

Indo-Russia Relations Amidst Evolving Regional Geopolitics: Challenges and Opportunities

Khitish Bhatta

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Naba Barrackpur Prafulla Chandra Mahavidyalaya
Kolkata-700131

Abstract

India and Russia have traditionally shared a strong and cooperative relationship, which has evolved into a privileged strategic partnership in the twenty-first century. This enduring bond is rooted in historical ties, defence cooperation, and shared geopolitical interests. However, the dynamics of this relationship have been tested by recent global developments, particularly Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Since the onset of the conflict, India has maintained a neutral stance, refraining from outright condemnation while emphasizing dialogue and diplomacy. New Delhi's approach reflects its strategic calculations, as Russia remains a key partner in defence procurement and geopolitical balancing, especially concerning China. India values Moscow's support in managing its territorial disputes and maintaining regional stability. Despite its ties with Russia, India has also significantly strengthened its relations with the West, particularly the United States and European nations. The growing Indo-U.S. partnership, QUAD engagements, and increased defence and trade cooperation with Western countries highlight India's multilateral approach to foreign policy. While India continues to prioritize its interests with Russia, its evolving geopolitical alignment suggests that it will not offer unconditional support to Moscow. In this context, this paper seeks to analyse India-Russia relations amid shifting global power dynamics. It explores how India navigates its strategic autonomy, balancing historic ties with Russia while deepening engagements with Western allies. By examining these factors, the study aims to provide insights into the future trajectory of Indo-Russian relations in a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape.

Keywords: Strategic Partnership, Territorial conflict, defense needs, immediate interest.

Introduction:

Indo-Russian relations today largely reflect the enduring legacy of Indo-Soviet ties, which were rooted in strategic cooperation and mutual pragmatism. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union provided India with crucial military and diplomatic support, strengthening its position against perceived threats from Pakistan and China. Soviet military assistance also played a pivotal role in India's emergence as a regional power. Despite the Soviet Union's disintegration, Russia has remained a vital partner, particularly in defense, energy, and geopolitical strategy. Unlike other historical alliances, this relationship was not shaped by cultural or linguistic commonalities, nor did the two nations share similar political systems. Instead, their partnership was driven by pragmatic considerations, with both sides recognizing mutual benefits in

cooperation. Today, as India diversifies its global partnerships, its ties with Russia continue to be shaped by strategic interests, reflecting a balance between historical legacies and evolving geopolitical realities.

Historical Background:

India and Russia have had diplomatic connections since before India gained independence from the British. The Soviet Union was one of the first countries to recognize India's independence in 1947, and it was a natural extension of Soviet anti-imperialism¹. Despite this, Joseph Stalin, Lenin's successor, refrained from strengthening ties with India's leadership because of its "Pro-Western" proclivities. However, India's unique position in the non-aligned movement and its contribution motivated the post-Stalin leadership to strengthen its ties with India. In a bipolar world, India's non-aligned stance suited the Soviet Union's strategic interests far better because it gave newly independent Afro-Asian countries an alternative to joining the US-led military alliance.

India's pro-Soviet stance at the Bandung conference in 1955² solidified these relations even more. Jawaharlal Nehru's visit to the Soviet Union in June 1955 and Nikita Khrushchev and Nikolai Bulganin's visits to India in December 1955 marked the beginning of Indo-Soviet friendship³. The political impact of these trips was visible in the United Nations Security Council, when the Soviet Union used its veto power for the first time to thwart anti-India moves on Jammu and Kashmir in February 1957 and June 1962, as well as Goa in December 1961⁴. In addition, the Soviet Union expressed unequivocal support for India's claim to Kashmir and began a programme of economic and technological assistance to India, assisting it in establishing its key industries. During the 1962 India-China conflict, the USSR attempted to remain neutral between "brother China" and "friend India."⁵ In India, the Soviet Union's action as a mediator in Tashkent during the Indo-Pak confrontation of 1965 was praised since it offered unequivocal guarantees that Indian interests would not be jeopardised.⁶ Both Indian and Soviet leaders saw the growing US-China rapprochement as a severe danger to their security in the early 1970s. Their response had been in 1971 with the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation, which provided immediate consultation in case of military action against parties to the Treaty. During the 1971 India-Pakistan conflict, the USSR adopted a strong position in favour of India. It dispatched ships to the Indian Ocean to counter the 7th Fleet of the US to the Bay of Bengal⁷. The Indo-Pakistani war of 1971 and the birth of Bangladesh produced a trusting relationship between India and the Soviet Union.

Post-Cold War Era:

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, India's ties with Russia have deteriorated significantly. The collapse of the Russian economy followed the demise of the Soviet Union, and Russia has been battling to recover since then. Since 1990s India began to move away from Russia and toward the United States and the West to fulfill its objectives. On the other hand, Russia also recognised the importance of developing strong ties with the United States to restore their economy. However, by the mid-1990s, as Russia's hopes for Western help went unfulfilled, the latter had warmed up to India. In January 1993, when Russian President Boris Yeltsin visited India, he asserted that the two countries had ended their prolonged interruption⁸. It was towards the beginning of the new millennium that Russia started gaining considerable strength and was able to consolidate its economy and polity. Against this backdrop, in October 2000, former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Russian President Vladimir Putin signed the "Declaration on the India-Russia Strategic Partnership"⁹. The Declaration established the tone for bilateral relations by establishing institutionalised conversation mechanisms at various levels to improve

bilateral contact. A joint statement issued in 2010 to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Declaration mentioned above declared that the alliance had developed to “the level of special and privileged strategic cooperation.”¹⁰ In international forums such as the UN-led organisations, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the G20, and the BRICS, India and Russia have attained a new level of collaboration and mutual support¹¹. India joined the SCO as a full member in 2017, partly due to Russian advocacy¹². Despite concerns in India about the growing ties between Russia and Pakistan, Moscow supported India on the issue of the changing special status of Jammu and Kashmir, claiming that “India’s decision on Jammu and Kashmir is a sovereign decision which is as per its Constitution” and that “Moscow follows a policy of non-interference in the domestic affairs of countries.”¹³ After initially disregarding India, Russia changed its position on Afghanistan, realising that if the war-torn country is to experience long-term stability, India's presence in Afghanistan is still essential.

Defence Cooperation:

Despite the recent decline in Russia's overall market share in India, the two nations’ defence cooperation is still crucial. Over 90% of the Indian army’s 3000 plus main battle tanks are Russian T-72 and T-90S. India was also in advanced talks to procure another 464 Russian T-90 MS tanks. Meanwhile, a large portion of India’s air force fighter squadrons comprise Russian aircraft like 272 Su-30MKI¹⁴. India’s significant acquisitions from Russia in recent years have included aero planes (MIG 29, MiG 29 SMT, SU 30K, SU MK1), helicopters (Mi-17, Mi-18, etc.), and air-defence systems (AK 630, 30mm, etc.)¹⁵. Russia is more involved with the ‘Make in India’ initiative in defence equipment than any other country. As a result both the countries have started joint manufacturing of weapons such as Brahmos missiles, T72M1 tanks, radars, anti-ship and anti-tank missiles, etc¹⁶.

In recent times, India has changed its defence objectives to include the procurement of intelligent weaponry, which Russia is ill-equipped to offer, putting a strain on bilateral defence cooperation. The Indian Air Force and Army have also complained about delays in receiving and repairing Russian weaponry and a scarcity of replacement parts. Over the last decade India has made concerted attempts to diversify its defence imports. For example, the Indian air force today heavily relies on the American C-17 and C-130J Super Hercules¹⁷ in its heavy-lift transport fleet. But cost competitiveness, proven battlefield performance and familiarity with consecutive generations of servicemen still make Russian platforms preferable. Furthermore, it is also evident that Russia is the only country prepared to transfer strategic military technologies to India, such as aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines. India continues to rely on Russia for strategic armament, despite recurrent delays in Russia’s fulfillment of significant arms orders. In October 2018, India and Russia signed a historic deal worth the US \$5.43 billion to buy five S-400 Triumph surface-to-air missile defence systems, one of the most powerful missiles defence systems globally, despite the US’s CAATSA act¹⁸. The US has threatened India with penalties over its plan to purchase Russia's S-400 missile defence system. However, in recent years, Russia has attempted to improve its defence relations with China, and Russia has even reached out to Pakistan, which is a critical subject for India’s security. However, given the continuous worsening of Sino-Indian relations in recent years, China’s threat would be one of the most crucial elements in deciding India’s defence outreach to Russia.

Collaboration in Space:

Space collaboration between India and the Soviet Union/Russia has a long history. With Soviet aid, the

Thumba Equatorial Rocket Launching Station was created, and a number of Indian experimental and remote sensing satellites were launched. In 1990, India and Russia signed a \$350 million contract to supply cryogenic engines and technologies for their manufacturing in India. Both nations are now working together on many space initiatives, including India's unmanned lunar space flight project (Chandrayaan-2), the human space travel project, and the building of Youthsat, an Indo-Russian student satellite. India has also agreed to accept signals from Russia's GNSS (Global Navigation Satellite System-GLONASS)¹⁹.

Trade and Economic Cooperation:

Perhaps the most challenging part of Indo-Russian ties today is the improvement of bilateral economic and trade relations, which do not yet represent the potential. Although trade between India and Russia has risen in recent years, it remained at approximately 1% of Russia's overall trade by 1996.²⁰ Recently, both governments have set a target of increasing bilateral trade by \$ 30 billion by 2025. In 2021-22, India's exports to Russia stood at US \$ 3.25 billion, while imports were US \$ 9.87 billion, leading to a deficit of US \$ 6.62 billion. As a result of Moscow's offer to provide oil at a lower price, India's imports from Russia significantly rose. Since April 2022, India has increased its oil imports from Russia from 0.25% of its total crude imports to 10%, with daily imports rising from 25,000 barrels at the beginning of 2022 to 600,000 barrels in May and June²¹. Both governments have set up a number of institutional mechanisms to strengthen economic cooperation, such as the Intergovernmental Commission for Trade, Economic, Scientific, and Cultural Cooperation (IRGC-TEC)²². Another step is India indicating its intention to create a shipping corridor from Chennai to Vladivostok, which would cut the time for commodities to be carried to the Russian Far East by 16 days²³. This would address the logistics problem. It should be noted that this is only a preliminary suggestion and that the Indian side has not yet provided a more detailed implementation plan.

Investment linkages:

Both countries have taken steps to encourage bilateral investment in a variety of industries, including infrastructure projects, IT, minerals, pharmaceuticals, hydrocarbons, power, coal, and nuclear power. In 2017, the US \$ 30 billion global investment target that was set for 2025 was already achieved. The investment target was eventually increased to US \$50 billion²⁴. For India, a large part of the investment in Russia has been in the oil and gas sector. Indian investments in Russia totaled about \$8 billion from 2000 to 2014, whereas Russian investments in India totaled about \$4 billion²⁵. Indian businesses invested \$5.4 billion in Russia's oil and gas sector in 2016²⁶. To gain a portion of Russia's gas industry, a group of Indian oil corporations, including ONGC Videsh, GAIL, and Petronet LNG, is investing in Russia's independent gas producer Novatek's US \$30 billion liquefied natural gas (LNG) project in the Yamal peninsula²⁷. Additionally, nuclear energy collaboration between the two nations has improved. The first two units of the Kudankulam nuclear power facility, each with a capacity of 1,000 MW, are already operational. Contracts for two more have already been signed. The discussion to establish another two units in Andhra Pradesh is going on²⁸. It is known that India is taking a little longer than usual to sign new agreements because the Nuclear Suppliers Group has yet to approve the country's membership.

Russia's recent actions in Ukraine have highlighted the foreign policies of various nations. India has maintained a largely neutral position toward the Russia-Ukraine situation, while Western countries, including the United States, have imposed economic and other sanctions on Russia. India has abstained from successive votes in the UN Security Council, General Assembly, and Human Rights Council that

condemned Russian aggression in Ukraine. Even in March 2022, when Western countries imposed economic sanctions on Russia due to its invasion of Ukraine, India and Russia explored alternative payment channels due to the absence of Russian banks from SWIFT²⁹ and Visa/MasterCard³⁰. The officials of both nations were talking about accepting RuPay and MIR cards.

India's worries concerning China and Pakistan are the primary motivators behind its stance towards the Russian incursion. Both of these countries pose immediate and long-lasting risks to New Delhi. Maintaining its friendship with Moscow will prevent Russia's connections with China from getting more robust and restrict Russian incentives to forge new strategic ties with Pakistan. Another critical factor is India's continued reliance on Russia for military equipment. This is because Russian weaponry is typically less expensive than its Western counterparts. New technologies are required for India to modernise its weapons systems. Russia has been more accommodating to India's development of strategic platforms, even though no government is willing to surrender cutting-edge military technology.

Conclusion:

The Indo-Russian relationship continues to enjoy strong support in both nations, demonstrating its resilience despite shifting global dynamics. Much like during the Cold War, present-day ties are shaped by a convergence of security interests, with India viewing a strong Russia as essential for maintaining multipolarity and a rule-based international order that supports its growth. India's stance on the Russia-Ukraine war reflects these strategic calculations; however, this does not imply unconditional support for Moscow. In recent years, New Delhi has significantly deepened its engagement with the West, and the long-term sustainability of its ties with Moscow remains uncertain. If Russia struggles to maintain its economic and military dominance due to sanctions or fails to achieve its strategic objectives in Ukraine, India may be forced to reassess its position. Furthermore, Russia's actions in Ukraine—particularly its support for separatist regions—set a precedent that could embolden China and Pakistan in their territorial ambitions, posing risks to India's security. While India's current position aligns with its immediate strategic interests, it has led to a dilution of its long-standing principles on sovereignty and territorial integrity. Going forward, India must carefully evaluate the impact of its choices on its strategic autonomy, particularly within the Quad and America's Indo-Pacific policy. In the medium to long term, the key to India's independent defense and strategic policy lies in building a robust domestic military-industrial complex, reducing reliance on external powers, and ensuring self-sufficiency in critical defense technologies.

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