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India-Russia Dynamic Relations in the Context of Indian Foreign Policy

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Abstract

History has witnessed a time-tested relationship between India and Russia that has evolved into a legacy. However, the current ongoing systemic geopolitical changes in the world are creating such uncertainty that both nations are facing some difficulties in maintaining their relations. Hence, despite Western efforts to isolate Russia at the global level, both India and Russia have maintained cordial relations with each other, prioritising defence and economic cooperation amid a complex geopolitical landscape, which highlights their autonomous strategy. In this context, this research paper presents India's foreign policy from the perspective of how conscious both India and Russia are about their relations and what both countries are taking essential steps to fulfil their national interests. Under the realist framework, the research paper emphasises the national interests, power balance, and security of both countries, especially in the aftermath of the Russia-Ukraine war. This research analyses the relationship from a state-centric perspective, where both countries are motivated to protect their existential interests, whether through balancing efforts or strategic autonomy. Pointing to India's neutrality and autonomous policy, the paper also evaluates and outlines the prospects of relations between the two countries, highlighting major obstacles. It examines the key factors strengthening the privileged India-Russia relationship. Lastly, an effort has been made to find a smooth path to enhance their trusting and cordial relations by removing obstacles.

Keywords: Autonomous Foreign Policy, National Interests, Balancing Strategy, Mutual Benefits, Potential Challenges.

Introduction

The equations in international relations are changing rapidly; no country can be a permanent friend or foe of any other country. The national interests and ambitions of any nation are the main catalysts for shaping its

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relations. India and Russia are not the exception to this. Along with the 75th anniversary of India's independence, both nations also recently celebrated the 75th anniversary of their diplomatic relations. Their congenial ties have become a substantial part of their foreign policy. The two countries have maintained their relations amid changing balances of power in international politics and regional instability, a suitable example of which is that India has been constantly avoiding direct condemnation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has sometimes angered the West.

Theoretical Perspective

Under the realist framework, the research paper emphasises the national interests, power balance, and security of both countries. Realism is a fundamental theory of international relations that posits that international relations are centred on power, security, and national interests, and sovereign states act as rational units with their national interests in mind. In his book Politics Among Nations, Morgenthau presents six basic principles that are essential to understanding political realism. (Morgenthau, 1985):

1. Politics is governed by objective rules and is rooted in human behaviour (p. 4)
2. The principle of interests, defined as power. Politicians think and act based on interests, defined as power (p. 5)
3. Interests are always dynamic in nature (p. 10)
4. According to Realism, abstract moral principles cannot be applied to politics (P.12)
5. The general moral laws of the world and of nations are different (p. 13)
6. They believe in the autonomy of international politics. Political realists maintain the autonomy of the political sphere (p.14)

National security and survival are the primary goals of the state. Under this, national interests were considered paramount over morality or global values, as exemplified by India's continued import of oil from Russia during the Ukraine crisis, despite Western pressure, and the sustained increase in trade relations between the two countries. National interests have been considered dynamic, such that India is currently giving more importance to the policy of multi-alignment rather than non-alignment. This is evident in India's inclusion in a group like the Quad, while maintaining balanced relations with Russia, which serves as a notable example. Realist principles, which prioritise national interests over idealism and morality, can be seen as a balancing policy in the case of India. While India inspires the entire world towards *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* and peace, it is also continuously inspired by its national interests. Also, during the Russia-Ukraine war, India

appealed for an end to the war, but did not break ties with Russia. Therefore, in this context, India's foreign policy, especially in relations with Russia, is reflected in the implementation of practical decisions.

Historical Context of India-Russia Relations

Mutual rapport, constant cooperation, and compatibility of reciprocal interests have enabled both nations to achieve a level of privileged partnership. Impressed by the rapid economic growth of the Soviet Union, especially its Five-Year Plan model, Nehru expressed his desire to establish relations with it during his visit to the Soviet Union in 1927. However, in view of the international instability, after its independence, India adopted a policy of non-alignment as an autonomous foreign policy, without joining either the communist or capitalist blocs, which was a realistic step in itself. The Soviet Union viewed this policy with great suspicion, but this changed after Stalin's death in 1953. The new leadership of the Soviet Union adopted a new approach, recognising the importance and independence of non-aligned states, replacing the policy of "those who are not with us are against us" with "those who are not against us are with us" (Azeem, 2006). In international politics, interests are constantly changing. Those who were your enemies yesterday can become your best friends today, because ultimately, the state prioritises its own interests.

In the Initial phase of the relationship, the USSR remained a nostalgic and silent spectator on Indian issues like the Kashmir issue and India's permanent seat in the UN. However, when Pakistan raised the Kashmir issue before the UNSC and when the Soviet Union held China entirely responsible for the 1952 Tibetan uprising, the Soviet Union's support for India was clearly visible. It played a very crucial role in the ceasefire of the Indo-Pak war of 1965, while during the India-China War of 1962, it remained neutral, which was shocking for India. However, its support for India against Pakistan and other powers in 1971 is also commendable.

In 1973, Russia proposed to India that it provide large-scale liberal economic assistance for a period of 15 years. On 18 January 1991, both parties signed an agreement regarding the transformation of the cryogenic engine and related techniques. The USA opposed this agreement, calling it a violation of the MTCR. On 16 July 1993, Yeltsin refused the agreement due to the US-imposed sanctions. (Conley, 2000). However, Russia is now capable of providing a fitting response to the sanctions being imposed by the West. The declaration of *the India-Russia Strategic Partnership* in October 2000, later elevated to a *Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership* in December 2010, gave a new qualitative character to their bilateral ties, reaching an advanced level of cooperation. Obviously, in international politics, the behaviour of every state is guided not only by moral ideals but also by national interest,

security, and power relations. It would not be an exaggeration to say that India and Russia are also moving forward with a realistic approach in their relations.

Analysis of India-Russia Relations after the Ukraine War in the Context of Indian Foreign Policy

Following the dissolution of the USSR, Russia and India have continued to maintain their traditional relationship, mutual trust, and cooperation through various means and international forums. Major dynamic areas of cooperation in which both countries are actively participating and performing well are further described analytically:

1. Energy security and Russian oil imports

Trade is the most important thing that accelerates the relationship between the two nations. After the Ukrainian war, "India's imports of Russian oil in November 2023 rose to a 4-month high of 1.6 million barrels per day, up 3.1 per cent from October 2023, making up about 3.6 per cent of the nation's overall imports last month" (Reuters, 2023). According to the *India Brand Equity Foundation*, during 2022-23, bilateral trade between the two countries stood at US $ 49.36 billion. Indian exports were US $3.14 billion, while imports from Russia were US $46.21 billion. The bilateral trade during April-May 2023-24 witnessed a growth of 161.22 per cent compared to the previous year (IBEF, 2024). A series of energy deals has significantly contributed to deepening their economic ties, with both sides aiming for an annual trade volume of $30 billion by 2025. The Western sanctions led Moscow to increase its crude exports to Asia, prompting Indian refiners to buy Russian crude at a discount and sell the processed oil to markets such as Europe, where diesel is in high demand. It can be said that India has played a crucial role in maintaining the overall oil market stability amid this unstable international scenario. In this context, S. Jaishankar can be quoted when he emphasised "India's role in stabilising the global oil and gas markets through its strategic policies amid the Russia-Ukraine war and said that he is expecting thanks for India's role" (Today, 2023). In the current changing scenario, alongside military power, economic power is also given equal importance, and the foreign policy of any country cannot be based solely on morality and idealism. If India supports the sanctions imposed by the West on Russia based solely on morality and idealism, it could have a profound impact on their traditional cordial relations, and losing a trusted friend like Russia would obviously be detrimental to India.

India is making efforts to diversify and strengthen its economic relations with major countries to avoid geopolitical risks in the future. It finds it attractive to buy oil and gas from the Russian Federation at very affordable rates. It is also considering investing in additional oil fields in Russia,

including the sourcing of LNG.

Indian companies have significant stakes in Russian hydrocarbon assets, including the Sakhalin-1, Imperial Energy, Vankor, and Tas-Yuriakh fields, but rarely import oil from there due to logistics constraints and high freight costs. Indian coal producer Coal India signed a deal to mine coking coal in Russia's Far East, while private company H-Energy is looking at buying LNG from Novatek on a long-term basis (Soldatkin & Tetrault-Farber, 2019).

Russia has already completed the supply of two out of the six nuclear power plants, each with a capacity of 1000 MW, and the supply for the remaining four is underway. The NPCIL is operating two nuclear power plants supplied by Russia at Kudankulam in Tamil Nadu, and the construction of the remaining four plants is in progress (Venkatachari, 2024).

Moscow's deliveries have enabled Indian refineries to produce diesel in abundance and boost exports, but apart from Russia, India also processes oil from other nations. In the context of bilateral trade between the two sides from February 2022 to April 2023, some experts argue that India has taken advantage of Western sanctions against Russia to increase imports of highly subsidised goods, resulting in bilateral trade exceeding $50 billion by 2023. However, it would be incorrect to say that the advantage lies solely on one side; Russia is expanding its strategic cooperation with India and China in favour of its national interests. Due to these growing relations, Russia can now provide a fitting response to Western sanctions, demonstrating that a nation's foreign policy is often driven by its national interests.

2. Defence and Strategic Cooperation

India has long-term and extensive cooperation with Russia in the defence sector, which is the strongest pillar of their relationship. Military technical cooperation between the two sides has transformed from a simple buyer-seller to an important joint adventure and development partnership.

BrahMos Missile System, joint development of the Fifth Generation Fighter Aircraft, the Multi Transport Aircraft, the licensed production in India of SU-30 aircraft, MiG-29K aircraft, T-90 tanks, Kamov-31 helicopters, and SU-30 MKI, are examples of such flagship cooperation (MEA, n.d.).

Bilateral projects include the supply of S-400, licensed production of T-90 tanks and Su-30 MKI, supply of MiG-29 and Kamov helicopters, INS Vikramaditya (formerly Admiral Gorshkov), production of AK-203 rifles and BrahMos missiles in India (Embassy of India, 2024).

Russian cooperation has enabled India to build capabilities in strategic areas through arms acquisition and development. Both nations are exploring opportunities for joint ventures in defence manufacturing and research

and development. The most notable example of this is the *BrahMos Missile System*. They are collaborating to develop joint projects that utilise natural resources in a productive, effective, and economical manner, implementing environmentally friendly and economically viable technologies. Indo-Russian Rifles Private Limited (RIRPAL) has also been set up to produce AK-203 rifles in India under the Make in India program. Russia's support for India's diversification under the Make in India program further deepens the mutual trust between the two countries. The presence of Russian weapons in the Indian Army reflects their defence relationship. Bilateral and multilateral military exercises continue to take place between their three armies, which include bilateral exercise *INDRA* (held in 2021), multilateral exercise *Vostok* (held in September 2022), and *Avia Indra* (air force exercise), etc.

Along with this, Nations are strongly condemning terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, as well as their safe havens and those who promote terrorist activities. In December 2023, India hosted a joint anti-terrorism exercise of the SCO countries with the broader objective of suppressing the use of the internet for terrorist activities (TOI, 2023). Both sides met in Moscow on May 3-4, 2023, for the 12th *India-Russia Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism,* in which they discussed the current terrorist threats at the global and regional levels and expressed their commitment to promoting cooperation in dealing with serious problems of terrorism and extremism (PTI, 2023). The two countries called for *zero tolerance* towards terrorism, emphasised an *unrelenting fight* against the international threat, and condemned violent extremism and all forms of terrorism, including the cross-border movement of terrorists, terrorism financing, networks, and safe havens of terrorism (Hindu, 2024).

In the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict, both nations expressed their concerns about the increasing terrorist activities in the region. Russia also has relations with Arab countries, Iran, Hamas, and Israel. It has urged both Palestine and Israel to end the violence. Russia supports the creation of an independent sovereign state of Palestine and also expressed condolences toward the dead people and victims in Israel. While not voting for or against a non-binding ceasefire resolution at the UNGA in October 2023, India opined that terrorism is a deadly disease that knows no borders, nationality, or race. Along with this, it expressed deep concerns about the conflict situation and the protection of civilians in the region (Firstpost, 2023). India has always maintained its *two-state solution* stance to the conflict. Apart from this, India strongly condemned the terrorist attack on Israel by Hamas on October 7, as part of its *Zero-Tolerance* policy. Global efforts to prevent and counter terrorist threats should emphasise the primary responsibility of states in fighting terrorism to comply with their obligations under international law fully.

3. Non-Alignment to Multi-Alignment Policy: A Modern Form of Realism

India is focusing on building strong strategic relations with Russia, the US, the European Union, Japan, and Australia, while also playing an active role in forums such as BRICS, SCO, and the Quad. As part of this, India gained full membership of the SCO in 2017, with Russia playing a key role. Both nations see it as a means of enhancing regional stability and security. Both are willing to increase the SCO's influence; they share similar views on the role of the group as a dialogue platform and security-enhancing tool. However, its importance subtly differs from their foreign policies; just as Russia does not support India's concerns regarding China's role in the grouping, it considers this group an important forum from a security perspective. On the other hand, India sees this group as a tool to maintain its strategic presence in the Eurasia region (Shchedrov, 2024). Russia's attitude towards the group seems to have changed, especially after the invasion of Ukraine. It is now moving towards deeper relations with the group members, which can be seen as a possible counter to China's economic expansionist policy.

Russia, under its hosting of the BRICS leader summit, is pushing for an alternative payment system in national BRICS currencies that would eliminate the need to exchange local currencies through the US dollar. However, a common BRICS currency, for now, seems to most analysts either unfeasible or a distant possibility. The dollar's dominance as a reserve currency and in the trade of commodities, such as oil, gives Washington a dominant position in the global financial system. Countries like Russia, China, Iran, etc., affected by Western sanctions and export controls, want to weaken the strength of the dollar to avoid sanctions and reduce US influence. Following the group's expansion, the BRICS summit was held in Kazan, Russia, on 22-23 October 2024. Hosting the summit is a good opportunity for Russian President Putin to show that Western efforts to isolate Moscow, for its invasion of Ukraine, have failed. BRICS leaders, particularly Russia and China, aim to create an alternative to Western-led security and financial arrangements (Gallagher & Andrew, 2025). BRICS is an important platform for India's global leadership aspirations and promoting strategic autonomy. The expansion of BRICS will further strengthen India's strategic position as a multipolar fulcrum for expanding economic reach in the Middle East and beyond, despite what many believe to be a China-driven multilateral Eurasian project (Panda, 2024).

The United Nations provides a platform for India and Russia to collaborate in balancing Western influence in international affairs by countering the unilateral actions of Western countries, particularly the United States. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that Russia views India as a "key international actor and a worthy candidate for permanent membership

within the UNSC" (Today I. , 2022). Russia's support is crucial for India to play a more effective role on the global stage. India has repeatedly reiterated its position at the UN regarding the Russia-Ukraine conflict and other geopolitical circumstances that affect global peace and stability, stating that it is strongly in favour of peace.

4. Major Obstacles in the Relationship

In the coming year, India may face several challenges in balancing its relations with Russia, including issues such as Russia's declining international standing, the strengthening of Russia-China relations, India's growing ties with the US, and Russia's increasing role in the Indo-Pacific and Eurasia. Some analysts are constantly raising apprehensions that the Russian attack on Ukraine has posed a significant challenge for India in simultaneously maintaining its relations with Russia and the West, especially with the USA, which can affect the relationship between the two nations, another hand according to some analysts Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the relations between India and Russia have strengthened especially in the Economic sector.

There is nothing new; India has a long-term policy of strategic autonomy, always striving to advance its interests in its relations with countries such as the US, Russia, and China. (Panda J. , 2024). There is a high potential for deeper India-Russia cooperation in other areas of defence, including nuclear issues, but India's diversification strategy may hinder Moscow's real-time confidence in India as a defence partner (Panda D. J., 2024). Along with this, Russia's credibility as a defence supplier is at risk due to Russian arms demonstrations in Ukraine and delays in deliveries, which are impacting India's military platforms. Now, India is adopting diversification in its policy so that in the future, it does not face any risk due to its dependence on a single country. India approved the import of French Rafale jets and US-made rifles for its carriers (Zafar, 2024).

Stability in the Indo-Pacific is a key foreign policy driver for strategically ambitious India, which could draw it closer to the West and impact its relations with Russia. The India-US Defence Accelerator Ecosystem, or Indus-X, aims to effectively innovate and collaborate in support of the shared concern to preserve a free and open Indo-Pacific region and counter China's ever-growing influence (Lalwani & Singh, 2024). The US administration recognises India as both a bilateral and multilateral partner in the Indo-Pacific, but, more importantly, India's position as the largest democracy and as a major defence partner. India's partnership is considered important in building a web of strong, resilient, and mutually deepening relationships in the Indo-Pacific region through regional partnerships such as the Quad and I2U2 (India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the US) (Pant, 2022).

India's move towards America to stop China's growing expansionist policy in the Indo-Pacific indicates a new phase in the relations between India and Russia.

As the war has dragged on, Moscow has diverted a significant share of its energy exports to China, becoming increasingly dependent on Chinese companies to import high-tech components for Russian military industries in the face of Western sanctions. During Putin's two-day visit to Beijing on May 16, 2024, Mr. Xi said, "China-Russia relations have been built with hard work, both sides need to cherish and nurture it, and the stable development of bilateral relations is not only in the fundamental interests of the two countries but also for the peace of the region and the world, also conducive to stability and prosperity" (PTI, 2024). Describing Xi as his dear friend, Putin said that the two countries are successfully cooperating in the UN, BRICS, SCO, and G20. Putin pledged to combine the potential of the Eurasian Economic Community and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to harmonise integration processes in the Eurasian region further (PTI, 2024). A key objective for Russia is to promote a multipolar, Eurasia-led world politics, challenging the US-led global order, while prioritising stable partnerships with both China and India. This is a clear anti-Western foreign policy goal for Russia, which also considers China a key partner in its dealings with the West. In contrast, India views a multipolar Asia as a counter to Western dominance in global institutions. Still, it neither seeks to oust the West completely nor to exploit adversaries led by China and Russia. (Panda D. J., 2024). India has been steadily growing its relations with Moscow on economic, defence, and multilateral issues. New Delhi is also more cautious in its approach towards Russia, particularly in the context of the potential imbalance with China.

Even as talks regarding the joint production of defence equipment are in progress, both India and Russia have so far failed to establish a mutually agreeable payment structure, further adding to the challenges. The low quality of Russian high-tech weapons has also been an important factor in this. Russia can be expected to focus solely on production for its own needs to strengthen its arms exports. The Indian government is now exploring ways to procure arms from the West, which will reduce Russia's presence in the Indian market. "In 2023, it contracted with Germany's ThyssenKrupp for six new submarines, and funds were made available for the purchase from France of three additional Scorpaena class submarines and 26 Dassault Rafale marine fighter jets" (Hedlund, 2024). In the context of the ongoing global conflicts between countries, dependence on any single source is a matter of concern, as it can pose a challenge at any time in the future. In this matter, India's steps to expand its economic relations are considered positive.

5. The Future of the Relationship

India is moving towards developing itself as a self-reliant country. The support of the Russian government in this context can be expressed in the statement of Mr Lavrov – "We are respectful of the aspirations of our Indian colleagues to diversify their military and technical links. We also understand and are ready to support their initiative to produce military products as part of the Make in India program" (Hedlund, 2024). The important thing to note is that despite the questions raised by the West, India's purchase of oil and gas from Russia at very affordable rates shows the priority of India's national interests. Praising Indian Prime Minister Mr Modi's stance in contrast to the Western policy of isolating Moscow, Mr Putin said, "I cannot imagine that Modi will be intimidated or forced to take any action, steps, and decisions which may be contrary to the national interests of India and the Indian people" (Marshal & Singh, 2021).

The Ukrainian envoy in New Delhi urged Mr Modi to contact Mr Putin, stating that India and Russia have special relations that would enable New Delhi to play a more active role in addressing the current situation. After this, Mr Modi told Mr Putin over the phone, "The differences between Russia and the NATO group can be resolved only through honest and sincere talks" (Martin, 2022). The importance both sides attribute to India's role amid the current deteriorating geopolitical landscape reflects its recognition as an honest broker, which can be considered a significant achievement of Indian foreign policy. From the very beginning, India has emphasised resolving disputes through dialogue instead of war. Following this policy, India is continuously moving ahead, and especially in the resolution of the Russia-Ukraine dispute, almost everyone is paying attention to India's role because both sides have seen India as an *honest broker*. India's balancing strategy of prioritising its vital interests in constantly changing circumstances highlights the breadth and dynamism of its foreign policy.

Russia and China's relationship is a significant concern for India, especially in economics, which can affect its relations with Russia and also prompt India towards the USA and other Western nations. Due to this, India has been continuously making efforts to diversify its arms suppliers; however, Russia remains an important supplier to this day. In connection with the two-day visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Russia, Russian Embassy Charge d'Affaires Roman Babushkin said that both countries have decided to establish a system for national currency settlement. Russia's growing closeness to China is not a matter of concern for India (Bhattacherjee, 2024). Bilateral trade between the two nations is increasing steadily, and this economic engagement and cooperation reflect India's continued interest in maintaining ties while diversifying its international partnerships.

Conclusion

The two sides continue to have a special and privileged strategic partnership, most importantly in defence, strategic alignment, and military and technical cooperation. They also continue to cooperate as major powers with important responsibilities for maintaining global peace and stability, reflecting the strong roots of their relationship. Their relationship is well-matured and confident, marked by deep trust, mutual respect, and close understanding of each other's positions, covering all areas of cooperation. After becoming India's third-time PM, Mr Modi visited Russia in October 2024, which was the first in-person meeting after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The visit highlights India's priority in its relations with Russia. India has consistently called on both sides to pursue a path of peace, with Moscow also sending representatives to all talks regarding Ukraine, except for those involving Switzerland. Russia has continuously reiterated its assurance to India for peace. In the era of constantly changing global geopolitics, both countries will need to focus on maintaining cordial relations through an autonomous strategic policy. Moreover, the key point is the growing closeness between Russia and China. When an interviewer asked Putin, "Don't you think Russia is putting so many eggs in the basket of China? Putin answered by joking that we have so many eggs but there are not that many baskets in which these eggs can be placed, Russia and China have many coincident interests which are what motivates our frequent contact, also he denied that Russia was getting too close to China and he spoke about an uncontrolled arms race in the absence of the arms control agreement with the USA" (Times, 2025).

In the context of the current geopolitical dynamics, India is accused by the West of fuelling the Ukraine war due to the ever-strengthening India-Russia economic ties, mainly because of India's import of Russian oil and gas at a very affordable rate. However, due to an autonomous foreign policy, Indian officials have affirmed that India will not compromise on its national interests. In the words of Mr S. Jaishankar, "Europe must now grow out of the mindset that Europe's problems are the world's problems, but the world's problems are not Europe's problem." Europe has been largely silent on many developments in other regions, focusing instead on those that are directly related to its interests. Moreover, as far as the purchase of Russian oil and gas is concerned, Western countries reduced the import of oil and gas from Russia and turned to the Gulf countries, due to which the prices increased there, so it can be considered justified for the underdeveloped countries to find an alternative to this increase in other countries like Russia. Again, in the words of Mr Jaishankar, the world should thank us for managing the world economy.

Indian foreign policy is clear: it is not in India's national interest to take sides. It has strong relations with Russia and the West and seeks to maintain them. Additionally, India consistently emphasises its readiness to collaborate with like-minded nations, exemplified by the QUAD and BRICS groups. India appears to be successful in its strategic policy of balancing relations with Russia and the West.

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