



India-Russia relations since 20th century

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Abstract

This paper seeks to analyse contemporary India -Russia relations. India's relations with the former Soviet Union and subsequently with Russia, have been rightly acknowledged by both the governments and most analysts as representing the most resilient relationship since India's independence. India and Russia (formerly the Soviet Union) share a longstanding and strategic relationship shaped by historical, political, economic, defense, and cultural ties. Since India's independence, both nations have built a multifaceted partnership, starting with Soviet support for India's industrialization and deepening during the Cold War through political alignment and defense cooperation. Key milestones include the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace and Friendship, support during the Bangladesh Liberation War, and collaboration in space and nuclear energy. Post-Cold War, India quickly recognized Russia as the Soviet successor and signed a Strategic Partnership in 2000. Despite geopolitical shifts, the relationship remains strong, especially in defense, with Russia being India's major arms supplier, and growing energy ties, particularly after the Ukraine conflict. Cultural exchanges, space collaboration, and trade connectivity through the INSTC further solidify the bond.

However, challenges like Russia's growing proximity to China, India's diversified foreign policy, declining defense imports from Russia, and trade imbalances persist. Yet, both nations continue to prioritize this time-tested partnership with a shared vision for multipolarity, regional stability, and mutual strategic interests.

This paper discusses the relationship between India-Russia since 20th century.

Keywords: India-Soviet Union, India-Russia, treaty of 1971, cold war, BRICS, SCO, U.N, energy cooperation, multipolar world, geopolitical alignment, defence cooperation

Introduction

India and Russia have a long-standing relationship that traces its origins back to the Soviet era. What began as a strategic and political alliance during the Cold War has evolved into a multi-dimensional partnership, encompassing defense, nuclear energy, space cooperation, and economic trade. Despite significant geopolitical changes since the collapse of the Soviet Union, both nations have maintained strong ties, balancing their historical alliance with new global realities.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia kept the same close ties with India, in international terms, both nations Russia and India consider their mutual affinity to be a "strategic partnership". Their governments support the creation of a multipolar world order in which both nations are "poles".

The Republic of India and the Russian Federation established bilateral relations in 1991 and remain close allies. Traditionally, the Indian- Russian strategic partnership has been built on five major components: politics, defence, civil nuclear energy, anti-terrorism cooperation, as well as the advancement of and exploration of outer space travel.

Both countries are members of international bodies including the UN, BRICS, G20 and SCO. Russia has stated that it supports India receiving a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. In addition, Russia has expressed interest in joining SAARC with observer status in which India is a founding member.

The India-Russia partnership has been based on defence cooperation for decades. India is still one of the largest importers of Russian defence equipment, taking about 20

per cent of Russia's total defence exports. Notable collaborations include S-400 missile system, Sukhoi fighter jets, T-90 tanks and naval platforms such as submarines. Successful defence technology collaboration is shown by the joint production of the BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles.

India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has referred to the India-Russia relationship as the one constant in global politics over the last half century.

Historical Foundations of India-Russian Relations

India and Russia (formerly the Soviet Union) have shared a strong and multifaceted relationship since the Cold War era.

1. During cold war

India established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union soon after its independence in 1947. The relationship gained significant momentum in the 1950s when Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru visited the Soviet Union in 1955, laying the foundation for a partnership based on mutual respect and shared non-alignment policies. The Soviet Union supported India's industrialization efforts, particularly through the construction of steel plants in Bhilai and other industrial hubs in India. Even Indian freedom fighter also inspired by Russian Revolution 1917. Nehru was greatly impressed not only by the Russian Revolution but also by the planned economy development. Nehru also paid a visit in 1927.

In the starting phase of 1950-60s, India had bitter relation with Stalin due to their rigid approach and India's stand to support Greece against communist expansion caused bitterness in the Indo-Soviet Union relationship.

Indo-Soviet relations became very cordial during and after the Nikita Khrushchev period. But during Stalin era India and Soviet Union signed a trade agreement in 1949. It was conducted through Rupee-Rouble accounting, bypassing US dollar or British Pound and good exchanged like India exported: Tea, jute, textiles, spices, etc and Soviet Union exported: Machinery, tools, industrial equipment, and petroleum products.

1.1 Khrushchev and Indo- Soviet Union:

- Nehru paid a visit to the Soviet Union in June 1955 and in return visit by Khrushchev and he received great welcome in India.
- One area in which Soviet has solidly stood by India was in regard to India's dispute with Pakistan and Soviet made it clear that it accepted the state of Jammu & Kashmir as integral part of India. And also supporting the demand of liberation of Goa. The two countries adopted the identical position on the Suez Crisis in 1956 and condemned the Anglo-French Israel aggression against Egypt.
- Despite that there was some misunderstanding developed between the two countries on the question of Hungary. Despite that they didn't harm the relations.
- In 1962 Indo- Sino War, initially the Soviet attitude was not very sympathetic to India. Their publication described the McMahon Line as an imperialist line. Even Soviet Union decided to postpone the promised supply of 22 MIG aircraft. Later the supplies to India resumed.
- In 1965 India -Pakistan war, Soviet supported India. The Soviet played an important role in arranging the ceasefire through the Security Council and later took the initiative to sponsor an Indo-Pak Summit in its own territory at Tashkent in January 1966.

The Bangladesh Crisis and Ind-Soviet Friendship 1971

The Bangladesh Crisis of 1971 brought India and Soviet Union so close that critics saying that India had given up the policy of Non-Alignment and moved into the Soviet Camp. Their bond was formalized in the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation through which the Soviet Union promised Indian support in crucial moments, such as the Bangladesh Liberation War, when the Soviet Union stood in the role of checkmating the US and China pressures against India. In the 1971 war, the Soviet Union dispatched naval forces to the Indian Ocean to prevent the US or British intervention during the war. It was signed for 20 years and after 20 years it was renewed.

Relations between Indo-Russia During 1972-1990

- In 1974 India conducted its **1st nuclear test at Pokhran** and it was fully **supported by Soviet Union**. But China and Pakistan bitterly criticized it.
- India did not take a strong position against prolonged Soviet occupation of Afghanistan 1979.
- Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Indo-Soviet relations were marked by strong military cooperation, with the Soviet Union becoming India's largest defense supplier. India acquired fighter jets, tanks, and submarines from the Soviets, forming the backbone of its military capabilities. Additionally, in 1984, India's space program received a significant boost when Rakesh

Sharma became the first Indian to travel to space aboard the Soviet spacecraft Soyuz T-11.

- Cold War ended in 1989 and 1991 Soviet Union disintegration.
- During 1990-91, India generally supported the position taken by the Soviet in the Gulf Crisis.

Post-Cold War Realignments (1991-2000)

- After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, India swiftly recognized the Russian Federation as its successor state, ensuring continuity in their bilateral relations. In 1993, a new Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation was signed, reaffirming the strategic nature of their partnership. Despite the disturbed economic conditions in postSoviet Russia, defense and strategic ties between the two countries remained strong.
- Russia had refused to apply sanctions against India after nuclear test at Pokhran 2 in 1998.
- In the Kargil Conflict 1999, the conflict gave a new momentum to emerging strategic partnership between India and Russia. Russia firmly supported India and urged Pakistan to withdraw the infiltrators from the India side of LOC. Putin came into power in 2000 continue to be strengthened relations between the two nations.
- The partnership continued to strengthen, even as India sought to diversify its global alliances. India and Russia worked to expand their economic ties during this period, focusing particularly on energy Cooperation.

India-Russia Relations in the 21st Century

The cornerstone of India-Russia relations in the 21st century has been their defense cooperation. Russia remains India's largest arms supplier, providing advanced weaponry and military platforms, including Sukhoi Su-30MKI fighter jets, T-90 tanks, and the S-400 missile defense system, which India began receiving in 2021.

Moreover, India continues to lease nuclear-powered submarines from Russia, like the INS Chakra in 2012, enhancing its naval capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region. In 2016, both nations agreed to jointly produce Kamov Ka-226T helicopters, further deepening defense ties.

Energy has emerged as a critical area of cooperation between India and Russia. The Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant (KKNPP) in Tamil Nadu, which is being developed with Russian assistance, is a flagship project in their nuclear cooperation.

Russia is the highest exporter of Crude Oil and after the Russia and Ukraine war it would assume that the import of crude oil from Russia would decrease because sanctions by the international world but India still continues to import oil. However, recent efforts, such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), aim to boost trade connectivity by reducing the time and cost of goods transportation between the two countries

According to a 2014 BBC World Service Poll, 85% of Russians view India positively, with only 9% expressing a negative view. A poll conducted in summer 2022 shows that Indians most frequently named Russia their most trusted partner.

In November 2022, India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar praised Russia as "exceptionally steady" and "Time-Tested" partner.

Now here let's disintegrate the relation between both the nations in terms of political, economy, defence, space, science and technology, multilateral forums etc.

Political Relation

After the disintegration of Soviet Union in 1991, Russia has emerged as their successor. Russia continues to carry the legacy of Soviet of their relation with India.

Their bilateral relations were greatly aided by the 1993 Treaty of Friendship & Cooperation, the 1994 Moscow Declaration on the Protection of the Interest of Pluralist States, & the 2000 Strategic Cooperation.

"The Declaration on Strategic Partnership" between India and Russia signed in October 2000 became a truly historic step (Putin).

Both countries closely collaborate on matters of shared national interest these include at the UN, BRICS, G20 and SCO. Russia also supports India receiving a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council.

In addition, Russia has vocally backed India joining the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). Moreover, it has also expressed interest in joining SAARC with observer status in which India is a founding member.

There is a body who acts as a Steering Committee of Indian-Russian relation, we can consider it as a main body that conducts affairs at the governmental level between both countries that is called The Indian-Russian Inter-Governmental Commission (IRIGC). It is one of the largest and most comprehensive governmental mechanisms that India has had with any country internationally.

Energy cooperation has been described as a cornerstone of the relationship between India and Russia. Under this sector nuclear, hydrocarbon and renewable energy took place as a part of discussion.

Most important nuclear plant is KundanKulam Nuclear Power Plant.

Both countries focused on improving connectivity between two countries in International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC). Among other initiatives, the Prime Minister Narendra Modi mentioned the "bring to innovation" to promote startups and entrepreneurship, and the forthcoming commencement of discussions on a Free Trade Agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union.

Despite the Russian Ukraine war 2022, the trade between two countries haven't gone too low because after the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and due to international sanctions against Russia, it started to provide oil and chemical fertilizers at discounted rate to India, increasing India-Russia bilateral trade volume from \$13 billion [2021-2022] to \$27 billion within 2022. But there are challenges due to Russian Ukraine war because Russia has widened up their relations with China.

Despite these things both the countries have completed approx. 78 years of bilateral relations. Recently the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Moscow to meet Putin in July 2024 and it was his first visit in Russia after 5 years. On the same day that Russian missiles struck a children's hospital in Kyiv. During the visit, the two countries discussed nine strategic areas for closer economic cooperation, including nuclear energy and medicine, with a goal to significantly improve bilateral trade by 2030.

Economic Relation

Even though Russia is India's largest security ally, their economic ties have not reached their full potential. Economic ties are the second most important strand in the Indo-Russia relations. For maintain strong economic ties both countries have given priority to each other. Even during the cold war, the Soviet Union played a significant role in India's development and Industrialization. And after LPG reforms in India and the collapse of Soviet Union brought significant changes in their economic relations.

Major products export from India to Russia consist of Pharmaceuticals, tea, coffee and tobacco, machinery and mechanical appliances, organic chemicals and electrical machinery and equipment. India imports major products from Russia include pearls, precious and semiprecious stones and metals, nuclear power equipment mineral oil and products, iron and steel and optical and surgical equipment. Bilateral bodies that conduct economic relations between the two countries include IRIGC, the Indo-Russian Forum on Trade and Investment, the India-Russia Business Council, the India-Russia Trade, Investment and Technology Promotion Council, the India-Russia CEOs' Council and the India-Russia Chamber of Commerce. Both governments have jointly developed an economic strategy that involves using a number of economic components to increase future bilateral trade.

Russia and India are successfully cooperating in the banking sector. In 2010, the Russian Federation opened an office of Sberbank in New Delhi and recently ICICI bank's opening its subsidiary ICICI Bank Eurasia in Russia.

India and Russia are preparing a roadmap for building a "Green Corridor" for easy availability of goods to enhancing and augmenting the bilateral trade which is far below the potential despite having the strong political knots. The India Russia Intergovernmental commission for Trade, Economic, Science & Cultural Cooperation (IRIGC-TEC) directs the conduct of economic cooperation at the Governmental level. It is the apex body of G2G forum for bilateral economic cooperation. The 22nd session of IRIGC-TEC was held in 2016 in New Delhi. India and Russia have agreed to have expanded Indian participation in the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF).

Negotiations on a free trade agreement (FTA) between India and the five members of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), led by Russia, are about to start. This is anticipated to increase New Delhi's exports to the region, especially in sectors like engineering goods, electronics, and agriculture, boosting trade.

There are a lot hinders between both the nations like India's geographical factor India's strained relation with Pakistan and the continued instability in Afghanistan have become major reason for the access the trade and transportation route and closer relations with China. And Russia's economy is struggling because of economic sanctions imposed by the West after its incursion into Ukraine which lead to a sharp decline in oil prices.

Defence Relation

The "strongest and most durable" factor influencing ties between Russia and India is Defence cooperation. During cold war Soviet Union was the largest exporter of defence equipment for several decades to India. After the collapse of Soviet Union this role has been inherited by the Russian Federation. Russia is the largest arms suppliers to India.

This relation is based on long term Inter Governmental Military Technical Cooperation (MTC) programme and remains a robust pillar of the bilateral strategic partnership.

In 1997, Russia and India signed a ten-year agreement for further military-technical cooperation encompassed a wide range of activities, including the purchase of completed weaponry, joint development and production, and joint marketing of armaments and military technologies.

Both the sides have periodic exchanges of armed forces personnel and military exercises. Around 70 percent of India's defence procurements have dependent on Russia. In 2008, the high-level Monitoring Committee (HLMC) was established for enhancing maintain constructing approach in defence sector. Lots of bilateral projects are in process including indigenous production of T-90 Tanks Su-30-MKI aircraft, supply of MiG 29 K aircraft and Komov-31 and Mi17 helicopters and supply of Multi-Barrel Rocket Launcher Smirch.

In 2018, India signed the historic agreement with Russia to procure five S-400 Triumf surface-to-air missile defence system, one of the best missile defence system in the world ignoring America's CAATSA act. And this has proved their strength in the recent Pahalgam attack.

India and Russia have several major joint military programmes including: Brahmos cruise missile, Sukhoi Su-30MKI programme, KA226T twin-engine utility helicopters and numerous others.

Additionally, India has purchased several systems like S-400, INS Vikramaditya aircraft carrier programme.

Recently India wants to buy Fifth Generation Fighter jets so Russia has given offer of their fifth-generation fighter jet crafts to India Russian SU-57.

Russia was the largest supplier of arms to India in both 2013–17 and 2018–22, but its share of total Indian arms imports fell from 64% to 45% while France emerged as the second largest supplier between 2018 and 2022.

Despite their cooperation there are several hurdles like USA fifth gen fighter jet F-35, France equipment also become challenge and India's Make in India Initiatives.

Space Cooperations

Cooperation in space is a key pillar strategic partnership between India Russia relationships. Their space relation is being traced during India's first satellite Aryabhata, it was launched by the Soviet Union on 19 April 1975.

The only Indian to visit space, Rakesh Sharma, was also launched by the Soviet Union under Interkosmos space program.

During President Vladimir Putin's visit to India in December 2004, two space-related bilateral agreements were signed *viz.* Intergovernmental umbrella Agreement on co-operation in the outer space for peaceful purposes and the Inter Space Agency Agreement on co-operation in the Russian satellite navigation system GLONASS.

In 2007 an agreement was signed between ISRO and Russia's space agency Roscosmos to jointly develop India's Chandrayaan-2 mission. Indian and Russian space agencies have signed a MoU on enhancing cooperation the field of exploration and use of outer space for peaceful purpose.

Cultural Cooperation

India and Russia share a rich cultural history. Nicholas Roerich, a famous Russian artist and philosopher, eventually settled in Himachal Pradesh. Writers like Leo Tolstoy and

Alexander Pushkin had a significant impact on Indian literature and thought.

Both the countries enjoying a rich culture heritage. Jawaharlal Nehru Cultural Centre at the Embassy of India, Moscow (JNCC) has been maintaining close cooperation with leading Russian institutions.

Bilateral tourism is growing, strengthening people-to-people ties, aided by e-visas for both countries. Notable Indians have received Russian state awards for enhancing Russian-Indian relations, including the Prime Minister.

Indian cinema remains popular in Russia, with regular film screenings throughout the country even a very song "Mera Jutha Hai Japni Yeh Patloon Englishtani Sar Pe Laal Topi Roosi Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani" became very famous in Russia and Yoga has become increasingly popular in Russia since the 1980s, mainly due to its reputation for health benefits.

Days of Russian Culture were held in India in November 2003, in Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai. "Days of Indian Culture" in Russia were organized from September to October 2005 in Russia.

In the period from 2018 to 2019, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Russian organization Rosscconcert.

Challenges and Future Prospects

Growing India-US Relations: India's growing relationship with USA in the field of defence, technology, space and science creates hindrance in the relation with Russia. Even US's sanctions on Russia, like caatsa, make India's defence dealings with Russia more complicated and the quad form also effects the Indo- Russia relation.

Decreasing Defence Imports: Now in the recent past few years we can clearly see the decrease of Russian defence export to India because new players have come like USA, France and Israel. And India's own domestic defence industry and make themselves self dependent programme like Make in India initiatives.

Russia-China Proximity: The closeness of Russia with China, could complicate India-Russia relations and create strategic discomfort for India due to its rivalry with China.

Trade Imbalance: Despite increased bilateral trade driven by crude oil imports and being the largest arms supplier, India and Russia face a significant trade imbalance. Out of the total \$65 billion trade volume, India's exports to Russia account for less than \$5 billion.

Ukraine-Russia Conflict: The ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict has put India in a diplomatic bind. India has come under fire for failing to condemn the invasion while continuing to cooperation. India has adopted a neutral stance, advocating dialogue and diplomacy while continuing economic engagements with Russia, particularly in the energy sector.

Conclusion

After the collapse of USSR, Russia became the successor and new chapters of bilateral relations started between Republic of India and Russian Federation. Russia continued the legacy of relationships of India and Soviet Union. Recently, the Russian Embassy in India witnessed a vibrant

cycle rally commemorating the 78th anniversary of India-Russia diplomatic relations.

India and Russia have traced since India's independence 1947. The Soviet Union and by the Cold War era, the Indo-Soviet partnership deepened, especially after the 1971 Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation. They had a great relation in defence, intelligence, space, industries etc. After the collapse of Soviet, Russia has emerged his successor and they continued their legacy of relationship with India.

Russia has a clear stand on the position of Kashmir issue that this belongs to Indian territory, and always supports India demands in the UN security council. The relations between both the nations has increased after 2000 when Putin became the president Russia. Their relation in the economy has not much increased due to trade imbalance between the two nations.

In terms of defence, Russia is the largest arms suppliers of defence equipment to India. Despite that there are several challenges like Indian own initiatives Make in India, India changing shifts towards France, USA, Israel.

In terms of space, both the nations collaboration in several projects like Intergovernmental umbrella Agreement on co-operation in the outer space for peaceful purposes and the Inter Space Agency Agreement on co-operation in the Russian satellite navigation system GLONASS.

Despite their collaboration there are several challenges like trade imbalance, Russia closeness with China, India 's growing relation with USA, Ukraine -Russia conflict, decreasing defence trade.

With a lot of challenges, the relation between both the nations have touched 78 years relation. Improved India-Russia relations give India a stronger bargaining position in negotiations with Western powers and even Russia supports India's demand for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council and its position on the Kashmir issue. Russia can help defuse rising tensions with China. Still India relies heavily on Russia for defence.

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