



## India-USSR Relations: From Cold War Alliances to Post-Cold War Realignments

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### Abstract:

India and the USSR maintained a robust strategic alliance during the Cold War, motivated by common geopolitical goals, economic collaboration, and defense cooperation. This partnership was founded on India's non-alignment policy, while fostering robust connections with Moscow, especially following the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation in 1971. The USSR significantly contributed to India's industrialization, defense modernization, and technical progress, encompassing space and nuclear initiatives. In exchange, India endorsed the Soviet position on significant international matters, while maintaining its involvement with the Western alliance.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 signified a pivotal moment in India-Russia ties. The shift from a bipolar to a unipolar world necessitated India's diversification of strategic ties, resulting in enhanced collaboration with the United States and other global powers. Despite economic restrictions and evolving political factors that first hampered relations, the India-Russia partnership proved robust, especially in defense collaboration and energy alliances. Throughout the years, both nations have adjusted to changing global circumstances by sustaining a strategic alliance founded on shared interests.

Post-Cold War realignments resulted in India establishing enhanced economic and geopolitical relations with the United States, while maintaining its longstanding collaboration with Russia. The rise of China as a significant power, regional security issues, and changing global trade dynamics have impacted India's foreign policy adjustments. Despite fluctuations in the Indo-Russian relationship, their defense cooperation and mutual geopolitical goals remain essential in global diplomacy.

**Key Words:** Indo-Soviet Treaty, Cold War Alliances, Post-Cold War, Strategic Partnership, Defense Cooperation.

**Introduction:**

India's foreign policy has been profoundly influenced by its relationships with major global powers, especially the Soviet Union (USSR) during the Cold War and the Russian Federation in the post-Cold War era. The Indo-USSR connection was crucial in defining India's strategic, economic, and military framework, serving as a counterbalance to Western influence, especially regarding Indo-Pakistani wars and worldwide geopolitical changes. Following the fall of the USSR in 1991, India was compelled to adjust to new global dynamics, recalibrating its diplomatic and economic strategy to sustain its relationship with Russia while also engaging with other major countries, especially the United States.

**Objectives:**

1. This paper seeks to examine the fundamental elements of India-USSR interactions throughout the Cold War period.
2. Analyze the evolution of Indo-Russian ties following 1991.
3. Examine the difficulties and potential in India-Russia relations in the 21st century.

Approach this study utilizes a qualitative research methodology, relying on secondary sources like scholarly papers, government records, historical narratives, and expert evaluations. A comparative analysis of the Cold War and post-Cold War eras is undertaken to emphasize changes in diplomatic strategies, economic partnerships, and military alliances. Archival studies and policy analyses facilitate a thorough comprehension of the evolution of the bilateral relationship.

**Analysis and Interpretation****India-USSR Relations during the Cold War (1947-1991)**

The Cold War (1947-1991) era was characterized by strategic, economic, and military collaboration between India and the Soviet Union (USSR). Notwithstanding India's stated stance of non-alignment, the USSR became one of India's closest allies, offering essential help across



multiple domains. This cooperation profoundly impacted India's political, economic, and defense spheres and was essential in determining regional geopolitics.

### **1. Political and Diplomatic Relations**

India and the USSR forged robust diplomatic relations from the outset, with the Soviet Union providing significant political backing to India in the United Nations and other international forums. The foundation of this partnership was the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation, signed in 1971, which codified the strategic alliance between the two countries. This convention guaranteed reciprocal collaboration during crises and afforded India a diplomatic safeguard against Western influences.

A significant examination of this relationship occurred during the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War, culminating in the establishment of Bangladesh. During the escalation of hostilities between India and Pakistan, the USSR significantly supported India through diplomatic and military means. The Soviet Union vetoed several UN Security Council resolutions aimed at intervening in India's military operations in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Moreover, the USSR dissuaded foreign intervention by positioning its naval fleet in the Indian Ocean in response to the US sending its Seventh Fleet to the Bay of Bengal to demonstrate support for Pakistan.

### **2. Economic Collaboration**

The USSR had a crucial role in India's economic advancement, especially during the Nehruvian era of state-led industrialization. The Soviet Union assisted India in the creation of substantial public sector enterprises and infrastructure initiatives, providing technical expertise and financial backing. Significant industrial collaborations included the establishment of steel plants in Bhilai, Bokaro, and Durgapur, which became symbols of Indo-Soviet cooperation. These initiatives significantly improved India's independence in steel production and heavy industry.

A notable characteristic of Indo-Soviet economic collaboration was the rupee-ruble trade system. This agreement enabled trade between India and the USSR in local currencies, bypassing Western financial institutions and reducing India's dependence on foreign exchange reserves. This arrangement was particularly beneficial for India, allowing the acquisition of



essential goods, machinery, and technology without the constraints of foreign exchange shortages. The USSR assisted India in enhancing its energy sector by promoting the establishment of power plants and hydroelectric initiatives.

### **3. Military and Defense Cooperation**

India's foreign policy during the Cold War was characterized by a careful balance between the Non-Aligned Movement and a strategic partnership with the Soviet Union. Despite nominally adopting a non-aligned position, India leaned towards the USSR owing to geopolitical factors, particularly in response to the strategic danger posed by the US-Pakistan-China alliance. The USSR provided essential diplomatic backing to India in global forums, particularly over the Kashmir issue. When Pakistan sought aid from Western nations to internationalize the Kashmir dispute, the Soviet Union consistently supported India's stance, impeding UN Security Council resolutions unfavorable to Indian interests.

### **4. Geopolitical Strategy**

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In the late 1980s, as the Cold War approached its end, Indo-Soviet relations faced challenges due to the changing global landscape. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979-1989) created diplomatic challenges, necessitating India to carefully navigate its response to avoid alienation from both the USSR and its non-aligned partners. India, meanwhile, refrained from explicitly denouncing Soviet actions, maintaining diplomatic balance while upholding its close bilateral connections.



## **Post-Cold War India-Russia Relations (1991-Present)**

The 1991 fall of the Soviet Union was a pivotal moment in India-Russia relations, compelling both nations to adapt to emerging geopolitical and economic circumstances. Following a phase of ambiguity, the two states reaffirmed their dedication to a robust bilateral partnership, adjusting their relations to the post-Cold War international framework. India and Russia have consistently upheld strong links in diplomacy, economics, defense, and multilateral interactions, solidifying their partnership as a fundamental element of global strategic dynamics.

### **1. Transformation in Diplomatic Relations**

The end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 resulted in a transient deterioration of India-Russia relations as Russia contended with economic instability and political turmoil. The newly established Russian Federation, concentrating on internal reorganization and fostering relationships with Western countries, has led to a period of uncertainty in Indo-Russian relations.

Nonetheless, acknowledging the historical significance of their alliance, both countries initiated efforts to restore diplomatic relations. In 1993, India and Russia ratified the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, confirming their dedication to a robust bilateral relationship. This pact established the groundwork for revitalized cooperation across various sectors, safeguarding the historical connections between the two nations.

A significant advancement occurred in 2000 with the execution of the Strategic Partnership Agreement during Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to India. This accord advanced India-Russia relations, formalizing annual summits between the two nations. These summits have evolved into a crucial forum for addressing significant bilateral and global matters, facilitating ongoing diplomatic interaction at the highest echelons.

In 2010, the partnership was elevated to a “Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership,” highlighting the significance of India-Russia relations. This status signifies the trust and collaboration between the two nations, especially in the domains of military, energy, and technology.



## **2. Economic and Trade Relations**

India's economic liberalization in 1991 resulted in a diversification of its trade and investment alliances, fostering increased interaction with Western economies, notably the United States and European countries. This transition briefly diminished the significance of Indo-Russian commercial connections. Over time, the two nations revised their commercial relations, emphasizing new areas of collaboration

. A significant domain of economic collaboration has been energy. Russia has emerged as an essential ally in India's energy security, providing oil, natural gas, and nuclear technology. The two nations have collaborated on significant initiatives, notably the construction of the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant, exemplifying Russia's contribution to India's civilian nuclear energy program.

## **3. Defense and Strategic Ties**

Defense collaboration constitutes a fundamental aspect of India-Russia ties. Russia remains India's primary arms supplier, delivering sophisticated armaments, aircraft, submarines, and missile systems. This collaboration has progressed over the decades from arms sales to encompass cooperative research, technological transfers, and co-development of military equipment.

An exemplary instance of this collaboration is the BrahMos missile project, a joint venture between India's Defense Research and Development Organization (DRDO) and Russia's NPO Mashinostroyeniya. The BrahMos missile is among the most sophisticated supersonic cruise missiles globally, augmenting India's strategic defense capabilities.

India has acquired various Russian defense apparatus, including Sukhoi Su-30MKI fighter aircraft, T-90 tanks, and the S-400 missile defense system. The acquisition of the S-400 system, over opposition from Western nations, highlights India's dedication to its strategic alliance with Russia.

## **4. Multilateral Engagements**



India and Russia cooperate on several international venues, strengthening their mutual goal of a multipolar world order. Their collaboration encompasses entities such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the trilateral framework of Russia-India-China (RIC).

India's accession to the SCO, endorsed by Russia, bolsters security and economic collaboration in Eurasia. The SCO offers a forum for governments to cooperate on counterterrorism, regional security, and connectivity initiatives.

Space exploration represents a significant domain of collaboration, with Russia aiding India in enhancing its space capabilities. Russia has been instrumental in India's Gaganyaan mission, which seeks to launch Indian astronauts into space. Furthermore, collaboration in nuclear energy persists, with Russia assisting India in augmenting its nuclear power generation capability.

### **Challenges and Opportunities in India-Russia Relations 21st Century Relations**

India and Russia have always maintained a robust strategic collaboration, originating from Cold War alliances and bolstered by similar interests in defense, oil, and geopolitics. The 21st century has presented new problems and opportunities that influence the course of this partnership. Despite global geopolitical transformations, economic limitations, and evolving defense dynamics presenting considerable hurdles, large opportunities persist in energy cooperation, trade expansion, technology collaboration, and multilateral engagements.

### **Challenges**

#### **1. Geopolitical Shifts and US-India Relations**

India's evolving strategic relationship with the United States has introduced tensions in its longstanding partnership with Russia. Over the past two decades, India has deepened its engagement with the US through defense agreements, participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), and economic collaboration. This shift has been driven by shared democratic values, concerns over China's rise, and the US's willingness to supply India with advanced defense technology.





However, this growing proximity has caused friction with Russia, which views QUAD as an anti-China alliance and remains wary of India's military engagements with Western powers. Additionally, the US sanctions on Russia under the **Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA)** have complicated India's defense purchases, including the acquisition of the S-400 missile system. Navigating these competing strategic interests remains a critical challenge for India.

## 2. Russia-China Strategic Alignment

Russia's increasing strategic alignment with China is another major challenge for India. In the wake of Western sanctions following the annexation of Crimea and the Ukraine war, Russia has significantly strengthened its ties with China, including military cooperation, energy trade, and diplomatic coordination. This growing partnership is concerning for India, given its ongoing border tensions with China.

Russia has largely maintained a neutral stance on India-China disputes, including the 2020 Galwan Valley clash, which has raised concerns in New Delhi. India fears that Russia's dependence on China could eventually weaken Moscow's commitment to its strategic partnership with India, particularly in defense and geopolitical cooperation.

## 3. Declining Economic Engagement

Despite their strong historical ties, economic engagement between India and Russia remains relatively weak compared to India's trade with the US, China, and the European Union. Bilateral trade between India and Russia stands at approximately \$35 billion, far lower than India's trade volumes with other major economies.

## 4. Impact of Ukraine War and Western Sanctions

The Russia-Ukraine war and subsequent Western sanctions have had a direct impact on India-Russia relations. Sanctions have restricted Russia's access to global financial systems, making transactions and trade with Russia more complicated for India. Payment mechanisms and





banking restrictions have forced both countries to explore alternatives like **the Rupee-Ruble trade mechanism** and other currency settlements.

Moreover, India's diplomatic balancing act has become more challenging. While India has maintained a neutral stance on the Ukraine conflict and continued its economic engagement with Russia, it has also faced pressure from Western allies to reduce ties with Moscow. Managing this delicate geopolitical balancing act is a persistent challenge for Indian diplomacy.

## 5. Changing Defense Dynamics

India has been diversifying its defense imports by engaging with other countries such as the US, France, and Israel. This shift is partly due to India's desire to reduce overdependence on Russian military equipment and enhance self-reliance under the **Atmanirbhar Bharat (Self-Reliant India) initiative**.

### Opportunities

#### 1. Energy Collaboration

Energy collaboration constitutes a fundamental aspect of India-Russia relations. Russia has emerged as a significant provider of inexpensive crude oil to India, assisting the nation in fulfilling its increasing energy requirements at reduced expenses. India has invested in Russian oil and gas initiatives, particularly those in the Arctic area.

#### 2. Defense and Strategic Alliance

Notwithstanding India's diversification in defense acquisitions, Russia continues to be its predominant defense supplier. The BrahMos supersonic cruise missile and AK-203 rifle production exemplify the extensive collaboration in military technology through joint enterprises.

#### 3. Eurasian Connectivity and Trade Enhancement



The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) provides India with an alternative commercial route to Central Asia and Europe through Russia, therefore diminishing reliance on conventional routes through Pakistan and China. This corridor can improve connectivity and augment bilateral trade across various sectors.

#### **4. Cooperation in Space and Technology**

India and Russia possess a longstanding tradition of cooperation in space exploration. Russia is significantly contributing to India's Gaganyaan mission, which seeks to launch Indian astronauts into space. Both nations possess prospects for enhanced collaboration in satellite technology, space research, and planetary exploration.

#### **5. Multilateral Involvement**

India and Russia participate extensively in global organizations such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), G20, and the United Nations. These forums enable both nations to synchronize policy regarding global governance, commerce, and security matters.

Russia has repeatedly endorsed India's pursuit of a permanent membership on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), underscoring their mutual interest in a multipolar global order. The collaboration in international forums continues to be a significant asset of the India-Russia partnership.

#### **6. Rupee-Ruble Trade Framework**

In reaction to Western sanctions, India and Russia have been investigating alternate payment systems, including the Rupee-Ruble trade, to enable transactions and reduce reliance on the US dollar. Enhancing local currency commerce may shield both countries from external economic pressures and facilitate trade in emerging areas.

#### **Limitations**

The analysis of India-USSR Relations: From Cold War Alliances to Post-Cold War Realignments possesses specific limitations. Initially, it predominantly depends on historical



documents and secondary sources, which may exhibit biases or lack direct perspectives. The study emphasizes diplomatic, economic, and military dimensions, possibly neglecting cultural or interpersonal connections. Third, due to the intricacies of international relations, several subtle geopolitical elements affecting the connection may remain inadequately examined. Furthermore, post-Cold War realignments persist, complicating the evaluation of long-term effects.

### Conclusion

The India-USSR relationship was fundamental to India's Cold War foreign policy, characterized by strategic alignment, economic collaboration, and military assistance. Following 1991, India and Russia recalibrated their partnership in reaction to emerging global dynamics. Although defense is a fundamental component, economic diversification and international involvement are influencing modern relations. Geopolitical developments, economic limits, and evolving global alignments pose both difficulties and opportunities for the future of Indo-Russian relations. A pragmatic and balanced strategy is essential to maintain the relevance and mutual benefits of this traditionally robust relationship within the changing global order.

Despite problems in India-Russia relations stemming from geopolitical developments, economic limitations, and evolving defense dynamics, substantial potential persist in energy, defense, trade, and multilateral collaboration. The viability of this cooperation in the 21st century will hinge on the efficacy with which both states manage global power transitions while enhancing their strategic, economic, and technological connections. By confronting problems and leveraging possibilities, India and Russia may secure a stable and mutually advantageous relationship for the future.

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