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Soft Power: The Component to Rejuvenate and Enthuse New Life to the Strenuous India-Russia Bilateral Relations

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Abstract

The recent Ukraine crisis has brought a strategic challenge to the robustness of the India-Russia bilateral relationship of the last many decades. Though India has neither aligned its interests totally with the western bloc nor gone the Russian way. Rather, India has played its card deftly enough to secure its national interests from both the United States of America (USA) and the Russian bloc. However, in the longer run, the Ukraine crisis has positioned a challenge to the longevity of robust Indian-Russian bilateral relations. As we can see India's growing security and economic (trade and investment) relationship with the USA is similar to Russia's relation with an all-time close but dependent tie with China and Pakistan. This suggests that both Russia and India are also going closer to each other's adversaries thus showing the complex interdependence-type nature of the international relations that are taking place among nations and that no bilateral relationship is exclusive. In this article, the analysis has been done on how the once exclusive and strategically dependent bilateral relationship between Russia and India is no longer there as well as the reasons behind it. Then by drawing a comparison between the kind of relationship India has with the USA, the article emphasizes how the India-Russia relationship has been exclusively dependent on the hard power component and the government-to-government (i.e., track 1 diplomacy) channel. Neither India nor Russia have significantly involved the soft power component and there isn't much-developed track 1.5 and track 2 channels of diplomacy between India and Russia. This results in a lack of people-to-people cooperation, which on the other hand, is the bedrock of the all-season India-USA bilateral relationship. Lastly, the article explores various possibilities of how soft power tools like cuisine, language, cinema, tourism sector, etc., can be employed to build people-to-people cooperation between India and Russia. Though the deployment of soft power components requires serious efforts but is required to give a new fillip to add more colours to the current black-and-white (energy and arms trade) relationship between India and Russia.

Keywords: *India-Russia bilateral relations, China, USA, Pakistan, complex interdependence, hard power, soft power, diplomacy*

1.0 Introduction

Any geopolitical crisis, involving nations with which India has a substantial relationship offers a new opportunity to review holistically not only our bilateral relations with those nations but also our relations with their strategic partners and adversarial powers. Any nation failing to review its relations and work

on the areas in which relations are lagging is doomed to fail the partnership with that country. The ongoing Ukrainian crisis is one such opportunity to conduct a complete review of our decades-old reliable bilateral relationship with Russia, the timely help that Russia has provided us in the critical situations of the past can't be ignored. Along with that, the need is to analyze where the bilateral partnership is heading as per the current trends and how India and Russia have started diversifying their bilateral relationship with each other's rival nations. For example, both India and USA are going close to each other (e.g., Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), the USA being India's largest trading partner, increasing weapons purchases, etc.) while at the same time bilateral stakes of both Russia and China in each other's economy, and spilling economic cooperation to the other areas of mutual interests in international politics, are at all-time high and the swiftness with which this has happened has rarely been seen in the past.

The article rather than commenting on the Ukrainian issue is written in two parts for understanding, in the first part, is the present status of India-Russia bilateral relations including *the success* the bilateral partnership has achieved¹. Then focus on the challenges that are there to the bilateral partnership and then learn about the possible reasons behind the need for rejuvenation in India-Russia bilateral partnership as currently, the bilateral relations are not anywhere near the optimum potential. After getting to know about the first part, amongst others, one of the important reasons behind the lesser optimization of the potentialities of the bilateral relation, is the lack of the people-to-people component in the relation and broadly, ill-paid attention to incorporating soft power tools in the bilateral relations. While at the same time heavy dependence on the hard power trade transactions and track 1 diplomacy channels. In the second part, the focus will be to understand and bring in the soft power component to give a much-required new strength and face to the bilateral relationship of India and Russia to enhance the greater involvement of both nations in each other's growth and stories to build an all-time sustainable friendly bond.

1.1 The Success and Challenges of the Bilateral Relationship between India and Russia

1.1.1 Successes

The overall **investment** target, by both nations in each other's economy of \$30 billion, which was set for

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¹ Mishra, Vivek. "The Ukraine Crisis and India: Balancing Triumph and Tribulation." (ORF, February 28, 2022)

2025 has already been achieved in 2018 and the target has now been raised to \$50 billion to be achieved by 2025. Their first **bilateral tri-services exercise- INDRA'17** was conducted in 2016². India-Russia military technical cooperation evolved from a buyer-seller framework to joint research, development and production of advanced defence technologies and systems (e.g., Brahmos missile, Su-30 aircraft, T 90 tanks production in India.) Despite Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) threats by the USA, India signed the S-400 defence system deal with Russia and is expecting the delivery of them soon. The Indian Army contingent participated in the multinational strategic drill, Zapad 2021³. Also, the technologies that Russia is willing to share with India, like Nuclear submarines, are very rare and unique. The high-quality **nuclear technologies** that Russia is providing (e.g., the Kudankulam nuclear reactors) are exceptional. Also, the then agreement on the trilateral cooperation between India, Russia, and Bangladesh in building the Rooppur nuclear power project in Bangladesh is pathbreaking.

The cooperation in **space science** between the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) and the Russian Federal Space Agency (ROSCOSMOS) is also entering a new era from the 1975's India launched its first satellite on a Russian launch vehicle to now, joint program activities in the field of the human space flight program, remote sensing and other activities for peaceful uses of outer space. Regular **cultural initiatives** to promote people-to-people contact have been organized e.g. The Indian arts festival "Namaste Russia" was organized in Russia in 2019; The first International Yoga Day held in Russia in 2015 in different cities attracted over 45,000 people; the Indian film ' Newton' won the "Transform nation" Film award in the 19th world festival of youth and students, held in Sochi 17; Recognizing the role of cinema in promoting understanding between different culture, Indian Film festivals in Moscow and Russian Film festival in Mumbai were organized in 2016⁴.

The field of **education** is also enhancing the bilateral cooperation between the two nations with nearly 11,000 Indian students enrolled in Russian universities. In 2015, the Russian India Network of Universities (RIN) was established to increase inter-university coordination between both nations.

² Bilateral Relation: India-Russia Relations, Embassy of India, Moscow, Russia. (January, 2022)

³ Roche, Elizabeth "Indian Army contingent to participate in Exercise ZAPAD 2021." (Mint, September, 2021)

⁴ India Russia Cultural Relations, Embassy of India, Moscow, Russia. (n.d.)

Russia has been an active partner country for the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) scholarship with around 118 Russian students taking the benefit in 2019-20⁵. The number of Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) scholarships for Russians has been steadily growing each year. Russia's continuous support of India's candidacy for the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) permanent seat and membership to the National Security Guard (NSG), despite the Chinese opposition, is very noteworthy. To analyze the depth of India-Russia relations comprehensively and to know the challenging part of the bilateral relations of India-Russia relations, they need to compare their present bilateral relations with the bilateral relations that they shared in the past and also their present relations with each other's adversaries (as the realist understanding of the international power politics) in the different sectors of the bilateral relations:

Bilateral trade relations - In 1989-90, Russia's share in India's foreign trade was 16%. In 1990, the then-Soviet Union was India's top goods export destination with exports worth \$2.9 billion and the USSR was the seventh-largest import source of India in value terms⁶. But in 2020-21, Indian exports to Russia are only \$2.6 billion, which if combined with the Russian export to India of \$5.48 billion, makes the bilateral trade \$8.1 billion, nowhere figuring in the top 20 trading partners despite the 54% increase in comparison to the previous covid impacted year's bilateral trade. Though small and faraway countries, like Venezuela and Switzerland, are among its top trading partners in India⁷. Now, comparing the India-Russia bilateral trade relations with each other's adversaries from the realist school's perspective of international politics: China- Russia bilateral trade, despite the covid 19 pandemic and its logistics hurdles and other challenges trade between them in 2021 was \$147 billion, exceeding the pre-pandemic level in 2019 and reaching a record high, with both President Putin and Xi Jinping announced a new goal of \$200 billion trade by 2024⁸. This is happening when China is Russia's single largest trading partner for the last twelve years consecutively since 2010 when China surpassed Germany. Though, still, the European Union combinedly remains Russia's largest partner (with \$260 billion) in 2019. Seeing the current pace of the Russia-China bilateral trade, it's not hard and that is far when China will overcome

⁵ Bilateral Relation: India-Russia Relations, Embassy of India, Moscow, Russia. (January, 2022)

⁶ S, A. Russia - a forgotten trade partner? (*The Hindu*, April 7, 2017)

⁷ Wikipedia contributors. (2022, February 4). List of the largest trading partners of India. (*Wikipedia*, February 4, 2022)

⁸ China-Russia trade hits record high in 2021 amid stronger energy cooperation: Russian envoy. (*Global Times*, 2021)

the European Union also⁹.

India- US bilateral trade is \$113 billion in 2021, with a 45% jump from 2020 and USA is also India's largest trading partner, with the USA receiving the largest share of Indian exports from India, worth \$71.2 billion¹⁰. India-China bilateral trade is \$125 billion in 2020-21. which has grown by 43.3% in 2021 with a trade deficit for India of \$69.4 billion up from \$45.9 billion in 2019. The widening trade deficit is at a time when India's exports comprise mainly the primary goods like iron ore, cotton, seafood, etc., which are easily replaceable with other countries but the imports from China are dominated by value-added sensitive items like active pharmaceutical ingredients and components of smartphones, which shows high dependency¹¹.

Status of bilateral trade partnership:

India- Russia	India- China	India- USA	India- Russia	India- Pakistan
\$ 8.7 Bn (2020-21)	\$ 124.7 Bn (2020-21)	\$ 113 Bn (2021)	\$ 147 Bn (2021)	Approx \$ 7Bn (2020)

Source: Authors' Contributions

Russia is also increasing its bilateral trade with Pakistan, which saw its bilateral trade grow from \$92 million in 2003 to reach a record high of \$790 million, seeing a rise of 45% from the trade numbers of 2019 and subsequently to approx. \$1 billion in 2020. This is in sync with the rapidly rising Pakistan-China bilateral trade from \$4.8 billion in 2017 to \$16.4 billion in 2018¹² However, this is not to suggest that Russia and India should be each other's largest trading partners and that they should not diversify their trade partnerships further that the only way to ascertain the depth of the relationship is through bilateral trade but only suggest that the difference is very wide to be filled on its own, at the times when economics is an important factor driving the international politics.

⁹ Fact box: China-Russia trade has surged as countries grow closer. (*Reuters*, March 1, 2022)

¹⁰ \$113 billion in 2021: India-US goods trade number marks a new record. (*Hindustan Times*, February 10, 2022)

¹¹ India-China trade grows to record \$125 billion in 2021 despite tensions. (*Business Standard*, January 14, 2022)

¹² Chia, C., & Zheng Haiqi. "Russia-Pakistan Economic Relations: Energy Partnership and the China Factor." (*ISAS.NUS.EDU.SG*, October 6, 2021)

The Russia – Pakistan axis- Russia started negotiating trade deals and there are also reports of selling weapons like Su-35 and T-90 tanks to Pakistan after 2014 when Moscow lifted its arms embargo on Islamabad and agreed to supply four Mi-35 helicopters besides the building of a \$1.7 billion gas pipeline from Karachi to Lahore¹³. Moscow's move to supply Islamabad came as New Delhi is seeking to modernize its armed forces' ageing hardware and has started choosing to buy arms from Israel, the USA, France, etc., This has happened simultaneously when during the trump administration, Pakistan saw military assistance frozen and a worsening of the overall ties, which prompted Pakistan to embrace Russia, to which Russians responded realistically by Russia signing a defence cooperation agreement in 2014 and a defence deal in 2015¹⁴. Russia has also shown interest in joining the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in the past to sync it with the Russian-sponsored Eurasian Economic Union. Russia is also financing, amongst other projects, the mega energy project called Central Asia-South Asia (CASA-1000) transmitting hydroelectricity from central Asian countries to Pakistan¹⁵. Russia has inked a naval cooperation agreement with Pakistan recently along with a regular Military exercise called "*Druzhiba*" (a Slavic word for friendship) since 2016.¹⁶ The volatile relationship of the USA with Pakistan has given space for Russia to make its mark here as when US president Trump ended Pakistan's participation in its international military education program, Islamabad went to sign a security training agreement with Moscow to train Pakistani military officers in the Russian military institutions for the first time in its history.

The Russia- China axis- Russia has also conducted the biggest military exercise since the fall of the Soviet Union, called, "*Vostok-2018*", with China. After the Crimean annexation and western sanctions against Russia, China Russia relationship is at its 'best time in the history of their bilateral relationship', with China investing many billions in Russia's ailing economy (mainly in the energy and infrastructure sector), in return, getting its gas and oil imports secured of more than \$500 billion¹⁷. This is further

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¹³ I, Krzysztof. "Russia's looming arms sale to Pakistan sets up a dangerous game". (*The Diplomat*, May 16, 2019)

¹⁴ Chia, C., & Zheng Haiqi. "Russia-Pakistan Economic Relations: Energy Partnership and the China Factor." (*ISAS.NUS.EDU.SG*, October 6, 2021)

¹⁵ Stronski, P., & Ng, N. Cooperation and Competition: Russia and China in Central Asia, the Russian Far East, and the Arctic. (*Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 28, 2018)

¹⁶ Y. Kamran. "In a first, Russia and Pakistan to hold joint war games". (*DFI*, September 12, 2016)

¹⁷ Malle, S. (2017). Russia and China in the 21st century. Moving towards cooperative behavior. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 8(2), 136–150.

strengthened by the recent joint statement, by President Putin and Xi Jinping during President Putin's visit to inaugurate the Winter Olympics in Beijing, which mentions, "*the new interstate relations between Russia and China are superior to the political and military relations of the cold war era*", and that the "*friendship between the two states has no limits, there are no 'forbidden' areas of cooperation*"¹⁸. From 2013 to 2020, Russia is also the second-largest recipient of funds under the Belt and Road Initiative of China in the energy sector¹⁹. Here, Pakistan is both the largest recipient of coal-related investments and the largest recipient of investment in hydropower. Overall, Pakistan attracted more than 50% of renewable energy investments under the Belt and Road Initiative²⁰.

India's diversifying tendencies- In the area of arms and defence equipment supplies also, India is lessening its dependency on Russia and increasingly signing defence deals with the USA, France, and Israel. India-US ties are at an all-time high with the initiatives like QUAD (with its military manifestations i.e., the Malabar exercise), trade relations (through minor hiccups are there), signing of the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), support for NSG and UNSC permanent membership). All the above factors, along with the new axis of the trio (Russia- Pakistan, and China) in Afghanistan, under the current regime of the Taliban have left little space for India's concerns there. This has already started showing the immediate impact on the existing South Asian regional strategic balance. The above points are aptly showing that the earlier exclusive relations between India and Russia are going through a sensitive phase and the "Charisma or awe" factor that was associated with the India-Russia relations is blurring as their relations with each other's adversaries are on a *geometric* progression while their own bilateral relations are on an *arithmetic* progression only.

1.1.2 Challenges

When the bilateral relations between major countries the world over are witnessing *neoliberal trends* (i.e., the involvement of multidimensional actors e.g. International organizations, NGOs, MNCs, and other non-state actors), India-Russia relations are still governed by the realist state-centric framework,

¹⁸ Putin and Xi Frame a New China-Russia Partnership. (*The Diplomat*, February 15, 2022)

¹⁹ China and Russia: Economic Unequals. (*Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2020)

²⁰ Wang, C. N.. China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Investment Report 2020 – (*Green Finance & Development Center*, January 21, 2021)

where the partnership is much constrained between the state dealings, which alone could not influence the development of trade, energy, defence, science and technology, agriculture, soft power, all of which combinedly becomes the mainstay of a vibrant relationship, in a *globalizing increasingly competitive and complexly interdependent international economic and political structure*.

Lack of multi-stakeholder approach in the India – Russia bilateral relations- The bilateral trade is unidimensional centred and heavily dependent on arms and various energy sales by Russia to India. This excludes the space for other shareholders while restricting it to the bureaucratic circles and hence allows limited space for people-to-people contact between the two nations. This can also be seen via the limited presence of the Indian-origin population in Russia (i.e., between 15 to 30,000 of the total 14.68 cr. Russian population) without any popular Indian-origin Russian figure. Only around 500 businessmen of Indian origin are there in Russia of which 300 are in Moscow²¹.

This leaves their bilateral relations falling prey to geopolitical manoeuvrings as there are no domestic constituents in both nations which could otherwise by being the beneficiaries of the deepening of the bilateral bonds between India and Russia, become a continuous source of motivation for the governments in both the nations to improve the bilateral relations as they would open many platforms of *track 1.5 and 2 diplomacies*, the number of which are clear indications of the stage and robustness of the bilateral relations of the two countries. In contrast to this, is the situation with the India-US relations, where the Indian-origin people are making an immense contribution to USA's growth story in all fields (e.g., IT tycoon Sundar Pichai, businessman and politician Subramaniam Raja Krishnamoorthy, etc.). which gives them the space to lobby for mutual interests and concerns to result in strong *bipartisan support* for a strong India-US partnership.

The growing enthusiasm about Chinese culture in Russia- Another theme is Culture, there is a "*Chinese craze*" in Russia, which can be seen by the increasing number of Russians studying the Chinese language i.e., from 17000 in 2007 increasing to 57000 in 2017²². This is with a total of 179 Universities offering Mandarin courses along with the operation of 19 Confucius centre in Russia. Every year, the number of Russian *tourists*' number to China is increasing at a great speed. 19.77 lakh Russians visited China in 2016. Similarly, in 2019, more than 2 million Chinese tourists visited Russia

²¹ India Community in Russia, Embassy of India, Moscow, Russia. (n.d.)

²² S. Zuo., Mandarin test added to exam in Russia. (*China Daily*, June 8, 2019)

which is up from 0.15 million a decade earlier. However, when comparing the above data with the popularity of Indian culture in Russia we see a very grim situation. Only 30 Russian Universities teach Hindi and other Indian *languages* to only around 1500 students yearly along with the JLN culture centres and other consulates catering to some hundreds more²³. Only 2.27 lakh Russian tourists came to India, at the same time when 14.73 lakh US tourists made India their tourist destination in 2016²⁴. The bilateral trade between Russia and China was below \$10 billion until the early 2000s which rose to prominence to around \$100 billion in 2018 and is planning to hit \$200 billion by 2024²⁵.

1.2 Recent Developments

The answer lies in Between 2007 and 2015, in which the two events that have shaken the Russians were the financial crisis of 2008-09 and the western sanctions imposed on Russia because of its foreign adventure in Ukraine and Crimea along with the plunging oil prices at the same time in 2013- 14, the combination of all of them have left Russia economically and politically vulnerable and potentially dependent on its biggest non-western trading partner, China²⁶. China had invested hundreds of billions into the Russian economy, when Russia was looking for economic help from everywhere, during both the times of financial crises of 2007 and when Russia was under sanctions imposed by the west. For e.g., Investment in the energy projects like "*Gazprom: the power of Serbia pipeline*" to transfer natural gas to China, which is one of the largest energy deals in world history²⁷. India could not be of much consequence to Russia during their hard times (except the moral support to Russia's action in the Crimean issue), in comparison to the help Russia did to India at various crucial strategic times in the past and always in the field of economy, and technology since the 1950s.

Russia also started renewing its relations with Pakistan during these years. India, however, during the same years (2007-15) started diversifying its defence and energy (including nuclear) with countries other

²³ Bilateral Relation: India-Russia Relations, Embassy of India, Moscow, Russia. (January, 2022)

²⁴ India Tourism Statistics. Ministry of Tourism. (*Government of India*, 2019)

²⁵ China and Russia: Economic Unequals. (*Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 2020)

²⁶ Malle, S. (2017). Russia and China in the 21st century. Moving towards cooperative behavior. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 8(2), 136–150.

²⁷ Malle, S. (2017). Russia and China in the 21st century. Moving towards cooperative behavior. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 8(2), 136–150.

than Russia like the USA, Israel, and France²⁸. Hence, both India and Russia are playing at securing their national interest by diversifying their relations and interests with other nations on individual terms by "*De-hyphenating the earlier hyphenated relations*". Hence, rather than crying foul about the Russian growing relationship with Pakistan or China, which was natural for Russia to go ahead with, seeing the emergencies of the circumstances, we should be thinking about measures needed to be taken to bring our relations with Russia on par with what they had been in the 1970s and 1980s as we require a serious sustainable interdependence with Russia to secure our energy needs for the economic growth and also maintaining the regional balance of power in South Asia favourable to the Indian interests.

From the above discussion, it can be concluded about India- Russia relations as Rajiv Sikri (former secretary, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India) has aptly done, that "*the absence of widespread people to-people contacts such as in the private sector, the flow of tourists and students, a large and influential diaspora and given the handicaps of language, Russia doesn't affect most ordinary people's lives of Indians as does, say, Europe, USA or Gulf*"²⁹.

1.3 Soft Power

The above various dimensions, mentioned by Rajiv Sikri, are part of Soft Power, cultural and public diplomacy and the same can be utilized in the strategy to revitalize India- Russia relations. But, before attempting those measures, let's understand: a) What is Soft power? b) India's position on it and c) Why is the emphasis on soft power growing in international politics?

Soft Power means using elements by which a country gets other countries to want what it wants, through attraction and persuasion. It was developed by the American political scientist, Joseph Nye in his book 'Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power' (1990)³⁰. He mentions the following as the elements of soft power- the quality of the country's institutional and political values, the strength of the diplomatic network and foreign policies, the extent of friendliness and appeal of its culture, and the attractiveness of the economic model.

India's position on soft power is very grim- India, despite its huge self-belief and romanticizing about

²⁸ Menon, R., & Rumer, E.,. Russia and India: A New Chapter. The Return of Global Russia. (*Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 2022)

²⁹ Sikri, Rajiv. Why Russia and India matter to each other. (January 23, 2007)

³⁰ Nye, Joseph S. *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. (New York: Basic Books, 1990)

being an important soft power nation, fails to figure in the Top 30 Soft Power nations of the world in the "Soft power 30 indexes"(2018), wherein our ranking slipped by 9 ranks from 27 in 2020 to 36 in 2021³¹. In the 2018 index, Japan and China, the other Asian powers, figure in the 5th and 27th positions respectively. Even in the separate ranking for Asian countries, India has ranked 8th position out of 10, behind Thailand and Malaysia³². For such dismal performance, Dhruv Jaishankar says, "Most of the Indian Soft power appeal and its expansion around the world till now is without the calibrated and well-designed involvement of the Indian government"³³.

The emphasis on Soft Power in international politics is getting emboldened with every passing day. "In today's information age, victory often depends on whose story wins". The assertion from John Arquilla- often echoed by Joseph Nye- clearly conveys the utility of soft power and the importance of effectively communicating a winning global narrative. Joseph Nye further says that "Soft power is the best source to build credibility, which is the scarcest resource in the information age". Xi Jinping 2014 spoke on the importance of soft power for China by announcing, "We should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's messages to the world"³⁴. The importance of soft power grew all the stronger after analyzing the defeat of military superpower (i.e., hard power) in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, etc., at a time when hard power was the complete understanding and equivalent of Power.

Now comes the second part of the article, which is about how to use the components of soft power and its growing significance to strengthen and revitalize India-Russia relations. Among the other elements of soft power, let us focus only on the cultural part of it. Culture is a way of life that combines the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people including their language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music, art, dress, sports, etc.

2.0 Recommendations

Creating a special division in the Ministry of External Affairs with diplomats and experts from the

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³¹ Global soft power index 2021: India slips to rank 36 despite scoring high in easy to do business with metric. (*Money control*, February 26, 2021)

³² A Global Ranking of Soft Power 2018 - Portland. (*Portland Communications*, October 20, 2019)

³³ Jaishankar, D. India rising: Soft power and the world's largest democracy. (*Brookings*, September 17, 2018)

³⁴ Biswas, Asit K., and Cecilia Tortajada. "China's Soft Power Is on the Rise." (*China Daily*, February 23, 2018)

various components of the soft power (particularly from the Culture) to Understand the different paradigms under which people-to-people contact affinity can be built between India and Russia. The Ministry of External Affairs or the ICCR (the nodal agency responsible for India's soft power projection) could help every Indian state, which has a **tourism** potential based on the different elements of Culture and open a cultural centre in Russia's important cultural cities. These centres will be displaying that state's cultural heritage, on the lines of the *Confucius Centre (which is instrumental in influencing the opinion of the world about China, while also playing an instrumental role in attracting people worldwide towards the Chinese culture, part of which also turns to the tourist potential of China)*, to attract a large section of the Russian tourists. E.g., Rajasthan's USP would be desert lifestyle, handicrafts (GI tagged Blue pottery, Mollela clay art), dishes like Dal batti churma and a special kind of laddoo made of aloe vera which has lubricating and moisturizing property, also the white and black sesame seeds' laddoo (a kind of sweets) which have a heating effect and thus can be helpful in the chilling winter for the Russians. Other parts of attractions are Heritage hotels, Kotadoria sarees, Forts, and architecture; along with the advertisement by Rajasthan Tourism, themed "*Jaane kya dikh jaaye*" regularly surfing on popular Russian internet sites in the Russian language, thus also using the digital and information technologies effectively to fill the information asymmetry when in comparison to the Chinese agencies to highlight and export their culture. Similarly, the Culture of Northeast and Himalayan states can also be capitalized on by effective branding. This initiative could facilitate state-to-state (*para*) *diplomacy* also, which could be of great significance for India-Russia bilateral cooperation.

The government of India through its collaboration with the Russian government could help to expand some of the **famous Indian food brands**, which are already having outlets in other countries though mainly in the west or Gulf (e.g. Sarvana Bhawan, CCD, Chokhi Dhani, Bikanerwala, etc., all of them have a definite Indian style), to open their outlet in Russian's metropolitan cities by facilitating good locations, property deals, etc., This can later create the same market for Indian in Russia as the Chinese food has developed in India (e.g. Anjan Chatterjee's Specialty Restaurant Chain- Mainland China) and the way Indian food is celebrated in Britain (e.g. Former foreign secretary of UK, Robin Cook, has anointed Chicken Tikka Masala as a "National Dish" of UK). Thus, it has the potential to create a niche for Indian culture both economically and socially. Government stimulation of the private sector's interest by incentivizing them and leading them to endeavour in the economically uncharted territory of the cultural economy of Russia is needed because the Russian economy is not as promising, self-lucrative,

and large as the western markets. In this exploration, the experiences of the Indian Brand Equity Foundation (IBEF), a trust under the Ministry of Commerce & Industry, can also be utilized as it worked for brand building to promote Indian exports, business and economy to the world.

Religious diplomacy can also be brought into usage to increase awareness about the mutually shared multireligious society in both Russia and India, special arrangements can be made to showcase the connection and popular religious shrines in India of Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, which are 6.5%, 0.5%, 0.1% population respectively of the total Russian population³⁵. This will further help in boosting the tourist potential of both countries. To work on the above initiatives, the first thing that is to be done to actualize the gains of the soft power in the true sense and within the shortest period is to focus on popularizing the **languages** of both countries in each other's educational system (e.g., Russian in the Indian education system and vice versa). This is because language is the single bridge in people-to-people cooperation via understanding the culture and society of both nations. It is comfortability with the English language, amongst other factors which has led the Indians to migrate to the west. It can be done by establishing many centres and chairs of Indology and Russian studies in the respective countries. The language initiative is much required otherwise also, to secure our national interest to match up to the leaping popularity of mandarin in Russia. *Combinedly, all the above factors could potentially create a vast Indian diaspora in Russia, which can play an instrumental role in revitalizing bilateral relations.*

All the above suggestions are easier said than done, as their implementation would require special dedicated efforts along with humungous human and financial resources with a lot of risks, but they're worth attempting for strong India-Russia bilateral relations, which can be implemented in other bilateral relations also. Thus, in this way with the use of proactive and **multitrack diplomacy**, the **"Idea of India"** **can** be taken to the streets of Russia and the growth of vast multi-layered networks of people-to-people cooperation (the most important dimension lacking in India-Russia relations) is possible which would lead to shared interests in each other's multi-dimensional growth, which then can help secure rule-based world order, for which both the countries are striving for.

³⁵ Wikipedia contributors. Religion in Russia. (*Wikipedia*, November 15, 2022)

3.0 Conclusion

When all the buzz is around India's partaking in the Ukrainian crisis, there is something seriously significant that we are not addressing i.e., the real issue of the cozying up of Russia with China and Pakistan that is not in favour of securing our strategic interests regionally and globally. While we are vying for great power status, India has to stop taking knee-jerk policy steps and temporary measures. Rather, it is consequentially important that we have a long-term vision of 10 to 50 years for the bilateral relationship with at least the important global players and countries of regional significance. We have to start investing more, along with hard power components, in the involvement of soft power components in bilateral relations as people-to-people cooperation has the potential and can efficiently secure the mutual interests of both nations in global politics in the long term by providing various arenas of cooperation for both the nations to evolve the partnership from unidimensional dependent to complexly interdependence which is key to save the human civilization from the scourge of another war.

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