



Foreign Policy of India towards Russia during Russia-Ukraine War

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Abstract

India's foreign policy towards Russia amidst the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war is a complex balancing act rooted in historical ties, strategic autonomy, and economic interests. Since the conflict's escalation in February 2022, India has carefully navigated the turbulent geopolitical waters, drawing criticism and praise in equal measure for its stance. Historically, India and Russia (and previously the Soviet Union) have shared a strong and multifaceted relationship. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was a reliable ally, supporting India's industrialization and providing crucial military equipment. This deep-rooted defense cooperation continues, with Russia remaining a major supplier of arms to India. Beyond defense, the relationship encompasses energy, trade, technology, and space exploration. This long-standing partnership forms a crucial backdrop to understanding India's current approach. However, the rise of a multipolar world and India's own growing global stature have led to a foreign policy emphasizing strategic autonomy. This principle dictates that India reserves the right to make independent decisions based on its national interests, without aligning itself rigidly with any major power bloc. The Russia-Ukraine war has tested this principle severely.

Keywords:

Foreign, Policy, War, Defense

Introduction

India's official stance on the conflict has been characterized by calls for an immediate cessation of hostilities, dialogue, and diplomacy. It has consistently emphasized the need to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states, a principle seemingly at odds with Russia's actions in Ukraine. Despite this, India has notably abstained from voting on several United Nations resolutions condemning Russia's aggression. (Mahapatra, 2021)



This abstention, along with India's continued engagement with Russia, particularly in the energy sector, has drawn criticism from Western nations. India has significantly increased its imports of discounted Russian crude oil, a move seen by some as undermining the sanctions imposed by the West on Russia. India defends its energy purchases as necessary to meet its domestic needs and has consistently stated that its priority is its own economic well-being.

India has maintained high-level diplomatic engagement with Russia. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has held multiple discussions with President Vladimir Putin, reiterating India's stance on peace and the need for a diplomatic solution. India argues that its continued dialogue with Russia provides a channel for communication and potential mediation, positioning itself as a potential bridge between the warring parties.

India remains heavily reliant on Russian military hardware. Disrupting ties with Russia could have significant implications for India's defense preparedness. With a large and growing economy, India needs access to reliable and affordable energy sources. Discounted Russian oil has become a significant component of its energy mix.

India seeks to maintain a balance in its relationships with major global powers. Alienating Russia could push it further into China's orbit, a scenario India wishes to avoid given its complex relationship with Beijing. The long-standing friendship and cooperation with Russia cannot be easily disregarded, and there is a degree of historical affinity within India towards Russia. (Leverett, 2022)

India's refusal to condemn Russia has, at times, created friction with its strategic partners in the West, particularly the United States and European nations. Ukraine has expressed its disappointment with India's stance, particularly its continued economic engagement with Russia. India's image as a responsible global power committed to international law and the rules-based order has faced scrutiny. The war has highlighted India's dependence on Russian arms and the need for diversification of its defense and energy partners.

For decades, India's defense establishment has maintained a significant dependence on Russia (and previously the Soviet Union) for its military hardware. This reliance, deeply rooted in historical, strategic, and economic factors, has shaped India's defense capabilities and foreign policy choices. However, the evolving geopolitical landscape, coupled with India's growing aspirations for self-reliance, is leading to a gradual but noticeable shift in this dynamic.



Historically, the Soviet Union was a reliable partner for India, especially during the Cold War when Western nations were hesitant to provide advanced military technology. This fostered a strong relationship built on trust and the transfer of critical defense systems at relatively affordable prices and without stringent end-user restrictions. Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia inherited this role, becoming India's largest arms supplier.

The extent of this dependence is substantial. Estimates suggest that a significant percentage, ranging from 50% to 70% or even higher, of India's in-service military platforms are of Russian origin. Main battle tanks like the T-90 and T-72, air defense systems, anti-tank guided missiles, and multiple rocket launcher systems are largely sourced from Russia.

A significant portion of the fighter fleet, including the Su-30MKI (produced under license in India), MiG-29, and MiG-21 variants, as well as transport aircraft and tankers, are Russian-made. While the Navy has a more diversified portfolio, key platforms like Talwar-class frigates and Veer-class missile corvettes, along with various missiles and torpedoes, have Russian origins. (Libman, 2022)

Literature Review

Menkiszak et al. (2022): Several factors have contributed to this enduring dependence. Russia has often been willing to share sensitive technologies and engage in joint development and production, as exemplified by the BrahMos cruise missile. This aligns with India's long-term goal of building its indigenous defense industrial base. Furthermore, Russian equipment has often been perceived as robust, reliable, and cost-effective.

Mankoff et al. (2022): The ongoing war in Ukraine has exposed vulnerabilities in relying heavily on a single supplier facing international sanctions and production disruptions. Delays in the supply of critical equipment and spare parts have become a concern for India. Moreover, reports of the performance of Russian military hardware in the Ukraine conflict have raised questions about the reliability of certain systems.

Pifer et al. (2020): The impact of this diversification is already visible. While Russia remains a significant defense partner, its share in India's arms imports has declined in recent years. India has signed major defense deals with the US for aircraft like the P-8I maritime patrol aircraft and Apache



and Chinook helicopters. Significant procurements have also been made from France, including Rafale fighter jets and Scorpene submarines, and from Israel for drones and missile systems.

Ozawa et al. (2022): The future of India's defense relationship with Russia is likely to be one of continued engagement but with a gradual recalibration. Russia will remain an important partner, particularly for the maintenance and upgrades of existing Russian-origin platforms and potentially for niche technologies where it still holds an edge. However, India's commitment to diversification and indigenous production will likely lead to a further decrease in its dependence on Russian arms in the long term.

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In recent years, India has actively pursued a strategy of diversifying its defense procurement. India aims to reduce its reliance on any single nation for its defense needs to maintain its strategic independence and flexibility in foreign policy. The government's strong push for indigenous defense production seeks to create a self-reliant defense industrial base, reducing the need for foreign imports.

India is looking to acquire cutting-edge technologies from various sources, including the United States, France, Israel, and other European nations, to modernize its armed forces. The growing closeness between Russia and China has also prompted India to seek closer defense ties with countries that share concerns about China's growing influence.

India's defense dependence on Russia is a complex legacy of historical ties, strategic considerations, and economic realities. While this relationship has been crucial in building India's defense capabilities, the evolving global landscape and India's strategic objectives are driving a diversification of its defense partners and a greater emphasis on self-reliance. The India-Russia defense relationship will likely endure, but its character and significance are poised for a gradual transformation in the years to come.

India's relationship with Russia, characterized by a "special and privileged strategic partnership," has been tested by the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. Navigating this complex geopolitical landscape, India has adopted a stance of strategic balance, prioritizing its national interests while carefully engaging with both Russia and the West. This article will explore the key aspects of India's strategic approach towards Russia during this conflict.



India and Russia share a long-standing relationship rooted in historical, political, and economic factors. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was a reliable partner, providing crucial military and economic assistance. This legacy continues to shape India's strategic calculations. A significant portion of India's military hardware is of Russian origin, making it dependent on Russia for maintenance, spare parts, and upgrades. This dependence is a crucial factor influencing India's cautious approach to the conflict.

A cornerstone of India's foreign policy is its commitment to strategic autonomy and non-alignment. In the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, this translates to avoiding taking sides and instead focusing on its core national interests. India has consistently abstained from voting on UN resolutions condemning Russia's actions, emphasizing the need for dialogue and a peaceful resolution to the conflict. This stance has allowed India to maintain open communication channels with both Moscow and Kyiv.

The economic dimension plays a significant role in India's strategic balancing act. Despite Western sanctions on Russia, India has continued to engage in trade with its long-standing partner, particularly in the energy sector. India has emerged as a major buyer of discounted Russian oil, ensuring its energy security amidst global price volatility. This pragmatic approach, while drawing some criticism from the West, is justified by India as a necessity to meet its growing energy demands and protect its economic interests.

While maintaining ties with Russia, India has also been actively strengthening its relationships with Western powers, particularly the United States. The strategic partnership with the US is crucial for India's security, technology transfer, and economic growth. India is a key player in the Quad, a strategic dialogue with the US, Japan, and Australia, focused on the Indo-Pacific region. Balancing these relationships requires careful diplomacy, ensuring that its engagement with Russia does not undermine its growing partnership with the West.

The Russia-Ukraine war has exacerbated existing geopolitical tensions and created new challenges for India. The deepening strategic alignment between Russia and China, India's primary geopolitical rival, is a significant concern. India's engagement with Russia is partly aimed at preventing an even closer alignment between Moscow and Beijing. Furthermore, India has expressed concerns about the potential for the conflict to destabilize the region and its wider implications for the international order.

Despite its strategic balancing act, India has consistently expressed deep concern over the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine. It has called for an immediate cessation of violence and emphasized the



importance of respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states. India has also provided humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, demonstrating its commitment to alleviating the suffering of the civilian population.

India's strategic balance towards Russia during the Russia-Ukraine war is a complex and multifaceted approach driven by its historical ties, strategic dependence, commitment to autonomy, economic considerations, and geopolitical realities. By carefully navigating its relationships with both Russia and the West, India seeks to protect its national interests, contribute to a peaceful resolution of the conflict, and maintain its position as a key player in the evolving global order. This balancing act, while challenging, reflects India's long-standing foreign policy principles and its aspirations for a multipolar world.

Conclusion

India's foreign policy towards Russia during the Russia-Ukraine war is a carefully calibrated strategy driven by a complex interplay of historical ties, strategic autonomy, and economic imperatives. While India has consistently called for peace and respect for international law, its refusal to condemn Russia and its continued engagement, particularly in the energy sector, reflect its pursuit of national interests in a challenging geopolitical landscape. This approach, while allowing India to maintain its strategic autonomy and meet its immediate needs, carries potential risks to its relationships with other key partners and its long-term global standing. As the war continues, India's ability to balance its multifaceted interests will be crucial in shaping its future foreign policy trajectory.

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