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INDIA-RUSSIA RELATIONS: A HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY ANALYSIS

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Abstract

India and Russia share a deep-rooted and multi-faceted relationship, which has evolved over several decades. Beginning in the early Cold War era, the relationship has expanded across multiple sectors, including defense, energy, trade, and global diplomacy. This paper provides a detailed exploration of the historical foundations, key milestones, and contemporary challenges that shape India-Russia relations today, with a focus on their strategic, economic, and diplomatic engagements.

Keywords: India-Russia relations, defense cooperation, strategic partnership, energy security, global diplomacy.

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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. The study examines the history of India-Russia relations, significant milestones, and the evolving dynamics of their partnership in the 21st century. It also explores the key challenges and areas of cooperation that define the contemporary bilateral relationship between these two major global players.

Review of Literature

The study of Indo-Russian relations has attracted scholarly attention from political analysts, historians, and international relations experts. The literature on this topic can be divided into three broad areas: historical analysis, defense cooperation, and contemporary challenges.

1. Historical Perspective

Scholars such as Gupta (1997) [1] and Rao (2000) [2] have emphasized the significance of the Indo-Soviet strategic alliance during the Cold War. Gupta (1997)

2. highlights the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty as a landmark event that strengthened military and political ties, while Rao (2000) explores the industrial and technical cooperation that helped India's development.

3. Defense Cooperation

Several studies, including Joshi (2013) [3] and Raghavan (2021) [4], underscore the critical role of defense in India-Russia relations. Joshi (2013) particularly focuses on the joint development of the Brahmos missile, while Raghavan (2021) analyzes Russia's continued dominance as India's top arms supplier.

4. Contemporary Challenges

Post-Cold War analyses, such as Sengupta (2018) [5] and Srinivasan (2022) [6], focus on the shifts in global geopolitics that have affected India-Russia relations. Sengupta (2018) delves into how India's growing relationship with the United States has introduced new complexities, while Srinivasan (2022) discusses India's neutral stance in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of this study are:

1. To trace the historical evolution of India-Russia relations from the Soviet era to the present.
2. To analyze the key sectors of cooperation, including defense, energy, and space, that define India-Russia ties.
3. To explore the impact of global geopolitical changes on India-Russia relations, especially in the context of India's growing ties with Western powers.

4. To examine the challenges and opportunities in maintaining a strong partnership in the current international climate.
5. To provide recommendations on how India and Russia can further strengthen their bilateral relationship, especially in trade and technological cooperation.

Methodology

This study uses secondary data analysis to explore the evolution of India-Russia relations. The methodology involves a review of relevant literature, official documents, and publicly available reports. The sources for secondary data include Academic Journals, Government Documents and News Articles.

Historical Foundations of Indo-Russian Relations

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

Early Diplomatic Ties (1947-1971)

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.

In 1971, a critical turning point came with the signing of the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation. This treaty marked a significant milestone, with the Soviet Union providing crucial political and military support to India, particularly during the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War. This 20-year pact solidified India's strategic relationship with the Soviet Union, providing India with political and military backing during the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War, which eventually led to the creation of Bangladesh (Gupta, 1997) [7]. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, India-Russia relations continued with Russia inheriting the Soviet Union's strategic role in India's foreign policy. Despite Russia's economic challenges during the 1990s, India and Russia maintained their defense and strategic ties, reaffirmed through the 1993 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation and further institutionalized in the 2000 Declaration of Strategic Partnership under President Vladimir Putin and Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee [14].

The Cold War Era (1971-1991)

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 (Sengupta, 2008) [8].

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 tumultuous economic conditions in post-Soviet Russia, defense and strategic ties between the two countries remained strong.

One of the most notable achievements of this period was the joint development of the Brahmos supersonic cruise missile, which became a symbol of the enduring defense cooperation between India and Russia (Joshi, 2013) [9]. 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. In 2000, Russian President Vladimir Putin visited India, marking the establishment of the India-Russia Strategic Partnership, a framework that institutionalized annual summits and broadened cooperation across defense, nuclear energy, and trade.

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 Triumf missile defense system, which India began receiving in 2021 (Raghavan, 2021) [10].

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 (Sharma, 2016) [11].

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. Plans to expand the plant with additional reactors further emphasize the importance of this partnership for India's energy security (Patil, 2017) [12].

Russia has also emerged as a significant supplier of crude oil to India, particularly in the wake of the 2022 geopolitical disruptions caused by the Russia-Ukraine conflict. India's increased import of Russian oil underscores the importance of this energy relationship despite international sanctions on Russia (Mohan, 2023) [13].

Despite robust defense and energy ties, trade between India and Russia has historically been below its potential. 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 (Singh, 2022) [14].

Modi's Diplomacy and Strategic Partnership with Russia: A Strategic Overview

Since taking office in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has pursued a dynamic and pragmatic foreign policy aimed at strengthening India's global standing. One of the pillars of this strategy has been enhancing and diversifying India's relationships with key global powers. Modi's diplomatic engagement with Russia is especially significant given the long history of India-Russia ties, which began during the Cold War when India and the Soviet Union forged a strong political, military, and economic partnership.

Under Modi's leadership, the India-Russia relationship has seen continuity as well as recalibration, adapting to new global realities while preserving the core strategic components of the bilateral partnership. This paper explores the key aspects of Modi's diplomacy with Russia, focusing on defense cooperation, energy security, geopolitical alignment, and economic engagement, while also analyzing how global shifts, including India's growing partnership with the United States, have impacted this relationship.

Modi's Strategic Diplomacy with Russia: Defense Cooperation: The Cornerstone of the Relationship

Defense cooperation remains the bedrock of India-Russia relations, and under Modi's leadership, this dimension of the partnership has continued to flourish.

- **S-400 Triumf Missile System:** One of the most significant defense deals under Modi's tenure has been the purchase of the S-400 Triumf air defense missile system from Russia. Signed in 2018 during the Modi-Putin summit, the \$5.43 billion deal for five S-400 units is a major milestone in India-Russia defense cooperation. Despite pressure from the United States and the threat of sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), India proceeded with the deal, underscoring the importance of its defense relationship with Russia (Sharma, 2021) [15].
- **Joint Military Development:** The BrahMos missile, a supersonic cruise missile jointly developed by India and Russia, continues to be a symbol of successful military cooperation. Under Modi, India and Russia have expanded this partnership, with plans to develop an extended-range version of BrahMos and to export it to third countries (Joshi, 2019) [16].
- **Military Exercises:** Modi's diplomacy has also focused on strengthening joint military exercises, such as the Indraseries of exercises. These are held annually between the Indian and Russian armed forces, covering a range of military domains, from counterterrorism to naval cooperation (Raghavan, 2022) [17].

Energy Security and Cooperation

Energy is another critical component of India-Russia ties, with Modi leveraging Russia's energy resources to meet India's growing demands.

- **Nuclear Energy:** India and Russia have deepened their collaboration in nuclear energy under Modi. The Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant (KKNPP), being built with Russian assistance, remains a key pillar of this partnership. In 2016, Modi and Putin signed agreements to build additional reactors at Kudankulam, further enhancing India's nuclear energy capacity (Patil, 2017) [18].
- **Oil and Natural Gas:** India has also sought to expand its energy imports from Russia. During Modi's tenure, state-owned Indian companies such as ONGC Videsh and Indian Oil Corporation have invested in Russian oil and gas fields, particularly in the Arctic and Siberian regions. In 2022, amid global energy market disruptions due to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, India increased its import of Russian crude oil, highlighting the importance of this partnership for India's energy security (Mohan, 2023) [19].
- **Renewable Energy Cooperation:** Modi's vision for India's energy future also includes renewable energy. India and Russia have discussed enhancing cooperation in areas such as solar and wind energy, which aligns with Modi's broader push for clean energy under the International Solar Alliance.

Geopolitical Balancing and Multilateral Engagement

One of the central features of Modi's foreign policy has been his ability to balance India's relations with major global powers. While India has deepened its strategic ties with the United States, particularly through the Quad grouping (India, the US, Japan, and Australia), Modi has maintained India's historical relationship with Russia.

- **BRICS and SCO:** Modi has consistently engaged with Russia through multilateral forums such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). These platforms have allowed India and Russia to collaborate on global governance, economic issues, and regional security, including counterterrorism and trade.
- **Russia-Ukraine Conflict:** India's neutral stance in the Russia-Ukraine conflict has been a clear manifestation of Modi's diplomatic balancing. While India has not supported Western sanctions against Russia, it has called for dialogue and diplomacy, reflecting its commitment to strategic autonomy. Despite Western pressure, India has continued to maintain economic and political engagement with Russia, particularly in energy and defense (Srinivasan, 2023) [20].

Economic and Trade Relations

Modi's diplomacy has also sought to enhance trade ties with Russia, although this remains an underdeveloped aspect of the relationship compared to defense and energy.

- **Bilateral Trade:** In 2021, bilateral trade between India and Russia stood at around \$11 billion, which is modest compared to India's trade with other major powers. To address this, Modi and Putin have set a target to increase bilateral trade to \$30 billion by 2025 (Singh, 2022) [21].
- **International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC):** Modi's government has supported the development of the INSTC, a multi-modal transportation network connecting India, Russia, and Iran, which aims to reduce transportation costs and increase trade between India and Russia (Vohra, 2021) [22].
- **Technology and Innovation:** Modi has also emphasized cooperation in technology and innovation. India and Russia have explored joint ventures in artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, and space exploration, building on their historical cooperation in areas such as space technology.

India's Treaties and Tie-ups with Russia

India establishes diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union shortly after gaining independence. The Soviet Union becomes an important ally for India during the early years of independence.

1950s - 1970s: Establishing the Foundations

- 1953: The first Indo-Soviet Trade Agreement is signed, marking the beginning of economic cooperation.
 - 1962: Soviet Union provides military support to India during the Sino-Indian War, which strengthens defense relations.
 - 1971: Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation signed. The agreement, signed during the Bangladesh Liberation War, solidifies the strategic partnership between India and the Soviet Union.
- ##### **1980s - Cold War and Strengthened Ties**
- 1980: India signs an agreement with the Soviet Union for the transfer of defense technology, including advanced fighter jets.
 - 1984: The Soviet Union helps India develop its space capabilities, leading to the launch of the Indian space program with Soviet assistance.
 - 1985: The Soviet Union assists India with the construction of the nuclear power plant at Kudankulam in Tamil Nadu.
 - 1987: A formal agreement on military cooperation is signed, focusing on defense technology, joint exercises, and collaboration in weapon systems.
 - 1991: The Soviet Union collapses, and Russia inherits the USSR's foreign relations. India quickly adjusts to the new Russian Federation and reaffirms its strong relationship with Russia.

- 1993: A new era of Indo-Russian relations begins with the signing of a "Declaration on Strategic Partnership" in 1993. The agreement emphasizes strengthening political, economic, and defense ties.
- 1994: Russia and India sign a "Framework for Bilateral Cooperation" in defense and technology, building on earlier military ties.
- 2000: India and Russia elevate their relationship to a "Strategic Partnership" with the signing of a "Declaration on Strategic Partnership". This was a significant step in fostering long-term collaboration in defense, nuclear energy, and space.
- 2001: Intergovernmental Agreement on Defense Cooperation signed, marking a deeper military alliance, particularly in the joint development of military systems.
- 2002: India and Russia sign an agreement for cooperation in space exploration. Russia agrees to assist India with satellite launches and share space technology.
- 2003: Russia and India sign a "Nuclear Cooperation Agreement", ensuring Russia's support for India's civil nuclear program.
- 2004: The Indo-Russian Joint Venture for Aircraft Production is launched, including collaboration on military aircraft manufacturing.
- 2005: Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) framework is agreed upon, aimed at expanding trade and economic ties.
- 2010: India and Russia sign the "Delhi Declaration", aiming to deepen their strategic partnership further, particularly in defense, space, and energy sectors.
- 2014: India and Russia sign a major "Defence Cooperation Agreement" worth over \$10 billion. This includes the joint development of defense technologies and more advanced military hardware.
- 2015: India-Russia Nuclear Energy Cooperation: The two countries sign agreements on nuclear energy, including the construction of new nuclear reactors and cooperation in uranium supply.
- 2016: The "India-Russia Military-Technical Cooperation Agreement" is signed, strengthening defense ties, including the transfer of Russian technology and joint development projects.
- 2016: Russia agrees to supply India with advanced S-400 Triumf air defense systems in a deal worth approximately \$5 billion.
- 2017: India and Russia finalize the \$5 billion S-400 deal, which is seen as a significant milestone in military cooperation.
- 2018: Indo-Russian Annual Summit: President Vladimir Putin visits India for the 19th Indo-Russian Annual Summit, during which both nations finalize deals for the S-400 systems and increased defense cooperation.

- 2021: Russia and India sign agreements for the joint production of military equipment and advanced defense technologies, including the AK-203 rifles.
- 2021: The 20th Annual India-Russia Summit is held in New Delhi, where both sides discuss further cooperation in sectors like energy, technology, and defense.
- 2022: Russia and India continue discussions on strategic defense, energy cooperation, and joint development of high-tech industries. India also strengthens its energy ties with Russia, buying discounted crude oil amidst the global energy crisis.
- 2023: The India-Russia Economic Cooperation Agreement continues to focus on energy, defense, and trade diversification. Despite Western sanctions on Russia, both countries explore new avenues of trade, including in sectors like agriculture, pharmaceuticals, and technology.
- 2023: A landmark S-400 deal is finalized, enhancing India's air defense capabilities.
- 2024: Discussions continue regarding further cooperation in space, nuclear energy, and advanced military systems²³.

Indo-Russian relations have seen a remarkable evolution from the early days of Soviet support for India's independence movement to a modern strategic partnership encompassing defense, energy, technology, and multilateral cooperation.

Challenges and Future Prospects

While Modi has successfully maintained and enhanced India's strategic partnership with Russia, there are several challenges:

- **Geopolitical Pressures:** India's growing strategic partnership with the United States and participation in the Quad have introduced tensions in its relationship with Russia. Moscow views India's Indo-Pacific strategy with some suspicion, particularly as Russia strengthens its ties with China (Sengupta, 2022)²⁴.

The global geopolitical landscape has shifted dramatically in recent years, presenting new challenges for India-Russia relations. India's growing partnership with the United States, particularly through platforms like the Quad, and its Indo-Pacific strategy have introduced complexities in managing its relationship with Russia. However, both nations have maintained a pragmatic approach, focusing on areas of mutual interest.

- **The Russia-Ukraine Conflict**

The 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict has further tested the relationship. India has adopted a neutral stance, advocating dialogue and diplomacy while continuing economic engagements with Russia, particularly in the energy sector. This pragmatic approach reflects India's emphasis on strategic autonomy in foreign policy (Kumar, 2023)²⁴.

- **Economic Underperformance:** Despite strong defense and energy ties, trade between India and Russia remains well below potential. There is a need for greater diversification in bilateral trade, particularly in sectors like pharmaceuticals, agriculture, and technology.

However, opportunities for enhancing the relationship remain, particularly in areas such as energy, defense production, and emerging technologies. India and Russia can also explore new avenues of cooperation in the Arctic region and expand their engagement in multilateral forums.

Key Findings of the Study

1. **Historical Continuity:** Despite the dissolution of the Soviet Union, India has maintained a strong relationship with Russia, rooted in defense cooperation and strategic alignment. The 1993 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation reaffirmed the bilateral ties post-Soviet era.
2. **Defense as the Cornerstone:** Russia remains India's largest arms supplier, contributing to major defense deals such as the procurement of the S-400 missile system and the joint development of BrahMos. Over 60% of India's defense imports are from Russia, despite India's efforts to diversify (Joshi, 2013; Ragavan, 2021) [25,26].
3. **Energy and Nuclear Cooperation:** India's energy security has been bolstered by its collaboration with Russia, particularly in nuclear energy (e.g., the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant) and oil imports. Since 2022, India's import of Russian crude oil has increased significantly in response to global disruptions.
4. **Geopolitical Shifts:** India's growing partnership with the United States, especially through the Quad and its Indo-Pacific strategy, has introduced complexities in India-Russia relations. Nevertheless, both countries continue to find common ground in multilateral platforms like BRICS and SCO.
5. **Economic Potential:** Despite strong political and defense ties, economic trade between India and Russia has historically been below its potential. Efforts like the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) aim to address this gap and boost trade.

Discussion and Conclusion

India and Russia's partnership is a product of both historical necessity and contemporary pragmatism. While the Cold War era cemented a strategic and defense-oriented relationship, the post-Soviet era witnessed an evolution of this relationship, accommodating new realities of the global order.

The strategic alignment between India and Russia has been largely driven by defense cooperation, with Russia serving as India's primary supplier of military hardware. Joint projects like the BrahMos missile and deals for

advanced defense systems like the S-400 underscore the significance of this relationship. In terms of energy, Russia remains a crucial partner for India, providing access to oil, natural gas, and nuclear technology. India's growing energy needs and Russia's abundant resources create a natural synergy in this area.

However, the changing geopolitical landscape, particularly India's growing ties with the United States and other Western nations, presents new challenges. India has walked a tightrope by maintaining strong ties with Russia while engaging with the West, especially in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Despite these challenges, India and Russia have displayed remarkable resilience in their bilateral relationship. Both countries continue to prioritize their partnership, focusing on areas of mutual benefit, such as defense, energy, and multilateral diplomacy.

Conclusion

India-Russia relations have been shaped by a shared history of strategic cooperation, particularly during the Cold War and post-Soviet eras. Despite significant geopolitical shifts, their partnership remains strong, particularly in defense, energy, and global diplomacy. As India seeks to balance its growing relationships with Western powers and its historical ties with Russia, the future of this partnership will likely be shaped by pragmatic cooperation in areas of mutual interest, even as new challenges emerge. Modi's diplomacy with Russia has been characterized by continuity, pragmatism, and strategic balancing. Despite the complexities of a changing global order and India's evolving relationships with other major powers, Modi has ensured that India's partnership with Russia remains strong, particularly in defense and energy. Moving forward, India and Russia will need to navigate the challenges of a multipolar world, leveraging their historical ties to build a future-oriented partnership. Despite global geopolitical shifts, both India and Russia have maintained strong ties based on mutual interests and shared concerns about security and economic stability. The relationship continues to evolve in response to changing global dynamics, with both countries committed to deepening their multifaceted partnership in the years to come.

Recommendations

1. **Strengthening Economic Ties:** While defense and energy cooperation remain strong, India and Russia must focus on improving their economic relationship. Efforts like the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) should be expanded to reduce logistical costs and enhance trade.
2. **Exploring New Areas of Cooperation:** Both countries should explore cooperation in emerging sectors such as artificial intelligence (AI), cybersecurity, and space technology. Collaborative ventures in technology and innovation can offer mutual benefits and reduce over-reliance on defense.

3. **Diversifying Trade Partnerships:** To enhance economic ties, India and Russia should focus on diversifying their trade portfolios. Greater emphasis on sectors like pharmaceuticals, agriculture, and technology can help strengthen bilateral trade beyond the traditional sectors of defense and energy.
4. **Balancing Global Alliances:** India should continue its policy of strategic autonomy, balancing its relationship with both Russia and the West. Diplomatic efforts must focus on ensuring that its partnerships with countries like the U.S. do not undermine its long-standing relationship with Russia.
5. **Focus on Multilateral Platforms:** India and Russia should continue to work closely in multilateral platforms such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to address global challenges and uphold a multipolar world order.

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