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India-Russia Relations amid the Ukraine Conflict: Navigating Strategic Autonomy in a Multipolar World

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Abstract:

The India-Russia relationship historically rooted in defense cooperation, energy security, and a shared vision of global multipolarity, is undergoing significant recalibration in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine war. India's diplomatic balancing act—marked by abstentions in United Nations resolutions, expansion of economic ties with Russia, and simultaneous deepening of partnerships with Western powers—showcases its evolving approach to strategic autonomy. This article critically examines the historical foundations of India-Russia relations, analyzes how the Ukraine war has affected defense cooperation, energy security, and diplomatic alignments, and explores future prospects for the partnership. Drawing upon contemporary developments up to 2025, it argues that while historical ties endure, India's strategic diversification and its ambitions for global leadership are reshaping the bilateral relationship for a multipolar future.

Keywords: India-Russia Relations, Strategic Autonomy, Ukraine Conflict, Energy Security, Defense Diversification, Multipolarity, G20, Global South

Introduction:

The India-Russia relationship has historically been one of the most durable and resilient bilateral partnerships in international affairs. Emerging from the geopolitics of the Cold War, this relationship has adapted across eras of global transformation, from the bipolarity of the twentieth century to the evolving multipolar order of the twenty-first century. For decades, India and Russia (and formerly the Soviet Union) shared a convergence of interests in defense cooperation, strategic autonomy, and economic development. Russia became India's largest defense supplier, the Soviet Union assisted India's early industrialization, and both nations supported each other in multilateral forums. (MOHAN, 2021)

However, the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war in February 2022 placed significant strain on the global order, testing India's diplomatic flexibility. Unlike the polarized choices faced by many

other nations, India opted for a position of cautious neutrality: abstaining from United Nations resolutions condemning Russia's actions, while simultaneously advocating for the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and dialogue. This strategic posture attracted both criticism and admiration. Critics argued that India risked alienating Western partners, while supporters viewed India's position as a sophisticated exercise of strategic autonomy—an approach India has historically valued and consistently practiced. (H V PANT, 2022)

The geopolitical ramifications of the war also impacted India-Russia relations directly. The imposition of severe Western sanctions on Russia disrupted defense supply chains, created challenges in payment mechanisms for bilateral trade, and opened new avenues for energy cooperation as Russia diverted its oil exports to Asian markets, notably India and China (Reuters, 2024). Meanwhile, Russia's growing dependence on China further complicated India's calculations, given the enduring India-China border tensions.

This article analyzes how the Russia-Ukraine conflict has affected the longstanding India-Russia relationship. It examines the historical foundations of the partnership, evaluates how defense cooperation, energy trade, and diplomatic engagement have been reshaped, and assesses the prospects for future bilateral ties amid the realities of a shifting global order. Drawing on contemporary developments up to early 2025, it argues that India's recalibration of ties with Russia is neither abandonment nor unconditional support; rather, it represents a pragmatic adjustment consistent with India's aspirations as a leading actor in a multipolar world.

Historical Foundations of the India-Russia Relationship

The origins of India's engagement with the Soviet Union date back to the early years of India's independence. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, deeply influenced by the ideals of non-alignment, sought to steer India away from entanglement in Cold War bloc politics. Nonetheless, pragmatic considerations led to an increasingly close relationship with Moscow. The Soviet Union supported India's efforts at industrialization through technical assistance in major public sector undertakings such as the Bhilai Steel Plant, the Heavy Electricals Plant at Bhopal, and the Oil and Natural Gas Commission (OGNC). (BUDHWAR, 2007)

Strategically, the Indo-Soviet relationship gained profound depth in the 1970s. The signing of the Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation in 1971 was a watershed moment. Against the backdrop of escalating tensions with Pakistan and a growing U.S.-China rapprochement, India sought security guarantees. The treaty assured India of Soviet diplomatic and military support during the Bangladesh Liberation War, a commitment that proved crucial in countering American and Chinese pressures (RAGHVAN, 2013).

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the Soviet Union remained India's principal defense partner. Soviet-supplied MiG fighter aircraft, T-72 tanks, and naval vessels formed the backbone of

India's military arsenal. By the end of the Cold War, over 70% of India's military inventory was of Soviet origin (SIPRI, 2023). The relationship extended beyond defense into scientific research, space exploration—including India's first satellite Aryabhata launched by a Soviet rocket—and strong diplomatic cooperation at the United Nations.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 presented challenges. Russia under President Boris Yeltsin initially prioritized engagement with the West, leading to a temporary downgrading of ties with India. Nonetheless, mutual strategic interests soon reasserted themselves. In 1993, India and Russia signed the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, and by 2000, the relationship was further elevated through the Declaration of the India-Russia Strategic Partnership (Affairs, 2023).

Under President Vladimir Putin's leadership, bilateral ties deepened significantly. Key defense projects, including the BrahMos supersonic missile (a joint venture), the licensed production of Su-30MKI fighter jets, and leasing of nuclear-powered submarines, underscored the strategic trust between the two nations. Russia strongly supported India's candidature for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council and continued to back India's admission into critical technology control regimes such as the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG).

At the same time, the relationship faced emerging challenges. India's economic liberalization and growing ties with the United States, coupled with Russia's increasing strategic alignment with China following the West's imposition of sanctions post-Crimea annexation in 2014, created subtle divergences. Nevertheless, high-level summits, defense agreements, energy collaborations, and multilateral engagements through BRICS, SCO, and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) sustained the momentum.

By the eve of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2022, India-Russia relations were thus characterized by a combination of historical trust, ongoing defense and energy cooperation, but also the need for pragmatic recalibration in light of global realignments.

The Russia-Ukraine War: Global Impact and India's Diplomatic Response

The Russia-Ukraine Conflict and Global Strategic Realignment

The Russia-Ukraine war, beginning with the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, marked a seismic shift in international politics. What Russia initially envisioned as a swift operation to "demilitarize and de-Nazify" Ukraine quickly escalated into a protracted and bloody conflict. Ukraine's fierce resistance, backed by extensive Western military and economic support, transformed the war into a drawn-out confrontation with profound global ramifications. (Institute, 2023)

Western nations, led by the United States and the European Union, responded with sweeping economic sanctions against Russia. Measures included the freezing of Russian central bank assets, removal of major Russian banks from the SWIFT payment system, export bans on advanced

technologies, and personal sanctions on political and business elites. Simultaneously, NATO was reinvigorated: Finland and Sweden, historically neutral countries, sought and gained membership in the alliance, thereby expanding NATO's frontier with Russia. (REUTERS, 2024)

The war triggered a profound energy crisis, particularly in Europe, which had relied heavily on Russian gas. Global food insecurity also worsened due to disruptions in Ukrainian grain exports, prompting fears of famine in parts of Africa and South Asia. Furthermore, the conflict accentuated the strategic realignment underway in Asia, with Russia and China deepening their quasi-alliance, even as India, Japan, and Australia strengthened their cooperation with the United States under the Quad framework (PANT, 2023).

The United Nations, despite humanitarian interventions, struggled to achieve political consensus. Russia's veto power in the Security Council paralyzed efforts to pass binding resolutions. Meanwhile, non-Western nations, including India, Brazil, and South Africa, charted more independent courses, resisting Western pressure to fully isolate Moscow. The emergence of multiple diplomatic approaches to the conflict underscored the fragmentation of the liberal international order into competing spheres of influence.

Against this turbulent backdrop, India's response revealed not only diplomatic agility but also the complexities of balancing longstanding partnerships with new strategic realities.

India's Diplomatic Response: Strategic Autonomy in Practice

From the onset of hostilities, India adopted a position of careful neutrality. In March 2022, India abstained from United Nations General Assembly Resolution ES-11/1 condemning the Russian invasion. India also abstained from votes at the UN Human Rights Council and the Security Council criticizing Russian actions. However, India's abstentions were often accompanied by statements emphasizing the importance of respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and international law (Affairs, India's statements at the United Nations regarding Ukraine crisis, 2022).

This nuanced position reflected India's deep strategic considerations. Russia remained a critical defense supplier for India, accounting for around 46% of Indian arms imports at the start of 2020. Russian equipment formed the backbone of the Indian Army's armored regiments, the Air Force's fighter fleet, and the Navy's submarine forces. Disrupting relations with Moscow could jeopardize vital defense supplies amid India's enduring border tensions with China and Pakistan.

Energy security provided an additional layer of pragmatism. With global oil prices surging above \$100 per barrel following the onset of the conflict, Russia offered heavily discounted crude to buyers willing to circumvent Western restrictions. India's oil imports from Russia surged from less than 2% in early 2022 to over 35% by late 2024, substantially easing India's inflationary pressures and strengthening its macroeconomic stability (STANDARD, 2024).

Domestically, India's diplomatic stance found broad support across political parties. Public

opinion polls conducted by the Observer Research Foundation in late 2022 showed that a majority of Indians preferred neutrality, citing concerns over national interest rather than ideological considerations.

At the same time, India expanded its diplomatic engagements with the West. High-level dialogues with the United States, European Union, Australia, and Japan intensified. Through the Quad, India cooperated on critical technology supply chains, cyber security, vaccine production, and maritime domain awareness. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Washington in June 2023 marked a historic moment, resulting in the signing of several defense and technology pacts under the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET). (HOUSE, 2023)

Despite Western expectations, India avoided condemning Russia in categorical terms. Instead, Indian diplomacy emphasized the necessity of dialogue and peaceful resolution. India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar repeatedly articulated that India's position was based on its own interests and principles rather than pressure from either side. Speaking at the United Nations in September 2022, Jaishankar asserted that "India is on the side of peace" and that "we urge that all efforts be directed at de-escalation and a return to diplomacy".

Notably, India leveraged its growing global stature during its G20 Presidency in 2023. Amidst intense divisions, India succeeded in brokering a consensus declaration at the New Delhi Summit, which refrained from directly blaming Russia for the war but emphasized adherence to international law and humanitarian concerns. The success of the G20 under India's leadership enhanced its image as a credible, pragmatic actor capable of bridging East-West divides.

Russia's View of India's Response

From Moscow's perspective, India's refusal to join Western sanctions and its willingness to expand energy and trade relations were highly significant. Russian officials frequently praised India's "balanced and independent" approach. In bilateral dialogues throughout 2023 and 2024, Russia sought to deepen cooperation in emerging areas such as the Northern Sea Route development, Arctic energy projects, and cross-border payments infrastructure.

At the same time, Russia's increasing reliance on China was not lost on Indian strategic thinkers. While Moscow publicly maintained that its ties with India and China were distinct and complementary, the strengthening of the Russia-China strategic partnership, particularly in energy and defense domains, added a layer of complexity to India's long-term calculations.

In essence, while India preserved a functional and pragmatic relationship with Russia during the Ukraine conflict, it also laid the groundwork for a more diversified and resilient foreign policy that reflects the new global realities.

Impact of the Ukraine War on India-Russia Bilateral Ties

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has brought profound changes to the nature and substance of

India-Russia bilateral relations. Although the historical foundations of trust and cooperation remain intact, emerging challenges in defense, energy, and diplomacy have introduced new dynamics into the partnership. Each of these domains reflects the complex pressures and recalibrations shaping India's approach to Russia amid a volatile international environment.

Defense Cooperation: Continuing Relevance and Strategic Diversification

Defense cooperation has traditionally formed the bedrock of the India-Russia relationship. Soviet-era platforms dominated India's military inventory for decades, and the legacy persists even today. Major Indian defense systems, including Su-30MKI fighters, T-90 tanks, and Kilo-class submarines, continue to rely heavily on Russian supplies and maintenance support. (Institute, 2023) However, the Russia-Ukraine war has exposed vulnerabilities in this dependence. Western sanctions on Russian defense industries, combined with disruptions in supply chains and prioritization of resources for the Ukraine front, have resulted in delays in deliveries and maintenance support for existing platforms. As of early 2025, India had received only three of the five S-400 regiments it ordered in 2018, with further delays likely due to Russia's defense production constraints.

Compounding the problem are financial transaction difficulties. The removal of Russian banks from the SWIFT system forced India and Russia to explore alternative payment mechanisms, including rupee-ruble settlement systems and trade in third currencies like the UAE dirham. However, the volume of bilateral defense trade handled through these mechanisms remains limited, and exchange rate fluctuations have complicated contracts denominated in rubles. (TELLIS, 2022) In response, India has intensified efforts at diversification. The signing of agreements with France for 26 Rafale-Marine fighter jets for India's aircraft carriers and with the United States for the procurement of MQ-9B Predator drones signal a conscious strategy to broaden defense partnerships. Indigenous defense initiatives have also gained new momentum. The Defense Research and Development Organization (DRDO) has accelerated projects such as the Tejas Mk2 fighter program, the Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA) initiative, and the development of indigenous artillery systems.

In parallel, India has launched new trilateral and quadrilateral defense engagements, such as the India-France-UAE trilateral framework on Indo-Pacific security and increased participation in multinational exercises like RIMPAC and Malabar. These developments indicate that while India will continue to maintain legacy defense ties with Russia, it seeks to minimize operational vulnerabilities by broadening its options.

Thus, defense cooperation remains crucial but no longer exclusive. Pragmatic diversification now anchors India's long-term strategic autonomy.

Energy Security: Opportunistic Gains and Structural Shifts

Energy security constitutes another vital aspect of India-Russia cooperation, and the Ukraine

conflict has dramatically expanded this domain. In the wake of European sanctions on Russian oil, India emerged as one of the largest buyers of discounted Russian crude.

Indian imports of Russian oil surged from under 2% in January 2022 to nearly 38% by late 2024, with Russian Urals-grade crude becoming the single largest source of India's oil supply (Reuters, 2025). Indian public sector refiners such as Indian Oil Corporation, Bharat Petroleum Corporation, and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation leveraged the discounts to stabilize domestic fuel prices amid global energy market volatility. (CHAUDHARY, 2022)

This opportunistic expansion has provided tangible short-term economic benefits. India's current account deficit narrowed in 2023–24, inflation moderated despite global trends, and foreign exchange reserves remained robust. Furthermore, Russian energy companies like Rosneft have expressed interest in expanding upstream partnerships with Indian firms, including joint exploration in the Arctic.

However, the sustainability of this arrangement faces multiple challenges. First, logistical and insurance constraints, especially due to the G7-imposed price cap and restrictions on Western maritime insurance providers have complicated the transport of Russian oil. Indian shipping companies have had to assume greater risk, sometimes relying on a "shadow fleet" of older tankers to maintain supplies.

Second, the threat of secondary sanctions remains an overhanging concern. Although the United States has thus far avoided penalizing Indian entities, political pressures may escalate depending on future geopolitical developments. Indian policymakers are therefore cautious about overdependence on any one source. (SEN, 2023)

Third, Russia itself is diversifying its customer base. Increasing exports to China, Turkey, and Southeast Asian markets mean that the exceptional discounts India enjoyed in 2022–23 are gradually diminishing. By early 2025, the discount on Russian crude had shrunk to less than \$8 per barrel compared to Brent, reducing India's bargaining leverage.

In anticipation of these risks, India has accelerated diversification efforts. It signed a 25-year LNG supply deal with Qatar in December 2024, strengthened strategic energy ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and invested heavily in the development of green hydrogen projects under its National Hydrogen Mission. (ENERGY, 2024) Domestic initiatives in solar, wind, and bioenergy sectors have also received significant fiscal support.

Thus, while the Ukraine war temporarily deepened India-Russia energy cooperation, structural factors suggest that India's long-term energy strategy will increasingly rest on diversification, resilience, and sustainability.

Diplomatic Engagement: Balancing Continuity and Caution

Diplomatically, India has sought to maintain a delicate equilibrium. While abstaining from

direct condemnation of Russia at international forum, India has consistently emphasized the importance of diplomacy, dialogue, and the preservation of the rules-based international order.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's assertion during the 2023 G20 Summit that "this is not an era of war" captured India's core diplomatic message: a rejection of both unilateral aggression and binary Cold War-style alliances. India's External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, elaborated this approach further, emphasizing that India's foreign policy is "interest-based, not ideology-driven".

In parallel, India has engaged Russia through multiple platforms. President Putin and Prime Minister Modi held several bilateral meetings between 2022 and 2024, including on the sidelines of BRICS summits, SCO gatherings, and the Vladivostok Eastern Economic Forum. Areas of cooperation discussed included expansion of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), Arctic energy exploration, and the co-development of critical technologies. (TASS, 2024)

However, India has also quietly expressed concerns over Russia's growing tilt toward China. The deepening of Sino-Russian strategic coordination, particularly following the "no limits" partnership declared by Moscow and Beijing in February 2022, raises apprehensions in New Delhi about Russia's long-term reliability as a balancing force in Eurasia.

India's active leadership in forums like BRICS, SCO, and the Voice of Global South Summit suggests a broader strategy: to shape multipolarity on its own terms, ensuring that emerging global platforms reflect equitable representation rather than domination by any one power bloc.

In sum, India's diplomatic engagement with Russia remains characterized by continuity but tempered with caution. Strategic patience, hedging, and selective cooperation define India's approach in an increasingly fragmented world. (Garima Mohan, 2023)

India's Strategic Autonomy in a Changing Global Order

India's response to the Russia-Ukraine conflict underscores the evolution of its strategic autonomy from a principle of non-alignment to a sophisticated strategy of multi-alignment. Historically, India's non-alignment during the Cold War aimed to preserve independence of action amidst superpower rivalry. In the contemporary context, strategic autonomy involves flexible engagement with all major powers, calibrated to India's national interests rather than loyalty to any ideological bloc (H V PANT, 2022).

The Russia-Ukraine war has tested this doctrine severely. Faced with intense pressure from Western partners to condemn Russia and join sanctions, India charted an independent course. Its refusal to succumb to binary choices reflects not only the legacy of Nehruvian non-alignment but also the practical necessities of its security, economic, and technological interests.

Defense diversification exemplifies India's recalibration. While continuing key Russian arms acquisitions, such as the S-400 systems, India expanded procurement from the United States, France, and Israel. The 2023 agreements on co-producing jet engines with General Electric, the acquisition

of Predator drones, and the deepening of ties with French aerospace companies underscore India's strategic diversification.

Similarly, in energy security, India utilized Russian crude to stabilize its economy but concurrently invested in alternative sources. Long-term LNG agreements with Qatar, expanded ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and investments in solar, wind, and green hydrogen projects reflect a hedging strategy to insulate India from future shocks. (BAJPAI, 2021)

Diplomatically, India's leadership of the G20 in 2023 showcased its capacity to navigate a fractured global environment. The G20 declaration crafted under Indian stewardship carefully balanced competing narratives on Ukraine, emphasizing humanitarian concerns without isolating Russia, and reinforced India's image as a consensus-builder.

India's proactive engagement with the Global South also illustrates the new dimensions of its strategic autonomy. Initiatives like the Voice of Global South Summit allowed India to articulate the interests of developing countries marginalized by great power rivalry, positioning itself as a bridge between developed and emerging economies.

However, strategic autonomy is not without challenges. Managing the deepening Russia-China axis, navigating Western sensitivities, and addressing vulnerabilities in critical supply chains require constant vigilance. Moreover, India must ensure that its quest for autonomy does not translate into isolation or loss of credibility among its partners. (CHAUDHARI, 2018)

In essence, India's strategic autonomy today is dynamic, issue-based, and context-specific. It seeks to maximize India's options while minimizing dependencies, allowing India to rise as an independent pole in a multipolar world order.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has fundamentally tested the resilience, adaptability, and future trajectory of the India-Russia relationship. While historical goodwill, defense cooperation, and shared visions of multipolarity continue to bind New Delhi and Moscow, the war has accelerated underlying structural shifts.

India's approach—marked by pragmatic neutrality, opportunistic energy engagement, defense diversification, and diplomatic balancing—has been broadly successful in safeguarding its core national interests. By resisting external pressure to abandon Russia while simultaneously deepening ties with the West and the Indo-Pacific, India has demonstrated strategic maturity befitting its rising global status.

However, future challenges loom. Russia's growing dependence on China could complicate India's Eurasian strategies. Secondary sanctions risks, evolving energy markets, and Russia's internal economic vulnerabilities necessitate careful risk management. (JOSHI, 2023)

Based on the analysis presented, the following policy recommendations emerge:

1. Continued Diversification of Defense Procurement: India must sustain its efforts to diversify its defense sources, prioritize joint production, and invest heavily in indigenous capabilities to minimize vulnerabilities in the event of future disruptions.
2. Energy Transition and Diversification: While Russian oil will remain important in the short term, India must accelerate renewable energy initiatives and secure diversified long-term fossil fuel contracts to hedge against geopolitical volatility.
3. Strategic Hedging in Eurasia: India should expand its engagement with Central Asian republics, Mongolia, and the Caucasus to offset growing Sino-Russian dominance in the region. Initiatives like the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) should be prioritized.
4. Multilateral Engagement and Leadership: India should continue to lead reform efforts at the United Nations, WTO, and IMF to reflect the interests of the Global South. Simultaneously, active participation in BRICS+, SCO, Quad, and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework will ensure India retains maximum diplomatic leverage.
5. Cautious Economic Engagement with Russia: India should explore expanding trade in pharmaceuticals, agriculture, and critical minerals with Russia while remaining cautious about sectors vulnerable to Western secondary sanctions.

In conclusion, the India-Russia relationship is evolving from a primarily sentimental and strategic partnership into a pragmatic, transactional, and multidimensional engagement. While the bilateral ties will endure, they will be increasingly shaped by India's broader goals: securing strategic autonomy, promoting sustainable development, and asserting leadership in a complex, multipolar world order. (SINGH, 2023)

India's management of its Russia relationship during the Ukraine crisis will likely be remembered as a case study in the sophisticated exercise of foreign policy autonomy in the twenty-first century.

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