Chapter Seven

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The fifteen years of Indo-Soviet relationship after the Treaty substantiated, in the first place, a remarkable stability in the relationship between the two countries which generally stood as an exception to Soviet relations with other Third World countries showing a mixed result of successes and failures. This natural friendship was based on a coincidence of interests. The Soviet leaders and analysts gave an ideological connotation to this process. They emphasised India's peace-loving, anti-imperialist foreign policy and as a corollary displayed Soviet interest in India as an example of Soviet support for the independence of the Third World states from western imperialism and colonialism.

The basic explanation of this natural friendship related, however, to the shifting balance of mutual dependence in political, strategic and non-strategic areas. From the point of view of India, the primary objective of Indian foreign policy so far as it related to her close links with Moscow was to have security against the perceived threat from her hostile neighbours -- primarily Pakistan, aided and armed by the USA and China since late seventies, and secondarily, China whose support for Pakistan added to India's security concern. India also needed the economic, technical and military assistance that the Soviet Union had been able to provide generously. On the other hand, the Soviet Union needed India against China and to a lesser extent against USA (especially in times of uncertainty as the Sino-US rapprochement). as well as to serve as an entry for the Soviet Union to the Non-Aligned Movement, the Third World and Asia. Economic relations with India had also provided the Soviets with some important benefits and the economic costs of the relationship were fairly small compared to the price that the Soviets had to pay for most of their socialist allies. India, on the whole, was one
of the few success stories of their Third World enterprises that the Soviets could display to their domestic audience which served an important propaganda role. The relationship, thus, paid dividends to both the treaty partners.

But the question remains who had needed whom more? Conventional wisdom would suggest that being a weaker partner in the Treaty, India had to be dependent upon the Soviet Union who was a Super Power. But the opposite may also be true. From a study of the relationship between 1971-86 one is, indeed, inclined to believe that both have been true in periods and sometimes even simultaneously. When Prime Minister Indira Gandhi remarked to Leonoid Brezhnev at a civic reception in New Delhi in December 1980 that "Indo-Soviet friendship...is of equal importance to both India and the Soviet Union" she was not only indicating the essence of the bilateral relationship, she was also tactfully reminding her guest of his country's need for India. Also, in contrast to the Soviet leaders who played up the Treaty at the slightest opportunity turning it into a part of their ritualistic litany, Indian leaders usually played it in low key in their speeches and on its anniversaries.

Probably, this was the reason why Soviet Union was cautious in using the Treaty as an influence-exerting medium. India had always contended that Soviet Union had a good relationship with her because the Soviets had never asked the Indians for anything they could not gracefully give. This had enabled India to keep her independence. At the same time lack of soviet leverage over India had not always meant Indian influence on Soviet Union either. The study of the relationship during the fifteen years would vindicate, however, the skill with which New Delhi had utilised her comparatively limited capabilities.
On the whole, the Treaty did not lead to any significant alteration in Indo-Soviet relationship in any phase in terms of the relationship becoming either very close or very distant. A striking stability was noted in the relationship; and whatever alteration or change that took place, occurred without much friction. This was partly because each side had taken the other's view and interests into consideration when making a policy decision. And, this was precisely the spirit of the Indo-Soviet Treaty which in article 1, pledged to consolidate the relationship of sincere friendship on the principle of "equality and mutual benefit". From that point of view, Indo-Soviet relationship after the Treaty set a new example in the history of relations between a Super Power and a Regional Power.

The working of the Indo-Soviet Treaty during the years 1971-86 reflected this dynamics, theme and pattern of the Indo-Soviet relationship. The Indo-Pakistan war of 1971 over the crisis in East Pakistan was the first crucial test of the Treaty. Although each needed the other's support against the main adversary (Pakistan for India and China for the Soviet Union) New Delhi's need for Soviet support was greater due to her isolation from the United States and China. It was quite probable that without Soviet diplomatic support to India at the United Nations against consistent US pressure on India to terminate the war through a UN call for ceasefire, India's victory in the war would not have been possible. Nevertheless, there was a clear example of India exerting a certain leverage over Moscow since the latter ultimately agreed to the former taking military action against Pakistan. Even during the war, it was India's policy which gradually drew Moscow to a course of action agreeable to India.

Paradoxically, after the War India's rise to regional predominance reduced her dependence on Moscow. India tried exploring relations with other external powers especially
China and Pakistan taking the plea that the Treaty was "not directed against any power". Although the relationship between India and the Soviet Union remained close, differences arose between the two countries on regional issues. As regards China, for example, both the countries differed. India perceived normalisation of relations with that country in the interest of regional peace and stability. Events like China's intervention in Vietnam or India's recognition of the pro-Soviet Heng Samrin regime did not bring any significant alteration in that policy. Moscow, on the other hand, had different goals as regards China. Obsessed with "China threat" and apprehending India's lesser need for Moscow, she responded to India's efforts for normalisation with China with a wide variety of arguments to prevent this "normalization". On several occasions she also tried to impress upon India the necessity for a collective security arrangement in Asia (which Brezhnev floated in 1969). India realised the fundamental importance of her bilateral relations with the Soviet Union and the policy changes were accordingly calibrated not to jeopardise the "essentials" of this relationship. But she continued the search for dialogue with China while assuring the Soviets about the constancy of Indo Soviet friendship. At the same time Brezhnev's proposal of collective security failed to arouse response from India who instead called for cooperation among the countries of region independent of any external power as a viable policy for bringing peace in the region.

India displayed the same attitude when Gorbachev in his Vladivostok speech resurrected Brezhnev's security by calling for an Helsinki type of conference on peace and security proposal in the Asia-Pacific region. India's primary cause for reservation against the proposal was that it was an important part of Sino-Soviet rapprochement that had started taking place since early eighties. Although Moscow assured India that her normalisation drive towards
China was not to be at the cost of her time-tested friendship with the latter, India, however, remained concerned. Since shared concern for China was an important factor in Indo-Soviet relationship India could not accept a Soviet proposal which included China much in the same way that she was earlier reluctant to accept Brezhnev's proposal in 1969 for being directed against China. On the whole, the record of India-China-Soviet Union triangular relations from 1971-86 period will suggest that both (India and the Soviet Union) enjoyed options with regard to China despite the existence of the Treaty. And this did not bring any erosion on Indo-Soviet friendship since neither India-China nor Sino-Soviet normalisation developed to an extent that could cause concern in either India or the Soviet Union.

Closer home, Afghanistan was another regional issue where a vulnerability of the relationship simultaneously with divergence in their agendas at the regional level -- regarding both Asia as a whole and South Asia specifically -- raised difficult problems. India's concern at the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was related directly with the question of her relations with Pakistan. Although the Soviet Union provided India the matching weapons, as Pakistan moved closer to USA for acquisition of arms, the Afghanistan conflict needed to be ended in India's security interest. It brought Super Power confrontation to India's doors; above all US-Pakistan strategic alliance threatened to disturb the military balance in the subcontinent. India, no doubt, avoided a policy of confrontation with Moscow but through quiet diplomacy expressed India's disapproval of Soviet action in Afghanistan and tried albeit unsuccessfully, to bring speedy withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan. In fact, the Afghanistan crisis symbolised lack of leverage by both the countries over each other's policy. Despite expression of consistent difference over Afghanistan India failed to persuade Moscow to effect a policy
change on Afghanistan. Moscow pursued her chosen policy on Afghanistan, notwithstanding India's sensitivities.

At the broader global level, India and the Soviet Union shared perceptions on most global issues although there, too, remained differences of opinion. But they were lesser in degree as compared to those which prevailed between the two countries on issues relating to the region. For all their shared rhetoric about nuclear matters, both Soviet Union and India continued to differ on Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Kremlin was unable to get New Delhi's approval to her call for becoming a signatory to NPT which India consistently opposed on the argument that the Treaty was "discriminatory". Moscow was also unable to prevent India from conducting a peaceful nuclear explosion (PNE) the PNE in May 1974 at Pokharan in Rajasthan. The Soviet Union did not appear to be convinced about India's contention but she preferred not to come out with her open criticism. Also, in a significant step she came forward to save India from the acute crisis of heavy water in the Rajasthan nuclear plant when Canada suspended the supply of heavy water as a punitive step towards India's Pokharan explosion which they thought went against the principles of NPT. Although the terms and conditions of Soviet supply of second lot of heavy water gave rise to criticism, because of Soviet imposition of "full scope safeguards"; this did not, however, complicate the relationship between the two countries, as it did with the USA in relation to the latter's suspension of the supply of low enriched uranium (LEU) to the Tarapore nuclear plant. Such a gesture by Moscow was regarded widely as an "exception" to her rigid non-proliferation stand. Similarly, through routine abstention in the UN General Assembly voting on Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (NWFZ) in South Asia, Soviet Union defended India's opposition to the proposal which
Pakistan sponsored with a political motivation of curtailing India's nuclear activities rather than for the cause of non-proliferation. One is thus inclined to believe that Moscow was unwilling to exert influence on India's nuclear policy and in fact showed deference to India's policy of pursuing an independent policy in this regard. The Soviet policy might have been motivated primarily by anti-US strategy in this regard which could be gleaned from the fact that Soviet criticism of Pakistan's nuclear activities was always in relation to her link with the USA; but it sufficiently enhanced India's bargaining position *vis-a-vis* Pakistan.

India's support to Moscow on the issue of nuclear disarmament stood Moscow also in good stead specially in areas like the US Star Wars programme where Moscow was at odds with USA. More than Brezhnev, Gorbachev counted on India's support in Moscow's global competition with Washington in arms control measures. India responded to Soviet gestures since she had been articulating in international forums the Third World countries' concern regarding USA's programme of militarisation of the space. The convergence of views was noted in the Soviet support to India's initiative in adopting the Six Nations Five Continents Declaration on nuclear disarmament in New Delhi in January 1985. But the closest point of convergence was the Rajiv-Gorbachev declaration in New Delhi in November 1986 for a Nuclear Weapon Free and Non-Violent World. While through India's support Gorbachev could mobilise the Third World against USA's militarisation programme, for India the Soviet recognition of Gandhian ideal of non-violence on nuclear disarmament under the "new political thinking" became significant. On the issue of nuclear disarmament, therefore, despite differences over NPT there was an apparent convergence of views between the two countries.
and the Indo-Soviet Treaty from that point of view became a stabilising factor of "peace" in the world as was intended by the Treaty partners.

This could not be said of India's relations with the Soviet Union at the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) forum where the chief Soviet aim for securing India's support for Soviet position on important international issues had not met with success. The Soviet Union, seeking to establish herself as the "natural ally" of the NAM explained her alignment with NAM and India for countering US influence in the world. Unwilling to accept such a proposition, India made conscious effort in preventing the NAM forum from being tilted towards the Soviet bloc as happened in 1979 at the Havana Summit when India gave a cold shoulder to Cuba's effort to propagate the Soviet thesis of "natural ally". India's resolution stressed on the importance of the original principles of the NAM laid down in successive NAM conferences.

Subsequent to this, India's stand at the Conference of Foreign Ministers of non-aligned countries in New Delhi in 1981 on some crucial issues bearing Soviet connection like Afghanistan, the question of Kampuchean credentials at NAM and the issue of making Indian Ocean free from Super Powers rivalry, evoked reaction in certain Western circles for these being "pro-Soviet". The latter drew their argument from India's refusal to name either Soviet Union or Vietnam for their respective military interventions in Afghanistan and Kampuchea while talking about the necessity for political settlement on the basis of independence and non-aligned status of those countries. India's reference to the US military base at Diego Garcia in Indian Ocean to the exclusion of reference to Soviet Union also perturbed many a political analyst about India's anti-US stand. But one should recall India's sincere attempt in similar vein to go along the consensus line on these issues in the interest of maintaining the movement's
original direction and preventing its "tilt" towards the Soviet bloc. One may also suggest that India's sensitivity to Soviet interests on these issues was not related to existence of Soviet pressure on India; rather it was a function of recognition of Soviet sympathy for the cause of the non-aligned which the USA was unable to do. Non-Alignment essentially meant to India safeguarding of her "independence of judgement" and did not impose on her an obligation to maintain a kind of "parity" between the two Super Powers. While this was not an 'equidistant" approach towards the two Super Powers, it could neither be regarded as India's alignment with the Soviet Union as a "natural ally" of NAM. India continued to maintain her independent and influential position in the NAM which was revealed in an unqualified support of the members of the Movement for change of venue of the seventh summit from Baghdad to New Delhi.

The economic and defence facets of the relationship (which were interlinked) could be said to have developed on the basis of 'equality and mutual benefit'; but on the whole India appeared to have gained more from the aggregate flow of goods and services and aid and, from economic and technological cooperation with the USSR which were needed for boosting India's basic productive industries leading to her goal of economic self-reliance. While the "socialist" oriented countries suffered from new appraisal of Soviet economic policy under Gorbachev's "Perestroika". India's position remained unaltered as she was seen as an influential stable country trying to orient herself to world market, which the "new political thinking" favoured. Of course, there were some caveats in the Indo-Soviet economic relationship which indicated the exhausted benefits of the relationship. This was evident in the expression of dissatisfaction in certain sections in India over some such areas. There was first of all the "shift" in focus on India's economic development from development of heavy industry to the development of
energy resources raising questions about the viability of soviet connection in this regard. This was further compounded by the declining complementarity of the Soviet and Indian capabilities in the economic field. This was evident in India's continuous favourable trade balance with the Soviet Union due to non-availability of sufficiently higher quality of industrial goods from the Soviet Union which India required after her own attainment of self-sufficiency in quite a few areas. There was also unpublicised murmur about rupee-rouble arrangement (not thought to be trade promoting in certain circles in India) and the related problem of "switch trade' by the Soviet Union (i.e., Soviet reselling of Indian commodities in the international market for hard currency) which led the critics to point out to the "hidden cost" of Indian rupee.

Although all these led to an increase in India's movement towards the West, Soviet willingness to remove these deficiencies through constructive proposals led to the continuation of Indo-Soviet economic links. Long term trade agreements aimed at increasing the level of trade followed by Soviet proposals for joint projects which could link the two economies closer and Soviet willingness to give Indian private sector a broader stake in Soviet relations with India, Soviet proposal for modernising the existing plants built with Soviet assistance were cases in point. These were, however, crowned by the long-term Agreement on Basic Guidelines for Cooperation in Economic, Trade, Science and Technology which was signed in May 1985 during Rajiv Gandhi's visit to Moscow. This added to Gorbachev's innovative proposals for boosting India's trade and technology and his economic aid to India only strengthened the economic links between the two countries.

However, the area where India benefitted most from her relations with Moscow was in the field of military supplies for India's defence purposes. The Indo-Soviet Treaty contained
no provision in this regard but the fifteen years old military relationship through the Treaty
made Soviet Union clearly become irreplaceable as India's major supplier of military hardware.
Successive leadership in India found the military support to be a compelling reason for keeping
the Soviet tie strong. Pragmatic reasons apart, the Soviet Union granting to India a rare
privilege of producing Soviet weapons under licence, and offering their most favourable
financial terms including rupee payment for their equipments which, indeed, went a long way
in building up India's indigenous defence production base -- the primary reason was security.
While in the sixties a perceived threat from China moved India towards a closer military link
with Moscow, since the seventies it was Pakistan's increasing strategic collaboration with the
USA (especially after the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979) that cemented close Indo-
Soviet military ties. Since the Soviet Union viewed the US assistance to Pakistan as inimical
to her interests, she shared India's perception of threat from US military assistance to Pakistan
and came forward willingly to provide matching weapons to India to counter the US deliveries
of most sophisticated weapons to Pakistan like F-16 jet aircraft and airborne early warning E-
2C Hawkeye (AWACS) to Pakistan. It was this mutuality of threat perception which led
Gorbachev even with his new political thinking not to neglect this important facet of Indo-
Soviet relationship.

Surprisingly, such a close Indo-Soviet military relationship could not give the Soviets
any capacity to influence India's defence policy where the latter was zealous to preserve her
independence from Moscow. There was no evidence to suggest that through arms transfer
Moscow was allowed to have access to India's defence strategy. Moscow on the other hand
feared loss of influence in Delhi as happened after the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and
when India's diversification of arms supply through Western sources became a cause of concern. This led to the biggest ever Indo-Soviet arms deal in May 1980. One should also note Moscow's continuing to accept rupee payment for arms sales while she was demanding hard currency payments from her other allies in the Middle East. These indicated that Moscow had political motivation in maintaining close ties with India through her arms transfer policy while in the seventies economic motivation of earning hard currency came to be an important consideration in Soviet arms deals with other Third World countries.

The whole panorama of the working of the Indo-Soviet Treaty leads us back to the issue raised at the outset regarding the basic explanation for the nature of Indo-Soviet relationship. Mutual perception of each other's interests led to coincidence of views on important issues. But the apparent consonance was not such as to exclude differences of opinion which existed on several areas of importance. But the reason why they did not damage the inherent stability in the relationship was, firstly, because these divergencies were outweighed by agreement on vital issues; and secondly, because neither side ever sought to impose her perception on the other being aware of each other's sensitivity and susceptibility. Despite occasional differences, the friendship therefore, remained of equal importance to both the countries. It was in this sense that there was validity in both sides' reiteration that the friendship had withstood the "test of time".