Europe was prepared to supply arms to India on equitable terms; some, indeed, were in no position to supply either, owing to post-war difficulties.

As for the Soviet Union, India was not exactly a Stalin's cup of tea, but by the time the Soviet dictator died in 1953, Russia had veered round the view that it could do business even with a bourgeois society. The first major approach was economic, in 1955, with a few transport planes and helicopters thrown in. But in 1962 there came the watershed. In its war with India, China found a pro-Indian Soviet tilt. As the rift widened, India and Russia came closer. Our wars with Pakistan in 1965 and 1971 had Soviet support, which included supply of arms, some flown from the Soviet stocks in Egypt. This military support came in the trail of political and economic assistance. All these have not abated; on the other hand they have ripened into cooperation, collaboration, friendship, and, as some say, even alliance.

Weak, developing, suffering from the shocks of partition, India was no doubt greatly in need of link with the Soviet Union. But the Soviet Union too needed a friend, and, in terms of realpolitik among other political and economic considerations, India was an asset. The erstwhile allies of World War II having split, Russia rolled on to a course irreversibly divergent from that of the United States.

With Mao Tse-tung refusing to toe the Soviet line, China broke off and the two Communist giants have been in confrontation ever since. Among over a dozen neighbours in Europe, the Middle East and Asia, India was and has remained the only one which has friendly ties with Russia, providing a valuable security buffer on its southern flank. Lying astride the Middle East, India has had the potential to bolster Soviet strategy in that region. Its crucial crossroad location in the Indian Ocean has provided Moscow a valuable vantage in the context of a possible showdown with the United States. Indo-Soviet relations have indeed been very much a two-way traffic.

The Indo-Soviet Treaty of 1971 forms the apex of these relations. It contains everything that a super power can provide for the strengthening of a developing power, politically, economically and militarily. In its twelve clauses, three bear directly on security. The merit of these clauses is that they contemplate collaboration at the military level without institutionalising this collaboration: thus India has been assured of military support without military alliance—and its non-aligned character. And another merit is that a great arms-producing country becomes involved in the bolstering of India's military clout with assured supply of defence hardware.

Apart from the unhelpful attitude of the West in respect of arms supply, India suffered from another handicap—paucity of foreign exchange. It was only after a quarter of a century from independence that our foreign exchange position rose to the top. India was certainly in no condition to defray the heavy expenditure on weapons, after its war with China and growing threat from Pakistan. Thus, military, political and economic considerations all conspired to the acceptance of the system of barter trade involving only the rupee and rouble. The Soviet terms are also favourable—a mere 2½% interest on credits repayable in 12 years.

For some twenty years now this system has continued. As far as I am aware, nobody in the official circles is plumbing for an alternative system of international foreign exchange. But even if there are people who would like to have otherwise, it appears impossible to do anything about it at this juncture, so deep are the roots of the rupee trade. Should anything be done under these circumstances and if so what?

THE SOVIET MILITARY SUPPLIES

I am concerned with the military aspect. Let us see how the services figure in regard to the major weapons acquired from the Soviet Union. The approximate picture, according to *The Military Balance* 1982-83 of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, London is something like this:

Army	Tanks T-54/55	950
	Tanks T-72	170 (on order 600)
	Anti-aircraft guns ZSU-23-4	
Air Force	Mig-21	300
	Mig-25	16
	AN-32	16
	AN-12	30
	TU-124	16
	Mi-4, Mi-8 helicopters	112
	Sam-2/3	120
	On order 60-Mig-23, 8 Mig-25, 40 AN-32	

Navy	Submarines	8
	Destroyers	2
	Frigates	12
	Corvettes	3
	Fast Attack Craft	16
	Coastal Boats	6
	On order two destroyers, two frigates, 3 IL-38 helicopters	

While scanning this picture, two facts must be borne in mind. First, the Soviet Union has not been the exclusive supplier of India, for arms and equipment have also been coming from Britain or France and the United States. Weapons from Britain or made with British collaboration include an aircraft carrier, Sea Hawk maritime planes, Sea King helicopters, Canberra bombers, Hunter ground attack fighter/bombers, HS 748 transport planes, Leander class frigates, and artillery pieces such as the 25 pounders. From France have come Alize planes, Alouette helicopters and SS-11 missiles. American contributions include Dakotas, super-constellations and C-119 transport planes. These have played prominent part in India's wars.

Secondly, India has some three dozen ordnance factories and a dozen defence undertakings. These have made the country well-nigh, though not absolutely, self-sufficient in small arms. Some 1,000 Vijayanta tanks have been made in Indian factories, with British collaboration. The latest model aircraft Ajeet (from the British Gnat) has been produced by our Hindustan Aeronautics Limited. A vast array of items roll out of weapon-producing centres spread all over the country.

THE COST AND THE VALUE

What is the cost of the Soviet-supplied weapons and what proportion does it bear to the total imports from Russia are secrets closely guarded by both New Delhi and Moscow. However, the absence of precise information on these points does not vitiate our assessment of this category of arms in the context of rupee-rouble trade. The timing as well as the quality of the material at the specific crucial junctures of our history are important considerations. The hardware came to us when we were militarily weak and we needed them badly. At the periods they arrived, they were regarded as arms of the second generation, which was good. The Migs, submarines, tanks etc. were "modern" stuff during 1960s.

And one more fact. Russian help was also pumped into our industry, and we owe the Soviet Union a good deal for our steel, electric power, oil and fertilizers. These and others are some of the cornerstones of military power, and should not be ignored in assessing the Soviet contribution.

Now we come to the cost factor, a difficult proposition, for we are not vouchsafed with figures. But let us make a guess, however hazardous. During the decade 1971-81, India imported, according to published figures, Rs 79,000 million worth of stuff from Eastern Europe and Rs 55,000 million worth of stuff from the Soviet Union. Assuming that some one-tenth of imports from Eastern Europe and some one-fifth of imports from the Soviet Union comprised weaponry, the arms and equipment that flowed in the rupee trade area of East Bloc could be worth Rs 20,000 million.

This is a hefty sum indeed, with marked incidence upon rupee-rouble trade. However, its value transcends cost, and the investment was worth our while.

THE OTHER FACET

The above discussion represents one facet of Indo-Soviet arms trade. There is another facet also, and to that we must now revert.

What influence has this trade exercised upon India? That arms trade has a conspicuous impact upon international relations goes without saying. But it has political and military dimensions also, and sometimes these supercede the purely commercial gains. Big powers in particular use this to win friends, gain presence, and exercise influence. Comparatively, the recipients are in a humbler position, and may have to toe the line of the Big Brother. Between the Soviet Union and India, the former is a super power, and it would be correct to say that it has an upper hand in terms of power status as well as the supplying agent.

Within a broad consensus, as implied in the Indo-Soviet Treaty, it would be a fine point of diplomacy to discern when Moscow has used the "whip". But let us have a cursory probe into India's attitude towards some of the world's latest politico-strategic issues.

So far as the issues of a general nature are concerned—disarmament, arms reduction, strategic arms limitations, missile deployment in Europe—India has gone absolutely in its own way, with stress on moderation, lessening of tension, and peace. When its own security is at stake, it has built or acquired whatever arms it needs irrespective of what this or that super power says. Our nuclear explosion of 1974 may have annoyed half the world, but we considered it to our advantage.

Switching to specific politico-strategic situations, the Middle East would suggest itself first. This region provides a striking example of India's useful foreign policy orientations. As it is, this most explosive region is now sharply divided into states which are inclined towards or are allied with one super power or the other. But India has maintained the best of relations with all the states, except Israel, whether these are "moderates" or "radical"; and, indeed, it redounds to its credit that both the belligerents at the Gulf, Iran and Iraq, agreed on New Delhi as the venue of the non-aligned summit, after Iran rejected Baghdad.

Things, however, are debatable when we look at two other sensitive areas, Indo-China and Afghanistan.

India is the only major country outside the East Bloc that has recognised Kampuchea and kept friendly relations with Vietnam marked by economic aid. Since Moscow has a good foothold here, it has been said New Delhi's policy has succumbed to Moscow's pressure. But then, we should not forget that India was once chairman of the three International Commissions on Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, and possesses expertise about this region more than most outsiders. Besides, and, perhaps as a matter of personal opinion, in terms of *realpolitik*, India's presence of howsoever low a profile in an important sector of China's southern flank is quite in its strategic interests. If China feels India's presence is a pinprick in its side, then it should look into its own almost massive intrusion and collusion in occupied Kashmir, of which the building of the Karakoram Road is a conspicuous example.

It may be mentioned that even among the Asean Nations—Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines—who are otherwise opposed to the presence of Vietnamese troops in Kampuchea—there is a body of opinion which considers that a strong Vietnam would be highly useful as a buffer to Chinese power. And, in reversal to earlier policy, the newly established government of Australia under Prime Minister Bob Hawke is extending economic aid to Vietnam.

With Afghanistan however the matter is different. There are people in this country, and many among the non-aligned states not to say nations of the West, who hold the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan as violation of international law, a continuation of Czarist imperialism which one had thought had ended with the annexation of Central Asia, and a danger to the security of the neighbouring states, especially India because with the Afghan Wakhan panhandle in

Russian occupation, a super power comes right at this country's doorstep. The Soviet case has been that Afghanistan being on its border is important for its security and that a Sino-Pak-US collusion to take advantage of the turmoil in Afghanistan was in the offing. In general, the Soviet apologia has not been convincing, for after all no country has the right to occupy another country because its own security is at stake. And one might say that in this case New Delhi's low profile of reaction is in deference to Soviet wishes.

May be this is one of the more unpleasant diplomatic games a country has to play in order not to jeopardise larger interests. But there is no doubt that in consequence of Soviet intervention, India's security dimensions have been widened and, with the US military aid to Pakistan on a massive scale on the pretext of Soviet threat, an arms race in the subcontinent is inevitable.

TECHNOLOGICAL-MILITARY ASPECT

There is always some speculative element in the assessment of politico-strategic influence that accompanies arms deals. But there can be a more definitive appraisal of military-technological aspects. There will be many questions: how far has the Indo-Soviet link resulted in indigenous self-sufficiency in arms manufacture? Are the Soviet supplied-weapons related to strategic environment? What about widening our sources of arms supply?

In respect of self-sufficiency, in several major weapons of the Army, Navy and Air Forces it simply does not exist. To supplement earlier purchases, we continue to buy destroyers and frigates and corvettes from Russia. Nothing like an indigenous submarine is in sight. After T-54/55 tanks we are now seeking the Soviet T-72 tank. It has been stated that India is near indigenisation of Mig-21. If this is the old model in the series, by the time we can produce it indigenously, it may be due to be phased out. The SAM/3-4 continues to be an exclusive Soviet supply, and its local manufacture has not even been contemplated.

When the Soviet weapons began to arrive in the 1960s, they were relatively modern. Then, as now, our two hostile neighbours were Pakistan and China. Pakistani arms in the wars of 1965 and 1961 were antiquated, and were no match for India's new acquisitions. This, coupled with the overwhelming superiority that India commanded, loaded the dice heavily in our favour. China too at that time juggled with outdated weapons. Thus, India could very well do with the Soviet-supplied hardware.

But now that is no longer the position. China has put its defence modernisation programme as a matter of top priority after industry, agriculture and science. Submarines are being fitted with missiles, aircraft factories have been activated, Chinese experts are in Europe and the United States hounding for computers, electronics, and special metals. The People's Liberation army is being turned from a largely guerrilla force to a force fit for both nuclear and positional warfare. India must reckon with contingencies on the northern border decidedly more serious than of 1960s.

This is all the more so in respect of India's north-western frontier. General Zia ul-Haq is said by the media to be very warm-hearted man, but he knows his onions.

In the \$3-2 billion package for military and economic assistance, F-16s have figured prominently. For one thing they have been discussed *ad nauseum*. Some have even argued that 40 F-16s that Pakistan will have by 1985 do not make much of a force—knowing though that with re-fuelling they could attack targets well beyond India's central regions and some would be quite capable of penetrating our radar and missile screens no matter how powerful is our Air Defence Ground Environment System. But more serious is the fact that noises about F-16s have drowned the other hardware Pakistan is getting from the United States. Here is a list, for record :

Armoured Personnel Carriers	30
TOW anti-tank missiles	1200
TOW launchers	60
Artillery rounds 105mm calibre	25000
Units of radio communication	200
Gunship helicopters	10
Howitzers 155mm	75
Towed guns 155mm	64
Self-propelled howitzers	40
M-48 tanks	100

Apart from the massive deal, a most important point from our angle is that this is US-made equipment. Now, time and again it has been proved that technologically American arms surpass Soviet arms. One need not go back to the Arab-Israeli wars in which the Soviet supplied arms were decisively blunted by American weapons, used no doubt with Israel's superior combat capability. But I give the latest instance from Lebanon.

Basically, Israel struck into Lebanon in June 1982 in order to destroy the PLO's military fangs developed dragon-like in the country during the twelve years or so after its expulsion from Jordan. But

Syria was there too, with over 30,000 troops under the guise of "Arab deterrent force", sharing the occupation of Lebanon with the PLO. The ground segment of this force kept a low profile but the air segment stirred ominously. This comprised some 80 Soviet-built Migs of the more modern variety including Mig-23s and 19 SAM-6 missile launchers. Within almost twenty four hours these were destroyed by US-built weapons, a fact as spectacular as the destruction of the Egyptian air fleet in the 1967 war - 15 years ago to the day.

The decimation of the Migs did not involve any extraordinary tactics. But taking on the Sam sites was yet another instance of Israel's miraculous prowess. According to eye-witnesses, Israelis sent pilotless drones which, before being shot down by missiles, relayed back to a ground station the frequency used by the homing devices on the missiles.

Apart from the drones, the Israelis used at least one of the four Boeing 707s as ECM platform over the Sams, jamming radar and communications. They also used the Wild Weasel, an electronic system fitted to the Phantoms that not only can deceive Sams but actually home in on the radar and the radio missiles on a beam right upto them.

The aircraft, drones, Boeing, Wild Weasel, complex ground stations were all American built. The Soviets laid the blame for the ineffectiveness of their weapons on the Syrians for their inability to handle missiles, but this would be taken with a pinch of salt. The latest on this is that quite a few Soviet troops have arrived in Syria with a new air defence system, the Sam-5, but how it works remains to be seen.

The evidence is unmistakable that in the event of another war with the neighbouring state, India will be up against arms much more sophisticated than those of the 1960s and early 1970s. The Soviet supplies executed so far will not do.

DIVERSIFICATION

The diversification of the sources of supply undertaken recently would show that steps have been taken to meet the new challenge. Mirage-2000s are coming from France, Jaguars and Sea Harriers from Britain, and SSK-1500 submarines from West Germany—all top producers of the newest weapons. India is also understood to have opted for Exocet anti-ship missiles from France in replacement of the outdated SS-N-2 Styx missiles of Soviet manufacture. Further, a deal may be struck with the Aerospatiale of France and Westland of Britain for anti-submarine helicopters.

However, there has been some shift in this policy, or so it seems. In respect of the Jaguar deal, after obtaining a number of planes in finished state as well as in kits to be assembled in the country, there was an option of indigenous manufacture of some 60 Jaguars. Now this last option has been abandoned. A similar action is understood to have been taken in respect of Mirage-2000s. In effect, this means that while India will have some more sophisticated aircraft from the West, it will not have the manufacturing technology.

Instead, India has opted, according to reports, for the latest Mig-27. The upshot is that India has gone in for Soviet technology for its air fleet, in the hope, apparently, that this would give a good mix of the Western-made and Soviet-made aircraft that could take care of the main threat that comes from Pakistan's F-16s.

That being so, and collaboration with the Soviet Union in respect of arms supply having been reinforced, two good lessons emerge. First, steps should be taken to indigenise manufactures as fast as possible; and secondly, to learn from the Soviet technology with a view to self-sufficiency in the near future. The example of China in this connection is pertinent. During the last three years China has sold weapons to the Middle East in a big way—worth, according to one report, about \$ 5 billion. But the technological gain has been more impressive and of greater consequence. China is understood to have received from Egypt as well as Iraq (both of whom have large quantities of Soviet-made weapons) samples of the more modern Soviet equipment than the 1950s technology. Items obtained in this way include Sukhoi SU-20 fighter bombers, export versions of Mig-23s T-62 tanks, and Sam-3 and Sam-6 anti-aircraft missiles. The updated technology has been incorporated in China's own manufactures based upon the earlier Soviet supplies—with excellent results; its latest F-6s, F-7s and F-8s are a big improvement on the original Soviet designs. China has so far shunned any large-scale buying of arms from the West.