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India–Russia Relations: Continuity and Change in a Strategic Partnership

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Abstract:

India–Russia relations represent one of the most enduring bilateral partnerships in international politics. Emerging from a legacy of Cold War cooperation, the relationship has successfully adapted to the changing contours of the post-Cold War and contemporary global order. In recent years, particularly after the Russia–Ukraine conflict, the partnership has acquired renewed strategic significance. This paper examines the contemporary dimensions of India–Russia relations by analyzing political, strategic, defence, economic, and geopolitical aspects. It argues that despite global realignments, sanctions, and emerging challenges, India and Russia continue to maintain a resilient and pragmatic partnership grounded in mutual trust, strategic autonomy, and shared interests in a multipolar world order. The study also highlights the challenges facing the relationship and explores future prospects for cooperation.

Keywords: India–Russia relations, Strategic partnership, Defence cooperation, Multipolar world, Energy security, Strategic autonomy, foreign policy.

1. Introduction:

India–Russia relations occupy a unique position in India’s foreign policy framework. Unlike many of India’s other bilateral relationships, ties with Russia are rooted in long-term strategic trust rather than short-term tactical alignment. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was India’s most reliable political, military, and diplomatic partner. Although the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a turning point, both nations demonstrated the political will to preserve and redefine their relationship in the post-Cold War era.

In the contemporary period, characterized by shifting power equations, intensifying great power rivalry, and the emergence of multipolarity, India–Russia relations have acquired renewed relevance. India’s growing engagement with the United States and the Indo-Pacific, and Russia’s increasing confrontation with the West, have created new complexities. Nevertheless, both countries continue to view each other as indispensable strategic partners. This paper seeks to analyze the

contemporary nature of India–Russia relations, focusing on continuity, transformation, and pragmatic adaptation. India and Russia maintain a "Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership," a designation established in 2010 that reflects a decades-old bond rooted in mutual trust. In 2025, this relationship has focused on navigating global geopolitical shifts while significantly expanding economic and energy ties. In the contemporary era, India pursues a policy of strategic autonomy, engaging simultaneously with the United States, Russia, Europe, and regional powers. Russia, on the other hand, seeks to reassert itself as a major global power amid Western sanctions and geopolitical isolation. In this context, India–Russia relations assume renewed importance. This paper analyzes the evolution of bilateral ties, key areas of cooperation, challenges facing the partnership, and its future trajectory.

2. Historical Background of India–Russia Relations:

2.1 India–Soviet Relations during the Cold War:

India–Russia relations date back to the early years after India’s independence. The Soviet Union emerged as one of India’s most trusted partners during the Cold War period. While India adopted a policy of Non-Alignment, it maintained close political, economic, and military ties with the Soviet Union.

The **1971 Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation** marked a turning point, institutionalizing strategic cooperation. Soviet diplomatic and military support during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War reinforced mutual trust. The USSR also assisted India in building heavy industries, steel plants, power projects, and scientific institutions.

2.2 Post-Soviet Transition:

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 posed a serious challenge to bilateral ties. Russia faced economic instability and internal political transformation, while India embarked on economic liberalization and diversified its foreign relations. However, both countries made conscious efforts to preserve their strategic partnership.

In 2000, India and Russia signed the Declaration on Strategic Partnership, which was later elevated in 2010 to a “Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership.”

3. Political and Diplomatic Relations:

3.1 High-Level Political Engagement:

Political relations between India and Russia remain strong and stable. Regular interactions at the highest political levels, including presidential and prime ministerial meetings, reinforce mutual trust. Institutional mechanisms such as the Inter-Governmental Commission and foreign office consultations provide continuity and depth to diplomatic engagement.

Russia has consistently supported India on critical political issues, particularly India’s demand for permanent membership of the **United Nations Security Council (UNSC)**. India, in return, has supported Russia’s vision of a multipolar world and has refrained from joining Western-led political

isolation of Russia.

3.2 Strategic Autonomy in Indian Foreign Policy:

India's approach towards Russia is shaped by its broader foreign policy doctrine of strategic autonomy. Rather than aligning with any single power bloc, India seeks to maintain constructive relations with multiple global actors. This approach allows India to strengthen ties with the West while simultaneously sustaining its strategic partnership with Russia.

4. Defence and Security Cooperation:

4.1 Defence as the Core Pillar:

Defence cooperation remains the most significant pillar of India–Russia relations. For decades, Russia has been India's principal defence supplier. A substantial portion of India's military platforms—ranging from fighter aircraft and tanks to submarines and missile systems—are of Russian origin.

This long-standing cooperation has ensured operational compatibility, affordability, and strategic reliability. Unlike many other defence partners, Russia has been willing to share advanced military technologies with India. While India is diversifying its suppliers, Russia remains a core partner. Cooperation has shifted from a buyer-seller model to joint research and production, such as the BrahMos missile and AK-203 rifles. In 2025, the RELOS (Reciprocal Exchange of Logistics Support) agreement was ratified, granting India strategic access to Russian naval bases in the Arctic and Pacific.

4.2 Joint Development and Indigenous Capability:

A defining feature of contemporary defence ties is joint research, development, and production. The BrahMos cruise missile project stands as a landmark achievement in bilateral defence collaboration. It reflects not only technological cooperation but also deep strategic trust.

Russia has also supported India's indigenous defence manufacturing under initiatives like Make in India, contributing to capacity building and technological self-reliance.

4.3 Emerging Challenges:

Despite its strength, defence cooperation faces challenges such as:

- India's diversification of defence imports
- Delays caused by sanctions and supply-chain disruptions
- Maintenance and modernization of ageing Russian-origin equipment

Nevertheless, defence cooperation remains strategically indispensable for both countries.

4.4 Joint Military Exercises:

- **INDRA Series:** Regular tri-service exercises. **INDRA-2025** naval drills were held in March–April 2025 in the Bay of Bengal, while the army edition took place in Bikaner in October 2025.
- **AviaIndra:** A biennial air force exercise. **AviaIndra-2025** was hosted by the IAF in

December 2025, involving Su-30MKI and Tejas aircraft.

5. Economic and Energy Relations:

Economic and energy cooperation forms a vital pillar of India–Russia relations, complementing their long-standing strategic and defence partnership. Although political and military ties have traditionally dominated bilateral relations, recent years have witnessed a renewed emphasis on trade, investment, and energy security.

5.1 Trade Relations:

Economic relations historically lagged behind political and defence ties. However, in the contemporary period—especially after 2022—bilateral trade has witnessed unprecedented growth. Russia has emerged as one of India’s major suppliers of crude oil, while India has expanded exports of pharmaceuticals, consumer goods, and agricultural products. Bilateral trade reached a record \$68.7 billion in FY 2024-25. The two nations have set a new target of \$100 billion by 2030.

5.2 Energy Cooperation:

Energy has become a central pillar of India–Russia relations. Russia’s vast hydrocarbon resources complement India’s growing energy demand. Indian investments in Russian oil and gas fields, along with long-term supply arrangements, enhance India’s energy security. Energy cooperation is the most dynamic component of India–Russia economic relations. As India’s energy demand continues to rise, Russia plays a crucial role in ensuring long-term energy security.

Oil and Gas Cooperation:

Russia is a major supplier of crude oil to India. Indian companies have invested in Russian energy projects, including Sakhalin-1 and Vankor oil fields. Following Western sanctions on Russia, India increased its imports of discounted Russian crude oil, benefiting both economies.

Nuclear Energy Cooperation:

Civil nuclear energy is a cornerstone of bilateral cooperation. Russia has been instrumental in constructing the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant in Tamil Nadu. This collaboration reflects high levels of trust, technology transfer, and long-term commitment.

5.3 Financial and Payment Mechanisms:

Western sanctions on Russia have disrupted traditional financial channels. In response, India and Russia have explored alternative payment mechanisms, including trade in national currencies. These efforts align with broader global trends aimed at reducing dependence on dollar-dominated financial systems.

5.4 Connectivity and Economic Initiatives:

Projects such as the **International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC)** and the proposed **Chennai–Vladivostok Maritime Corridor** aim to enhance trade and connectivity between the two countries.

6. Geopolitical Context:

6.1 Russia–Ukraine Conflict and India’s Response:

The Russia–Ukraine conflict has posed a significant diplomatic challenge for India. India has adopted a neutral and balanced position, emphasizing dialogue and peaceful resolution while safeguarding its national interests. India’s abstentions in international forums reflect its commitment to strategic autonomy rather than ideological alignment.

6.2 Russia–China Relations and Indian Concerns:

Russia’s growing strategic partnership with China presents challenges for India, particularly in the context of Sino-Indian tensions. However, India continues to engage Russia to prevent excessive strategic convergence between Moscow and Beijing and to maintain balance in Eurasian geopolitics.

6.3 Russia–USA Relations and Indian Concerns:

In 2025, the relationship between Russia and the United States continues to be a central challenge for Indian foreign policy. India maintains a "Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership" with Russia while simultaneously deepening its strategic alignment with the U.S. through initiatives like the Quad.

6.4 India’s Relations with the West:

India’s expanding engagement with the United States, including participation in the Quad, has raised concerns in Moscow. However, India emphasizes that its partnerships are not directed against any country and are guided by national interest.

7. Multilateral Cooperation:

India and Russia cooperate closely in multilateral institutions such as **BRICS**, **Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)**, and **G20**. These platforms provide avenues for collaboration on global governance reform, counter-terrorism, economic cooperation, and regional stability.

Both countries advocate:

- **United Nations (UN):** Both nations advocate for "reinvigorated multilateralism". Russia maintains its steadfast support for India's permanent membership in a reformed UN Security Council.
- **BRICS:** Following Russia’s 2024 presidency, both countries are deepening cooperation within the expanded BRICS. Russia has pledged full support for India’s upcoming BRICS Chairship in 2026.
- **Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO):** India and Russia coordinate on regional security, counter-terrorism, and connectivity. Russia recently hosted the SCO Council of Heads of Government in Moscow (November 2025), and India plans to launch the SCO Civilizational Dialogue Forum in 2026.
- **G20:** Both nations work to ensure the G20 remains the premier forum for international

economic cooperation, focusing on the priorities of the Global South.

8. Conclusion:

India–Russia relations in the contemporary era reflect a unique blend of continuity and change. Anchored in historical trust and reinforced by strategic necessity, the partnership has adapted to evolving global realities. Despite geopolitical pressures and emerging challenges, both countries recognize the enduring value of their relationship. As the international system moves towards greater multipolarity, India–Russia relations are likely to remain a significant pillar of India’s foreign policy and a stabilizing factor in global politics.

While the relationship faces unprecedented structural and geopolitical pressures, it remains a pillar of India's foreign policy. Success in the coming years will depend on diversifying trade beyond energy, operationalizing new connectivity corridors (like the Chennai-Vladivostok Eastern Maritime Corridor), and finding sustainable payment mechanisms outside Western-controlled financial systems.

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