

Navigating Shifting Tides: The Evolution of Moscow-New Delhi Relations in a Complex Global Arena

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The first conceptual unit explores the historical evolution of Russian-Indian relations, tracing its roots from the solid foundations of the Soviet era to contemporary challenges. The subsequent part delves into the current state of cooperation between the two nations, spanning domains such as defense, energy, and multilateral forums. Following the focus shifts to the challenges posed by the rise of China, the resurgence of U.S.-India ties, and Russia's pivot towards Beijing amidst Western isolation. Lastly the impact of the conflict in Ukraine on the relationship is analyzed, questioning the resilience of their bond amidst competing alliances and economic realities. Nevertheless, the enduring mutual respect and shared interests between Russia and India, which shape regional dynamics, are highlighted, underscoring the importance of strategic foresight and diplomatic agility in navigating shifting geopolitical landscapes.

Introduction: Evolution of India-Russia Bilateral Relations

The foundation of India's relationship with the former Soviet Union/Russian Federation is built on trust and mutual interests, established over decades. After independence, India gained support and industrial growth through its association with the USSR. Indian leaders and intellectuals saw the USSR as a model for rapid industrialization and addressing poverty and economic inequality. Unlike Western imperial powers, the Soviet Union was not viewed with suspicion by countries like India, emerging from colonial rule. Initially, the Soviet view of India and other newly independent colonies was less favorable, seeing them as not truly independent due to their ties with former rulers. Soviet leaders considered these nations to be governed by a bourgeois class, subordinate to former colonial powers. India, a key player in the Non-Aligned Movement, aimed to stay neutral in the Cold War. [However, early postcolonial years and the onset of the Cold War saw Moscow reject this neutrality, directing the pro-Soviet Communist Party of India to pursue revolution against the "bourgeois nationalist" governments.](#)¹

Beginning in the 1950s, the Soviet Union significantly aided India's industrialization, especially in defense, space, and atomic energy sectors, providing capital and expertise. During India's shortages in capital, foreign exchange, and technology, the USSR bridged these gaps, allowing India to pay for projects in rupees. This partnership ensured reliable military supplies, essential commodities, and supported India's emerging Public Sector Units (PSUs), enhancing self-reliance. The 1955 visit by Soviet leaders Khrushchev and Bulganin solidified the Soviet-India relationship based on arms sales, shared technology, and geopolitical alignment. Throughout the Cold War and non-alignment era, India relied on Soviet support for strategic issues like the Jammu and Kashmir conflict, benefiting from advancements in space technology and nuclear capabilities. The 1971 Indo-Soviet Friendship Treaty, amid the India-Pakistan conflict, further cemented military-technical collaboration.

In the 1990s, post-Soviet Russia's shift towards the West and economic reforms led to a temporary drift in bilateral ties. Despite these challenges, the friendship endured, showing resilience amid geopolitical shifts. The post-Soviet era weakened Moscow-New Delhi relations, with Russia's foreign and security policies becoming more pragmatic. This required reassessing

Indo-Russian relations, focusing on realistic opportunities and mutual economic benefits, especially after India's liberalization in 1991.

Under President Putin, Russia regained its status as a major global player, with economic prosperity bolstered by oil revenues. While Cold War tensions diminished, Russia opposed Western encroachment in its neighboring regions. Since the [Declaration on the India-Russia Strategic Partnership in October 2000](#),² the relationship evolved significantly, with increased cooperation in politics, security, defense, trade, economy, science, technology, and culture. The partnership, elevated to a so called special and privileged strategic partnership in December 2010, includes several institutionalized dialogue mechanisms ensuring regular interaction and follow-up on collaborative activities.

Given these developments, it is essential to examine the foundation and boundaries of this cooperation, which will be addressed in the following section.

Foundations and limitations of the cooperation

Russia and India align in their strategic objectives, emphasizing the significance of international multilateralism as a pathway towards a more inclusive, democratic, and transparent global order, ensuring secure and sustainable development for nations irrespective of size, wealth, or geographic location. [They advocate for the establishment of new multilateral institutions founded on principles of equality and mutual respect, exemplified by entities like the G20, Shanghai Cooperation Organization \(SCO\), and BRICS.](#) Both nations assert that the evolution of the Eurasian continent will exert considerable influence on global economic, political, technological, and societal advancement. Moreover, the ideological commonality between the two states extends to geopolitical and geostrategic areas.

Firstly the Arctic is emerging as a global frontier with untapped resources and economic potential, made more accessible by global warming. Stakeholders must balance exploiting opportunities with mitigating risks. As the largest Arctic state, Russia is eager to collaborate with China and India, indicating a shift towards easternization in Arctic affairs. This move highlights Russia's departure from cooperation with Western Arctic states in the Arctic Council, leading Moscow to seek Eastern partnerships. India aims to utilize the Northern Sea Route for faster maritime connections and access to Arctic energy, and it seeks Russian support for expanding the North-South Transport Corridor. India is also motivated by concerns over

China's growing Arctic presence and aims to counterbalance Beijing's influence. India sees disrupting Chinese shipping through the Indian Ocean as key in potential confrontations with China and worries that China's Arctic access could undermine this strategy. [India views increased Arctic involvement as a way to diversify Russian partnerships and reduce Moscow's reliance on China](#), strengthening defense and strategic ties. For Moscow, competition between China and India in Arctic projects offers strategic opportunities, but greater benefits lie in trilateral cooperation among Russia, India, and China. This cooperation could improve relations between these nations and potentially evolve into broader multilateral partnerships involving other Eurasian states.

Russia and India also prioritize security in Central Asia, focusing on terrorism and extremism, and aim to enhance cooperation through the SCO and support anti-terrorism efforts. Economically, both see opportunities for joint projects in line with Central Asia's modernization, increasing demand for investments, technology, and training. Energy is crucial for both, with Russia avoiding competition with regional exporters and India diversifying away from the Middle East. [However, they differ on labor migration from Central Asia to Russia. India supports the International North-South Transport Corridor \(INSTC\) for regional trade, while Russia coordinates with China's Belt and Road Initiative \(BRI\) and its Eurasian Economic Union \(EAEU\)](#). Both advocate for an open Central Asia and oppose third-party dominance. For instance in Afghanistan, they acknowledge challenges from instability and drug trade, supporting conditional recognition of the new regime to enable aid and development projects, believing engagement with Kabul is essential for resolving regional issues.

Important to mention Africa as well: [Russia and India have been increasingly engaging due to its demographic, resource, and economic potential](#). Russia aims to restore Cold War-era influence through diplomacy and military collaboration, focusing on natural resources and infrastructure investment. The Russia-Africa Economic Forum highlights these efforts, with Africa also helping Russia counter Western isolation. India seeks to strengthen economic ties with Africa through trade, investment, and development cooperation. It views Africa as a market for goods and services and aims to diversify its energy sources. India engages in development projects, scholarships, technical support, and healthcare, enhancing its soft power. Both countries actions in Africa reflect their broader foreign policy goals, with limited

competition between their private sectors suggesting that increased state-level coordination would be mutually beneficial.

Lastly though neither borders the Middle East, Moscow and New Delhi are indirectly deeply impacted by the region and pursue strategic interests there. [The Russian Federation aims to maintain its geopolitical influence, fostering relations with Iran, Syria, Egypt, the Gulf countries, Israel, and Palestine despite regional political polarization.](#) India, focusing on economic cooperation and maritime security, recently initiated the IMEC to connect with Europe via the Middle East, seen as a counter to China's BRI. Both nations prioritize energy security: India as a major importer of Gulf oil and gas, and Russia as an exporter aiming to stabilize global markets. Their complementary strengths enable joint efforts on security and development, including conflict resolution and economic collaborations.

Nonetheless, the parties' strategic collaboration faces four limitation factors:

1. China Factor: India's concerns about China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific and border conflicts contrast with Russia's close ties with China. This divergence can lead to conflicting goals, especially if a Russian-Chinese military-political alliance forms, potentially complicating India-China relations. [However, Russia has not supported China against India and values India as a counterbalance to its dependence on China.](#)
2. The Quad and Indo-Pacific: India and Russia have differing views on the Indo-Pacific. Russia sees it as a US-driven initiative against China and Russia, while India sees it as a means to expand its influence. India's involvement in the Quad raises Russian concerns about a new Asian NATO. Indian experts argue that the Quad will not become a military alliance, as India values its foreign policy independence. India could help Russia navigate the Indo-Pacific and facilitate dialogues between Moscow, Washington, and Beijing.
3. Pakistan Relations: India's concerns about Russia-Pakistan relations are unfounded. Russia's engagement with Pakistan is situational, influenced by changes in Afghanistan and Pakistan's influence on the Taliban. However, Russia prioritizes its longstanding strategic partnership with India over any tactical relationship with Pakistan.
4. Defense Partnership and US Pivot: India's growing economic ties with the West may occasionally clash with Russia's interests. Despite India's heavy reliance on Russian

arms, it aims to diversify its defense sources. India will not sacrifice partnerships with countries like Russia and Iran, even under US pressure. [India will continue balancing its involvement in the Quad, BRICS, and the SCO while establishing new multilateral structures in South Asia and the Middle East.](#)

Overall, while Russia's importance as a key partner for India is debated, both nations continue to navigate their complex strategic cooperation amidst evolving global dynamics.

Beyond the past: the present and the future, or the effects of the war in Ukraine

Russian-Indian relations are undergoing a significant transformation. Historically, the relationship was anchored on three key pillars: Soviet arms sales to India, significant contribution to building India's public sector through aid and technical assistance, particularly in steelmaking, power generation, and heavy industry, and a geopolitical alignment against the US, Pakistan, and China. However, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the rise of India and China, U.S.-China tensions, deepening U.S.-India ties, and the Russia-China partnership, intensified by Russia's estrangement from the West and the war in Ukraine, have reshaped the relationship.

Currently, the arms trade remains the strongest link, with Russia continuing as a major supplier of weapons to India, though it faces increasing competition as India diversifies its arms sources and develops its own defense industry. [Between 1955 and 1991, 66% of India's military technology came from the Soviet Union, overtaking the former UK.](#) Arms sales remained the most important element of Russian-Indian relations in the post-Cold War period. [During these years, Russia supplied two-thirds of India's total arms imports, including Soviet/Russian tanks \(T-72 and T-90S\) and ground attack aircraft \(MiG-21, Su-30, and MiG-29 variants\).](#)³ Additionally, more than half of India's conventional submarines are of Soviet design, as are all of its aerial refueling tankers (Il-78s), as well as its single aircraft carrier and nuclear-powered submarines. The number of Russian arms deliveries to India has declined in recent years due to these efforts. Russia's pivot toward China, driven by its isolation from the West, complicates its partnership with India amid U.S.-China and China-India tensions. Russia's junior partnership with China poses challenges for its relations with India, which now has greater capabilities and new partnerships offering more than Russia can.

The long-standing Russian-Indian friendship, as illustrated above historically characterized by Soviet dominance, has shifted towards a more balanced relationship recognizing India's rise as a global power. [The Ukraine conflict has further altered this relationship as Russia seeks closer ties with China, which have become more important than those with India.](#)⁴ Additionally, Russia's significance in India's foreign policy has diminished due to India's growing security relationship with the US. Since the conflict began, India has refrained from condemning Russia, maintaining defense and commercial relations, advocating for dialogue, and emphasizing the importance of respecting territorial integrity. Russia views India as a rising global power and values its independent stance amid external pressures. Despite some concerns about the future of their bilateral relationship, both nations share a profound and enduring bond, resilient to political shifts. No serious disagreements exist on key international issues, and Russian-Indian relations lack the mutual fears and distrust typical of great-power relations. Indian culture, philosophy, and art have long fascinated the Russian intelligentsia, reinforcing this bond. However the relationship is losing momentum. Trade growth has been significant but questions about its sustainability persist. [Military cooperation faces challenges due to the increasing presence of Western players in India's defense market and Modi's "Make in India" strategy.](#)⁵ There are also points of contention on international matters such as the Quad, Afghanistan, and China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Trade and economic ties, already the weakest of the three pillars during the Cold War, have declined significantly. Russia's economic troubles in the 1990s and India's shift to a market-driven economy with lower tariffs and greater foreign investment have reduced Russia's economic significance for India. While the Soviet Union once provided a model for economic development, contemporary Russia offers little in terms of positive experience. Russia's role as a trading partner for India has diminished, with 2020 figures showing less than \$6 billion in Russian exports to India (excluding weaponry) and less than \$3 billion in Indian exports to Russia. Major exports included Russian coal briquettes and Indian packaged medicaments. Russian investment in India from 2000 to 2021 totaled only \$1.26 billion, compared to the United States' \$42 billion. The goal of increasing two-way investment to \$50 billion by 2025 is unlikely to be realized. Thus, Russia's importance to India in trade and investment remains marginal. One significant area of increased trade since the Ukraine invasion is oil. [India as the world's third-largest oil consumer imports nearly 85 percent of its needs, and planned to raise](#)

[another 5 percent by 2040⁶](#). This shift highlights the changing relationship: outside of defense, Russia is now mainly a supplier of raw materials to India. Despite complexities, the Russian-Indian partnership persists. Russia remains a crucial supplier of weapons and oil to India, which has not joined Western sanctions against Russia, underscoring its independent foreign policy. Although India's security ties with the US are growing, its longstanding relationship with Russia continues to benefit both nations. Maintaining strong security ties with both China and India is increasingly challenging for Moscow. China's response to Russian arms sales to India and potential pressures on Russia from China are critical issues. Given geographic proximity and economic ties, Beijing likely wields more influence over Moscow than New Delhi. [The September of 2022 SCO summit illustrated these dynamics: the Indian leader urged Putin to seek peace in Ukraine, while Xi Jinping took a nuanced stance](#). Overall, the Russia-India relationship reflects a trend towards a new geopolitical and geoeconomic bipolar structure. Russia has strengthened ties with China, while India has built stronger links with the US. If this trend continues, Russia and India might find themselves in opposing blocs, complicating their cooperation. Despite this, they must not be mere spectators in the US-China rivalry and should emphasize multilateralism to mitigate bipolarity. Their long history of cooperation suggests their relationship need not deteriorate. Their so called privileged strategic partnership serves as a model for great power relations, even when they agree to disagree, highlighting the importance of strategic thinking and solutions to sustain bilateral cooperation long-term.

Endnotes

¹ ИНДИЯ. ДЕЛА ПОСОЛЬСКИЕ, 2023.

² Menon, 2015.

³ SIPRI, 2022.

⁴ Acosta – McCarthy, 2024.

⁵ YouTube, 2022.

⁶ Debjit, 2022.

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