

RUSSIA'S PIVOT TO THE EAST

IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA



RAJORSHI ROY

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RAJORSHI ROY



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR
DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES

मनोहर पर्रिकर रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

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INTRODUCTION

Russia is at war. The Kremlin's "special military operation" (SMO) against Ukraine launched on 24 February 2022 is an epochal moment in Russian history. It marks Moscow's first major conflict since its independence. Crucially, the war has upended Russia's geostrategic and geoeconomic environment. A full-blown confrontation with the West is the new reality. It marks Russia truly breaking away from its historical quest of integrating with the West.¹

This has, inevitably, led to new calibrations and new alignments in the Kremlin's foreign policy. One of the key vectors is strengthening engagements with the "world majority"² – a euphemism for the non-Western world states which have not sided with the West in isolating Russia. In this, amidst an ongoing shift in global centres of economic growth to Asia, Russia's 'Pivot to Asia' – '*povrot na vostok*', in the works since first proposed by former Prime Minister Yeygeny Primakov in the late 1990s³, has acquired a renewed momentum.⁴

¹ D. Trenin, "The War and the World: How the Ukraine War Has Changed the World and Keeps Changing It", *Russian International Affairs Council*, 3 May, 2024 at <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/comments/the-war-and-the-world-how-the-ukraine-war-has-changed-the-world-and-keeps-changing-it/>.

² S. Karaganov, "From the Non-West to the World Majority", *Sergei Karaganov*, 1 September, 2022 at <https://karaganov.ru/en/from-the-non-west-to-the-world-majority/> & I. Timofeev, "Russia's Path to the 'World Majority'", *Valdai Discussion Club*, 5 April, 2023 at <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/russia-s-path-to-the-world-majority/>.

³ A. Torkunov, "Russia's Pivot to The East: Achievements, Problems, and Prospects", *Social Sciences*, 52 (2), June 30, 2021, pp: 4-16.

⁴ "The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation", *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, 31 March, 2023 at https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/ (Accessed on January 15, 2026).

At stake is Russia's position and place on the world stage amidst a complex external environment. The West has sought to isolate the Kremlin globally. The Western toolkit, anchored to "weaponising interdependence" in a globalised world⁵, is spread across multiple fronts – military, diplomatic, economic, technological, information and ideological. The scale of overcoming the Western pressure is reflected in the asymmetry in Russia's comprehensive national power in comparison to the West. The Russian economy is dwarfed by the West. Arguably, Russia appears to have been "outgunned, outmanned and outspent" by the West.⁶ And Moscow's Achilles' heel continues to be its weaker technology base.⁷ These trends pose a key challenge to Russia's aspiration of restoring its great power status. As such, it would appear that Russia today is at a crossroads similar to what it found itself at during Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. Notably, as the conflict continues into 2026, Russia has been engaged in this confrontation far longer than it has ever been— even during the Second World War.

The battle in Ukraine, meanwhile, continues to unravel. Speculation of Moscow lowering its nuclear threshold⁸ to deter its adversary reflects the inherent dangers of climbing up the escalation ladder. This is despite the fact that none of the parties to the conflict appear better off today than what they were at its beginning. The differences between the stakeholders run deep, anchored to mutual insecurity and trust deficit.⁹

⁵ Henry Farrell, Abraham L. Newman, "Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion", *International Security*, 44 (1), pp: 42–79.

⁶ D. Trenin, "Two Worlds of Russia's Foreign Policy", *CIRSD*, 1 June, 2023 at <https://www.cirsd.org/en/horizons/horizons-spring-2023—issue-no23/two-worlds-of-russias—foreign-policy> (Accessed on January 10 2026).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ "Russia's nuclear doctrine is now being specified — Lavrov", *TASS*, 27 August, 2024 at <https://tass.com/politics/1834619> (Accessed on September 1, 2025).

⁹ F. Lukyanov, "Legitimacy in the Era of Uncertainty", *Russia in Global Affairs*, 22 (1), 2024, pp: 5-6.

The ongoing battle is not just over territory. Moreover, it is no longer just a conflict between Russia and Ukraine but has instead evolved into a proxy war between Russia and the West.

Notably, even the Trump 2.0 Presidency has found it a Herculean task to bridge the decades-old mutual insecurity and trust deficit. This is notwithstanding Trump's attempts at resetting ties with Russia. It includes hosting a summit with his Russian counterpart Putin in Alaska, apart from offering unprecedented concessions on Russia's perceived red lines – Ukraine's neutrality, security guarantees and territories occupied by the Kremlin. Trump has even accused the Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy of sabotaging peace initiatives. These concessions seemingly stem from Trump's belief that a new *modus vivendi* must be formed with Russia starting with ending the war in Ukraine. However, failure to find common ground with Moscow even after a year of sustained negotiations, has seen an increasingly frustrated Trump revert to imposing new sanctions on not just the biggest Russian energy producers but also inflicting punitive tariffs on countries importing Russian hydrocarbon. This includes India which has been slapped with 25 per cent additional tariff for purchasing oil from Moscow.

Impact of the War

The importance of Ukraine for Russia stems from not just its geostrategic location as a security buffer but is also due to its civilisational, economic and military linkages with Moscow. Kiev's growing embrace of the West, including Russia's *bête noire* in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), was seemingly the straw which broke the camel's back.¹⁰ The SMO had sought to arrest the slide. However, four years later, the conflict continues unabated. A battle of attrition seems on the cards.

Notably, it appears that the war has heightened Russia's insecurity rather than alleviate it. It has also highlighted the Kremlin's weaknesses. This is

¹⁰ "Address by the President of the Russian Federation" *President of Russia*, 24 February 2022 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

notwithstanding the apparent miscalculation in achieving its objectives while perhaps underestimating Ukraine's ability to fight back. At the end of the day, Ukrainians are fighting for their motherland. They also have the home advantage. More importantly, Russians and the Ukrainians are from the same stalk of ethnic Slavs – the *Kievan Rus*.¹¹ The famed resilience in Russia's DNA would appear to run in Ukraine's as well.

Meanwhile, the war is likely to make Russia a visceral enemy of the Ukrainian citizens who are bearing the brunt of loss of lives, property and livelihood. Unsurprisingly, President Zelenskyy has managed to turn the tide of a dip in his pre-war popularity to rally Ukrainian citizens around the flag. The conflict also seems to have strengthened Ukraine's resolve to join NATO. This is evident in its attempts to fast-track the domestic governance reforms expected of a NATO aspirant.¹²

Crucially, Russia's actions have led to an expansion of NATO.¹³ The traditionally neutral states on Russia's periphery viz. Sweden and Finland have joined the alliance. This has led to the doubling of NATO's boundary with Moscow. Several NATO countries today are closer to St. Petersburg than how far St. Petersburg is, from Russia's seat of power in Moscow.

The West has imposed sweeping sanctions against Moscow. This has led to Russia being the world's most sanctioned country amidst its economic blockade.¹⁴ Sanctions hang like the proverbial Sword of

¹¹ Article by Vladimir Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", *President of Russia*, 12 July, 2021, at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

¹² "Washington Summit Declaration", *NATO*, 19 July, 2024 at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_227678.htm (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ "Russia Is Now the World's Most-Sanctioned Nation", *Bloomberg*, 8 March, 2022 at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-07/russia-surges-past-iran-to-become-world-s-most-sanctioned-nation> & "Ukraine and Russia Sanctions", *U.S. Department of State* at <https://www.state.gov/ukraine-and-russia-sanctions/> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

Damocles on countries seeking to do any business with Russia. The Kremlin's international assets remain frozen.¹⁵ Russia has been expelled from SWIFT.¹⁶ It has lost its energy leverage with Europe amidst the Western boycott of Russian hydrocarbons. Western allies in Asia, who have traditionally sought a rapprochement with Russia, have joined the bandwagon in isolating Moscow. This has seen Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, New Zealand and Australia impose identical sanctions on the Kremlin.¹⁷ It, therefore appears that an iron curtain is once again dividing Europe with Russia seen as the outlier.¹⁸ The successes which Russia had achieved in integrating its economy with the West since its independence now appears to have been erased.

The ongoing confrontation also appears to have damaged Russia's reputation in some non-Western quarters. This stems from a P5 member initiating a military conflict. Similarly, questions have been raised on the efficacy of Russian weapons.¹⁹ For a country which has traditionally prided itself as an eminent military power catering to the defence requirements of others, it faces the prospect of not only missing its clients' delivery timelines but also of them diversifying their arms imports.

¹⁵ "Attempts by West to seize Russian assets considered theft, will not go unanswered — Putin", *TASS*, 14 June, 2024 at <https://tass.com/politics/1803539> & "How G7 and EU plan to use Russia's frozen assets to help Ukraine", *Reuters*, 7 June, 2024 at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/how-g7-eu-plan-leverage-frozen-russian-assets-ukraine-2024-06-06/> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

¹⁶ "Russian banks banned from using SWIFT for transfers within Russia as of October 1", *Interfax*, 2 October, 2023 at <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/95043/> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

¹⁷ "Russia Sanctions Database", *Atlantic Council* at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/econographics/russia-sanctions-database/> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

¹⁸ R. Sakwa, "Crisis of the International System and International Politics", *Russia in Global Affairs*, 21 (1), 2023, pp: 70-91.

¹⁹ R. Pukhov, "From "Special" to "Military": Lessons from Two Years of the Operation in Ukraine", *Russia in Global Affairs*, 22 (2), 2024, pp: 112-126.

Meanwhile, the war has strengthened the insecurity of Russia's Central Asian neighbours – a region which it considers as its sphere of influence or “near abroad”. These states remain apprehensive of Moscow replicating its Ukrainian playbook. This is particularly relevant at a time when the Central Asian Republics (CARs) have expanded their engagement with the West as part of their multi-vectored foreign policies.²⁰ Both the US and the EU hosted C5+1 summits with their Central Asian counterparts in 2025. The key themes of discussion revolved around strengthening economic, energy, connectivity and security collaboration.

Similarly, the conflict has forced Russia to seek a closer embrace of China to overcome the Western pressure. This has led to fears in Moscow of a geostrategic and geoeconomic squeeze by Beijing especially in Russia's core strategic areas.

Meanwhile, questions have been raised about the efficacy of Russia being a reliable global partner amidst its preoccupation with the war in Ukraine. This comes amidst Moscow's seeming inability to come to the aid of its allies in Venezuela, Syria and Iran during their times of crises. Even Armenia – a CSTO ally – has questioned the relevance of its membership when this Russia-driven military organisation did not come to Yerevan's aid during Baku's attacks on its territorial integrity and sovereignty. Armenia eventually turned to President Trump to forge a ceasefire with Azerbaijan.

²⁰ “C5+1 Leaders' Joint Statement”, *The White House*, 21 September, 2023 at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/21/c51-leaders-joint-statement/> & “Joint Declaration by Heads of State of Central Asia and the Federal Chancellor of Germany”, *Bundesregierung*, 29 September, 2023 at <https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/998352/2226656/45f64011ff425e6db0dab0c60ff50310/2023-09-29-z5-erklaerung-en-data.pdf?download=1> & F. Tolipov, “The “C5+1” on the Central Asian Geopolitical Chessboard”, *CIRSD*, 2024, at <https://www.cirsd.org/en/horizons/horizons-summer-2024—issue-no-27/the-%E2%80%9Cc51%E2%80%9D-on-the-central-asian-geopolitical-chessboard> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

The Ukraine war also runs the risk of usurping the domestic social contract between the Russian state and its citizens. The economic disruption coupled with the loss of lives could undermine social cohesion leading to instability of the regime.

Nevertheless, it would appear that it is too early to write off Russia. Resilience remains a part of the Russian DNA. The Russian leadership also retains the ability to pull the proverbial rabbit out of the hat. This is evident in the economy weathering the storm. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) revised its growth projections three times since the end of 2023. At an estimated 3.2 per cent growth, Russian economy was among the best-performing Western economies in 2024.²¹ In July of the same year, the World Bank also reclassified Russian economy as higher income from upper middle income category.²² Other parameters like inflation and unemployment continue to be within the historic comfort levels of the Central Bank of Russia.²³ Critics, on the other hand, have argued that this data needs to be taken with a pinch of salt. This is largely on account of the state stimulus in propping up a war economy. The risk of the overheating of an economy runs high, including a spike in inflation and unemployment. This perhaps explains the Central Bank of Russia keeping interest rates at a historic high of 16 per cent in 2024.²⁴ These fears were borne out when the Russian

²¹ “Russian Federation”, *IMF* at <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/profile/RUS> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

²² “Russia was classified as a high-income country”, *World Bank Group*, 2 July, 2024 at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/about/leadership/directors/eds23/brief/russia-was-classified-as-high-income-country> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

²³ “Cash currency market remains stable in August despite ruble depreciation”, *Bank of Russia*, 6 September, 2024 at <https://www.cbr.ru/eng/press/event/?id=20982> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

²⁴ “Talking Trends: signs of slower economic activity”, *Bank of Russia*, 3 September, 2024 at <https://www.cbr.ru/eng/press/event/?id=20971> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

economy grew by 1 per cent in 2025 – a significant slowdown from the previous two years.²⁵

Crucially, the crippling Western sanctions have neither led to a collapse of the Russian economy nor deterred the Kremlin from seeking to achieve its objectives in Ukraine. The Russian citizens continue to rally around the flag.²⁶ In big cities, the war is barely felt while people go about their daily lives. This sense of normalcy has allowed the state to tackle incipient discontentment. The elites too seem to be supporting the war efforts. This is crucial for regime stability since revolutions in Russia usually happen from the top rather than from the bottom rungs of society.

Meanwhile, the West has been unable to completely isolate Russia on the global stage. A number of non-Western countries of the Global South continue to engage Russia diplomatically, economically and militarily.²⁷ This has enabled the Kremlin to withstand the Western geopolitical pressure. And it is this non-Western constituency which has now become Moscow's principal area of focus.

Interestingly, fortune too seems to be shining on Russia. Increase in gold prices have cushioned the blow of the EU having frozen Russian monetary assets worth more than 200 billion Euros. Russia is one of

²⁵ “Russia’s GDP growth in 2025 slows to 1%, slowdown was ‘man-made’ – Putin”, *Interfax*, 3 February, 2026 at [\(https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/115946/#:~:text=Home%20%3E%20Newsroom%20%3E%20Top%20Stories%20%3E,Bank%20\(0.5%25%2D1.0%25\)\)](https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/115946/#:~:text=Home%20%3E%20Newsroom%20%3E%20Top%20Stories%20%3E,Bank%20(0.5%25%2D1.0%25)) (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

²⁶ “Almost 70% Russians back decision on special military operation in Ukraine — pollster”, *TASS*, 24 February, 2024 at <https://tass.com/society/1751125> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

²⁷ A. Sidorov, “Russia and the West After the SMO: A New Level of Confrontation”, *International Affairs (Moscow)*, 70 (1), 2024, pp: 105-117 & I. Timofeev, E. Arapova, & Y. Nikitina, “The Illusion of “Smart” Sanctions: The Russian Case”, *Russia in Global Affairs*, 22 (2), 2024, pp: 156-178.

the largest producers and holders of the yellow metal. The rise in bullion's valuation has offset the entirety of assets seized by the EU.²⁸

BREAKING AWAY FROM THE WEST

Russia's war in Ukraine seemingly marks the end of Moscow seeking accommodation and integration with Europe.²⁹ Gorbachev's clarion call of a "common European home" juxtaposed with Putin's "Greater Europe" stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok were anchored to create a balance of interests in Europe vis-à-vis a balance of power.³⁰ Russia sought to build not only a *modus vivendi* but also a *modus operandi* with Europe.³¹ This had seen Moscow even explore NATO membership during the first fifteen years of its independence – often viewed as the golden age of Russia-West rapprochement. However, the Kremlin assessed the consistent rejection of its outreach. It included Moscow's grouse that the West refused to acknowledge its interests, particularly its red lines. The wave of NATO expansion eastwards in the post-Soviet space since the late 1990s inevitably strengthened Russia's insecurity.

Today, their differences have further crystallised. Russia perceives the West of continuing its containment strategy of Moscow. The Western toolkit of NATO's expansion eastwards, colour revolutions in post-Soviet space, missile defence in eastern Europe, sanctions against the

²⁸ "Russia Gains \$216 Billion in Gold Rally, Replacing Lost Assets", *Bloomberg*, 20 January, 2026 at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2026-01-20/russia-gains-216-billion-in-gold-rally-replacing-lost-assets> (Accessed on January 30, 2026).

²⁹ A. Dugin, "Illiberalism in International Relations", *International Affairs (Moscow)*, 70 (1), 2024, pp: 13-21 & A. Sidorov, "Russia and the West After the SMO: A New Level of Confrontation", *International Affairs (Moscow)*, 70 (1), 2024, pp: 105-117.

³⁰ R. Sakwa, "Crisis of the International System and International Politics", *Russia in Global Affairs*, 21 (1), 2023, pp: 70-91.

³¹ T. Romanova, "In Different Languages 2.0.: Geopolitics and Sovereignty in the EU and Russia's Discourses", *Russia in Global Affairs*, 22 (1), 2024, pp: 72-92.

most vibrant sections of the Russian economy and now the proxy war in Ukraine; appear to have strengthened the Kremlin's resolve of carving out a new non-European, geopolitical identity for itself.

RUSSIA'S GRAND STRATEGY

The deep-seated fissures with the West appear to have led Russia to conceptualise a new geopolitical vision and identity for itself. In this, the end goal seems to cast Russia as an independent global pole.³² It has seen the Kremlin highlight its distinct Eurasian character anchored to a rediscovery of Russia's Asian heritage. Moscow has sought to project itself as a unique cultural, civilisational and geographical space that straddles the East and the West.³³ This envisioned benign space would facilitate dialogue between warring sides to achieve a peaceful co-existence.

Similarly, Russian officials and scholars seem to be increasingly focussing on building a positive narrative of Russia engaging with Asia. In this, Russia's historical engagement with the East has been emphasised. It includes the role of Siberia as being the resource basket for the Tsarist regime. Natural resources as well as toll collection from caravans passing through Russia's Northern Silk Route enabled Peter the Great to initiate Russia's modernisation in the 18th century.³⁴ Incidentally, the Mongol

³² T. Bordachev, "In Chase of Vanishing Poles: Gaps in Conceptualization of International Politics", *Russia in Global Affairs*, 22 (1), 2024, pp: 58-71 & A. Dugin, "Illiberalism in International Relations", *International Affairs (Moscow)*, 70 (1), 2024, pp: 13-21.

³³ D. Karaganov, A. Kramarenko, & D. Trenin, "Russia's Policy Towards World Majority", *Russia in Global Affairs*, 2023 at chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpgclefindmkaj/https://www.mid.ru/upload/medialibrary/c98/cjmfdf73760bme0y99zql1j51zz1lrvs/Russia%E2%80%99s%20Policy.pdf & L. Slutsky, & E. Khudorenko, "The EAEU amid Global Uncertainty: Integration Dilemma Revisited", *Russia in Global Affairs*, 20 (2), 2022, pp: 130-157.

³⁴ S. Karaganov, "An Age of Wars? Article one", *Russia in Global Affairs*, 1 January, 2024 at <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/an-age-of-wars-article-one/> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

invasion of Tsarist Russia in the 13th century had scarred Moscow's perception of the East.³⁵ The invasion was seen as a trigger for Russia's pivoting to the West.

Presciently, Dostoevsky's prophecy of 1881 appears relevant today:

“Russia is not only in Europe, but also in Asia. The Russian is not only a European, but also an Asiatic. In Asia, perhaps, we have greater expectations than in Europe. In our future destinies, Asia might be our main outlet.”³⁶

Similarly, Russia's focus on Asia has been aptly highlighted by President Putin:

“Russia has always felt itself to be a Eurasian country. We have never forgotten that the main part of the Russian territory is in Asia. Frankly, we have not always made good use of that advantage. I think the time has come for us to move on from words to actions and to build up economic, political and other ties. Russia has not been left out of the processes taking place here. Russia's full participation in the processes of economic interaction in Asia and the Pacific is natural and inevitable”.³⁷

The turn to the East, therefore, has become a rallying cry. Friendly Asian countries are seen as natural partners of Russia. These developments, however, mark a fundamental reorientation of Russia's traditional Europe-centric approach – a path followed since Peter the Great. Notably, the quintessential Russian national emotion has been to associate Russia as a part of Europe.³⁸

³⁵ I. Istomin, “Historical Record and Prospects of Russia's Alliances”, *Russia in Global Affairs*, 22 (1), 2024, pp: 94-109.

³⁶ A. Torkunov, no.3. .

³⁷ “Article by Russian President Vladimir Putin “Russia: New Eastern Perspectives”, *President of Russia*, 9 November, 2000 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21132> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

³⁸ F. Lukyanov, “Not Against, but Beyond the West: Ukraine Crisis Draws a Line under Colonial Times”, *Russia in Global Affairs*, 21 (4), 2024, pp: 5-8.

As such, the ongoing recalibration seeks to tap the independent foreign policies of non-Western countries — a euphemism for those that have not joined the Western bandwagon in isolating Russia — to meet the Kremlin’s investment and technology needs. It includes developing Russia’s Far East and the Arctic regions. Notably, these sparsely populated regions comprising 66 per cent of Russian territory are seen as the next incubator of Russia’s growth. Their huge repository of diverse natural resources remains untapped. Hydrocarbons, precious metals, copper, aluminium, nickel and coal form the bulk of unexploited resources. The importance of the Far East has been frequently highlighted with President Putin recently stating:

“We have designated the development of the Far East as a national priority for the 21st century. The significance and correctness of that decision have been confirmed by life itself, the challenges we have recently encountered and, most importantly, the objective trends that are gaining momentum in the global economy, when the main business ties, trade routes and the overall development are increasingly shifting towards the East and the Global South. Our Far Eastern regions offer direct access to these growing emerging markets, helping us overcome the barriers which some Western elites are trying to create worldwide. The most important thing, as I have already mentioned, is that the Far East is a huge area for implementing business initiatives, launching complex projects and creating whole new industries. In fact, the Far East has become a crucial factor for strengthening Russia’s standing in the world and our flagship in the new global economic reality. The further development of the Far East will largely determine the future of our country as a whole.”³⁹

Meanwhile, Russia has sought to leverage its competitive sectors to build new equations and alignments with the “world majority”. It includes Moscow’s energy and arms expertise as well as credentials as

³⁹ “Plenary session of the 9th Eastern Economic Forum”, *President of Russia*, 5 September, 2024 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/75029> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

a P5 member. Hydrocarbons and weapons also enable Russia to earn valuable hard currency amidst the Western economic boycott.

Crucially, Russia appears to be positioning itself as a hub of like-minded countries to build a new equitable global order from the ground up. Moscow's focus on multilateralism and multipolarity (polycentricism in Russian parlance) aims to dilute perceived US unilateralism and hegemony.⁴⁰ President Putin's recent statement reflected this sentiment:

"It is necessary to strengthen the emerging multipolar world. There is absolutely no doubt that a new world is taking shape before our eyes and becoming multipolar. I believe all the people are aware of this. It is important that those who are trying to maintain their monopoly on making decisions on all issues globally should realise this (I believe that they do realise it perfectly well). Understanding this, they should do everything possible to facilitate this natural process. I repeat, this process should be peaceful and conflict-free, with the opinions of all parties to the international process fully considered. All of us should seek compromises while making the difficult decisions that lie ahead."⁴¹

In this regard, Russia-led, non-Western, multilateral institutions like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and BRICS are crucial to Moscow's game-plan of co-building new models of interaction.⁴² Its broad contours rest on equality, reciprocity, mutual respect, mutual benefit and peaceful co-existence, which eschew coercion and non-

⁴⁰ S. Lavrov, "Genuine Multilateralism and Diplomacy vs the "Rules-Based Order", *Russia in Global Affairs*, 21 (3), 2023, pp: 104-113.

⁴¹ "Answers to media questions following the visit to China", *President of Russia*, 17 May, 2024 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74065> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

⁴² V. Gulyants, "Synergy Between the SCO and BRICS: Consolidating the Non-Western World", *International Affairs (Moscow)*, 70 (3), 2024, pp: 241-247 & N. Stepanov, "The Expediency of Creating a Supranational Currency Within the SCO and BRICS Under the Impact of Trade and Sanctions Restrictions", *Far Eastern Affairs*, No 2, 2023, pp: 59-72.

interference.⁴³ Providing viable regional public goods also appears as a vital part of the agenda.

Incidentally, Russia's projection of it being a strong and independent global pole is anchored to Moscow overcoming the chinks in its comprehensive national power. This has seen the coinage of "Fortress Russia" gain traction in policy discussions.⁴⁴ Prioritising import substitution while simultaneously establishing new payments mechanisms, unfettered trade and transit corridors and reliable supply chains can be viewed as attempts at overcoming the Western blockade. Similarly, reindustrialisation based on military industrial complex's modernisation (MIC) appears to be a part of the strategy to address Russia's Achilles' heel – its weaker technology base. In the same vein, the State, in conjunction with the Orthodox Church, has sought to generate patriotic fervour among the people⁴⁵. The clarion call for preserving Russia's unique identity threatened by the West, while also restoring Russia's rightful place in the world, appears to be a tactic in the toolkit to make people rally round the flag. Crucially, foreign policy remains a vital source of domestic legitimacy.

Arguably, the Kremlin today is in uncharted waters amidst a radical shift in its geopolitical axis. In this, the stakes for Russia appear to be high and the challenges enormous. For states inclined to do business with Moscow, Western sanctions appear to be like the proverbial Hobson's choice. In the same vein, achieving economic autarky seems like a Herculean task especially in a globalised world. China's support may have helped Russia withstand the Western pressure. Yet, it also runs the risk of Beijing squeezing Moscow in the latter's core strategic

⁴³ S. Lavrov, "BRICS: Towards a Just World Order", *Russian International Affairs Council*, 21 August, 2023 at <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/comments/brics-towards-a-just-world-order/> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

⁴⁴ A. Tsygankov, "Irreplaceable Russia: Fortresses and Bridges of the "Russian Idea", *Russia in Global Affairs*, 21 (4), 2023, pp: 66-76.

⁴⁵ A. Grininsky, "On "Conservative Balance" and "Traditional Values", *Russia in Global Affairs*, 21 (3), 2023, pp: 25-37.

space. The Kremlin's accommodation of China can even facilitate Beijing's rise as a continental Eurasian power, thereby altering the regional geopolitical balance.

Meanwhile, only a fraction of states friendly to Russia would perhaps side with the Kremlin in radically upending the global order. Several countries, including India, ascribe to a more nuanced version of multipolarity and multilateralism. These nations have merely sought to reform existing multilateral institutions and structures instead of fundamentally dismantling them for building a new order as envisioned in Moscow.

This evolving geopolitical environment can have an impact on the India-Russia 'special and privileged' strategic partnership. The war has inevitably complicated India's geostrategic calculus amidst the pulls and pressures of the Russia-West confrontation with India expected to choose sides. Notably, in the last few years, India has explored strategic congruence with the West while Russia has qualitatively improved ties with China while it also sought to build new equations with Pakistan. As such, India and Russia would need to deftly navigate the complications arising from their independent engagements with other nations with whom they share adversarial relations.

These developments have necessitated a new vision for the India-Russia relationship in order to stay relevant in their foreign policy priorities. As Russia focuses on the East, it retains several key leverages on the global and regional stage. They also have shared concerns about geopolitical developments in their neighbourhood, including the rise of China. However, the expectations, perhaps, need to be lowered and deliverables made more realistic. The prevailing trends, therefore, present challenges as well as opportunities to find common synergies between a new India and a new Russia.

Conceptual Framework

This study is framed under the conceptual framework of 'balance of power'. Given the asymmetrical nature of Russia's confrontation with the West, Moscow has sought to balance it by stepping up its engagement with non-Western countries. Its pivot towards Asia is a key part of this strategy. While China forms an important pillar of this Asian vector

yet, Russia also appears to be aware of the risks of imbalance in their bilateral ties. Therefore, it is in Russia's interests to subtly balance Beijing in Asia. In the same vein, India remains a key pillar of Russia's Asian strategy. However, amidst India's stepping up its engagements with the US and Europe, and Russia seeking an entente with China, the pulls and pressures of the Russia-West confrontation can complicate India's foreign policy options, with New Delhi expected to choose sides. This entails deft balancing on the part of India in the evolving geo-political landscape.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the drivers, challenges and opportunities of Russia's pivot to Asia?
2. Could there be a fundamental reset between Russia and the West? What could be the potential implications of such a reset? Will Russia's attention on Asia, in the advent of this reset, remain the same?
3. Is the pivot a long term strategy or determinant to the ebb and flow of Russia's ties with the West?
4. What is the nature, scope and importance of Russia's attempts to create a 'neo-Eurasian' identity?
5. What is the scope of the Russia-China entente?
6. Where does India fit into Russia's Asian strategy?
7. What are the opportunities and challenges for the India-Russia strategic partnership in the evolving geopolitical context?
8. Does India's and Russia's multi-alignment dilute the strength of their bilateral partnership?
9. How will the dynamics of the Russia-China-US triangle affect the Indo-Russian relationship?
10. Has the traditionally strong Indo-Russian defence partnership run its course?

11. What are the strategic initiatives required to increase the relevance of an India-Russia partnership?

HYPOTHESIS

The main hypothesis of this study is that Russia has adopted a long-term Asian strategy. Given the trends that are unfolding, the regional geopolitical alignments will have an impact on the India-Russia partnership.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Both primary and secondary sources have been used. Official documents and statistical figures have been reviewed. The methodology adopted is historical and empirical.

RUSSIA-CHINA TIES: DEEPENING OF PARTNERSHIP

“Friendship between the two States has no limits, there are no forbidden areas of cooperation” – Joint statement issued by Russia and China during President Putin’s visit to Beijing in February 2022.⁴⁶

The above statement aptly sums up the robust strategic partnership between Russia and China. Amidst the observance of the 75th anniversary of their diplomatic ties⁴⁷, the qualitative depth in this relationship is reflected in their partnership extending to virtually every conceivable area of cooperation. These include domains such as political, trade, investment, energy production, high-technology, space research, cultural, educational, sports and people-to-people exchanges. Incidentally, the partnership also extends to areas which Russia has traditionally tried to shield from external influence. Today, the “no limits” friendship has seen Beijing make inroads into the Arctic, Far East and Central Asia. Moreover, as a sign of Russia truly setting aside its suspicion of China reverse engineering Russian defence technology, weapons exports are back on the agenda.

Crucially, a Russia-China tandem on the world stage also appears to be the new normal. Anchored to mutual solidarity and support to each other’s core concerns, Moscow and Beijing appear largely aligned in re-shaping the global order. This involves promoting multilateralism

⁴⁶ “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development”, *President of Russia*, 4 February, 2022 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

⁴⁷ “Meeting with Vice President of the People’s Republic of China Han Zheng”, *President of Russia*, 4 September, 2024 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/75020> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

and multipolarity — a euphemism for diluting what they perceive to be American hegemony. Weaning the Global South away from the West to reconfigure international governance appears to be a key part of their blueprint. A vital tool of this strategy seems linked to Russia and China promoting non-Western multilateral institutions.⁴⁸

Arguably, the Kremlin's ongoing proxy war with the US in Ukraine appears to have strengthened Russia and China's shared outlook towards the West. Both view the US as aiming to contain their rise. This has seen Beijing emerge as Moscow's key pillar of support in tackling the Western pressure. This is notwithstanding China's attempts at projecting itself as a neutral actor in the conflict to safeguard its own robust economic linkages with the West.⁴⁹

Today, the addition of new pillars of cooperation is inevitably deepening bilateral ties. President Xi Jinping and his counterpart Vladimir Putin making Moscow and Beijing their first port of call at the start of their new terms in 2023 and 2024 respectively⁵⁰, aptly highlight the symbolism and signalling of this entente. Both sides have even sought to project their relationship as a partnership between civilisations.⁵¹

⁴⁸ “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on Deepening Comprehensive Partnership and Strategic Interaction Relations Entering a New Era, in the Context of the 75th Anniversary of the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between the Two Countries”, *President of Russia*, 16 May, 2024 at <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/6132> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

⁴⁹ “Wang Yi on the Ukraine Crisis: The Earlier the Talks Start, the Sooner Peace Will Arrive”, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The People's Republic of China*, 7 March, 2024 at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202405/t20240530_11332819.html (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

⁵⁰ “Media statement following Russia-China talks”, *President of Russia*, 16 May, 2024 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74049> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

⁵¹ “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on Deepening Comprehensive Partnership and Strategic Interaction Relations Entering a New Era, in the Context of the 75th Anniversary of the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between the Two Countries”, *President of Russia*, 16 May, 2024 at <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/6132> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

Unsurprisingly, the sobriquet of ties being at a “historic high” and “golden age” have been frequently used to describe their relationship.⁵² This sentiment is echoed in President Putin’s statement:

“Over the past seven and a half decades, Russia-China relations have developed dynamically and reached an unprecedentedly high level. They are based on a solid foundation of neighbourliness, equality, mutual respect and support. This strategic approach serves the fundamental interests of the Russian and Chinese nations”.⁵³

The pertinent questions, therefore, are –

What are the key drivers and the salience of the Russia-China entente?

Is their military alliance in the offing? and,

What are the implications of this embrace for India?

I) DRIVERS AND SALIENCE OF BILATERAL TIES

The qualitative depth in the Russia-China partnership has been three-and-a-half decades in the making. This embrace, nevertheless, is a remarkable feat given their chequered bilateral history. Ties have oscillated radically in the last 75 years. The 1950 Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance formalised their alliance.⁵⁴ However, this was soon followed by a period of acute hostility marked by the

⁵² “China-Russia relations embrace golden era”, *People’s Daily China*, 4 June, 2019 at <http://en.people.cn/n3/2019/0604/c90000-9584328.html> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

⁵³ “Media statement following Russia-China talks”, *President of Russia*, 16 May, 2024 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74049> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

⁵⁴ Conclusion of the “Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance”, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The People’s Republic of China* at https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/wjls/3604_665547/202405/t20240531_11367548.html (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

border clashes of 1969.⁵⁵ It even led to a fundamental reconfiguration in power dynamics with China siding with the US to box in the Soviet Union. Gorbachev's "new thinking"⁵⁶ along with Primakov's⁵⁷ clarion call for 'pivot to the East' helped normalise ties. The 2001 Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation⁵⁸ alleviated several bilateral friction points including the vexed boundary issue. Setting up of the BRICS and the SCO, anchored to their shared convergence on promoting non-Western multilateralism, further concretised their bilateral equations.

However, the real boost in ties date to Ukraine 1.0 in 2014. Western geopolitical and geoeconomic pressure made it a strategic necessity for Moscow to increasingly lean on Beijing to tide over the crisis. This made China an indispensable strategic partner for Russia. Similarly, mutual economic complementarities as well as shared outlook on the US-led global order, grounded to the West bracketing Russia and China as revisionist actors⁵⁹, made China reconfigure its equations with Russia.

Notably, in the decade since Ukraine 1.0, the binding glue of the Russia-China entente continues to be their mutual convergence on the US. The National Security Strategies (NSS) of both the Trump⁶⁰ as well as

⁵⁵ Y. Kuisong, "The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969: From Zhenbao Island to Sino-American Rapprochement", *Cold War History*, 1 (1), 2000, pp: 21-52.

⁵⁶ M. Gorbachev, "Perestroika and New Thinking: A Retrospective", *Russia in Global Affairs*, 9 August, 2021 at <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/perestroika-and-new-thinking/> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

⁵⁷ A. Torkunov, no. 3.

⁵⁸ "Joint Statement Signed by the Chinese and Russian Heads of States", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The People's Republic of China*, 16 July, 2001 at http://pg.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/xwdt/200107/t20010716_886963.htm (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

⁵⁹ "Biden's National Security Strategy Focuses on China, Russia and Democracy at Home", *The New York Times*, 12 October, 2022 at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/12/us/politics/biden-china-russia-national-security.html> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

⁶⁰ "A New National Security Strategy for a New Era", *Trump White House*, 18 December, 2017 at <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/articles/new-national-security-strategy-new-era/> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

the Biden⁶¹ administrations appear to have strengthened Moscow and Beijing's shared apprehensions of more of continuity rather than change – of the US seeking to retain its dominance by undermining Russian and Chinese interests. The 2022 NSS states:

“The People’s Republic of China harbours the intention and, increasingly, the capacity to reshape the international order in favour of one that tilts the global playing field to its benefit, even as the United States remains committed to managing the competition between our countries responsibly. Russia’s brutal and unprovoked war on its neighbor Ukraine has shattered peace in Europe and impacted stability everywhere, and its reckless nuclear threats endanger the global non-proliferation regime. Autocrats are working overtime to undermine democracy and export a model of governance marked by repression at home and coercion abroad.”⁶²

Today, Russia and China appear to have set out on implementing their shared priority of recasting the global order. In this, their historical grouse against the US remains extensive. It covers proselytisation on democracy and human rights and includes what they perceive to be American attempts at diluting their influence in their neighbourhoods through colour revolutions and formation of military blocs. Similarly, Moscow and Beijing view American insistence on following the “rules of the road” as American proxy for maintaining its global dominance.

Russia and China’s joint statement of 2024 aptly reflects their grouse against the US:

“States accustomed to thinking according to the logic of hegemonism and power politics are seeking to undermine the generally recognised world order based on international law and

⁶¹ “Fact Sheet: The Biden- Harris Administration’s National Security Strategy”, *The White House*, 12 October, 2022 at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/10/12/fact-sheet-the-biden-harris-administrations-national-security-strategy/> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

⁶² Ibid.

replace it with a rules-based order....As independent centers of the emerging multipolar world, Russia and China will fully utilise the potential of bilateral relations for the purpose of equal and orderly advancement of this process and democratisation of international relations, and consolidate efforts to build a fair and rational multipolar world order...The parties believe that all states have the right in accordance with national conditions and based on the will of the people, to choose their own development model, political, economic and social system. The Parties oppose interference in the internal affairs of sovereign countries, the introduction of unilateral sanctions that have no international legal basis and are not approved by the UN Security Council, as well as the extraterritorial application of national law and the drawing of ideological dividing lines....The parties call on the relevant countries and organisations to stop pursuing confrontational policies and interfering in the internal affairs of other states, undermining the existing security architecture, creating new dividing lines between countries, provoking regional tensions and fomenting bloc confrontation.”⁶³

Incidentally, it would appear that the Russia-China embrace has today passed the stress test of Moscow’s war against Ukraine. Amidst initial reports of China disapproving the Kremlin’s actions, Beijing has emerged as an economic lifeline for Moscow. In this, China may have adopted a neutral position on the conflict yet a deep dive indicates a “pro-Russia neutrality”.⁶⁴ This has seen China abstain⁶⁵ on UN resolutions

⁶³ “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on Deepening Comprehensive Partnership and Strategic Interaction Relations Entering a New Era, in the Context of the 75th Anniversary of the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between the Two Countries”, *President of Russia*, 16 May, 2024 at <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/6132> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

⁶⁴ A. Stent, Y. Sun, & A. Pita, “The dynamics of the Russia-China partnership”, *Brookings*, 22 May, 2024 at <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-dynamics-of-the-russia-china-partnership/> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

⁶⁵ “China abstains from UNGA vote on Ukrainian nuclear facilities”, *CGTN*, 12 July, 2024 at <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2024-07-12/China-abstains-from-UNGA-vote-on-Ukrainian-nuclear-facilities-1vaHLeRWIyk/p.html> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

criticising Russia's war while expressing an understanding of Russia's position at the same time. China has also refrained from exporting its weapons to Russia.⁶⁶ Beijing's deft balancing act is evident from President Xi Jinping's statement during Putin's visit to Beijing in May 2024:

“China and Russia believe that the Ukraine crisis must be resolved by political means. China has been consistent and clear on this matter by advocating for compliance with the norms and principles set forth in the UN Charter, respecting state sovereignty and territorial integrity for all countries, while taking into consideration their reasonable security concerns. This approach aims to shape a new balanced, effective and sustainable security architecture.”⁶⁷

This sentiment is also echoed in the 2024 Russia-China joint statement:

“The parties proceed from the fact that in order to achieve a sustainable settlement of the Ukrainian crisis, it is necessary to eliminate its root causes and adhere to the principle of the indivisibility of security, taking into account the legitimate interests and concerns of all countries in the area of security.”⁶⁸

However, China's neutrality is being increasingly questioned by the West. It stems from China's exports of dual-use products which Russia has apparently put to use in its weapons system. This has brought forth a sharp rebuke from the West, evident in NATO's 2024 Washington Summit's Joint Declaration which stated:

“The PRC has become a decisive enabler of Russia's war against Ukraine through its so-called “no limits” partnership and its large-

⁶⁶ “US intelligence finding shows China surging equipment sales to Russia to help war effort in Ukraine”, *AP*, 19 April, 2024 at <https://apnews.com/article/united-states-china-russia-ukraine-war-265df843be030b7183c95b6f3afca8ec> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

⁶⁷ “Media statement following Russia-China talks”, *President of Russia*, 16 May, 2024 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74049> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

⁶⁸ Ibid (3).

scale support for Russia's defence industrial base. This increases the threat Russia poses to its neighbours and to Euro-Atlantic security. We call on the PRC, as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council with a particular responsibility to uphold the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, to cease all material and political support to Russia's war effort. This includes the transfer of dual-use materials, such as weapons components, equipment, and raw materials that serve as inputs for Russia's defence sector. The PRC cannot enable the largest war in Europe in recent history without this negatively impacting its interests and reputation."⁶⁹

The same NATO declaration also highlights Western apprehensions of China's perceived insidious actions:

"The People's Republic of China's (PRC) stated ambitions and coercive policies continue to challenge our interests, security and values... The PRC continues to pose systemic challenges to Euro-Atlantic security. We have seen sustained malicious cyber and hybrid activities, including disinformation, stemming from the PRC. We call on the PRC to uphold its commitment to act responsibly in cyberspace. We are concerned by developments in the PRC's space capabilities and activities... we are boosting our shared awareness, enhancing our resilience and preparedness, and protecting against the PRC's coercive tactics and efforts to divide the Alliance."⁷⁰

Incidentally, Western criticism of the Russia-China tandem appears to have further strengthened their partnership. And for China, engaging with Russia seems worth the price of being in the crosshairs of a barrage of Western criticism over aiding Moscow's war. This is notwithstanding China's far more lucrative trade with the West than

⁶⁹ "Washington Summit Declaration", *NATO*, 10 July, 2024 at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_227678.htm (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

⁷⁰ *Ibid* (24).

Russia.⁷¹ In fact, the acrimony between China and the West has only increased in the recent past. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi hit out at “groundless accusations” made against China at the NATO Washington summit.⁷² He had also warned the West against “inciting confrontation” and that “NATO should stay within its bounds, and refrain from interfering in Asia-Pacific affairs or China’s internal affairs, and from challenging China’s legitimate rights and interests”.⁷³

Unsurprisingly, Russia and China remain a pillar of support for each other on their core concerns. This includes de-dollarisation, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Xinjiang, origins of the Covid-19 pandemic, Syria and Ukraine. The 2024 Joint Statement aptly reflects this mutual support:

“The Russian Side reaffirms its commitment to the “one China” principle, recognises that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China, opposes Taiwan’s independence in any form, firmly supports the actions of the Chinese Side to protect its own sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as to unify the country. The Chinese Side supports the efforts of the Russian Side to ensure security and stability, national development and prosperity, sovereignty and territorial integrity, and opposes outside interference in Russia’s internal affairs... the Parties note the negative impact on regional peace and stability of the “Indo-Pacific” strategy of the United States, synchronised with the destructive line of NATO in the Asia-Pacific region. The Parties express serious concern about the consequences for strategic stability in the Asia-Pacific region of the implementation of the AUKUS.”⁷⁴

⁷¹ “EU trade relations with China”, *European Commission* at https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/china_en#:~:text=China%20is%20the%20EU's%20second,and%20the%20biggest%20for%20imports. (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

⁷² “China lashes out at Nato’s ‘groundless accusations’ over Russia”, *South China Morning Post*, 12 July, 2024 at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3270251/china-lashes-out-natos-groundless-accusations-over-russia> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

⁷³ Ibid (27).

⁷⁴ Ibid (3).

Russia's Drivers

The economic rationale remains a key driver of Russia's embrace of China. A robust economic partnership with Beijing appears to have somewhat cushioned the blow of Western sanctions. The Western boycott of the Russian market had led to a major disruption in Russia's supply chains. This decoupling from the West has seemingly led to a re-orientation of Moscow's economic priorities towards Beijing.⁷⁵ Unsurprisingly, amidst the loss of Russia's most lucrative market in Europe, China has emerged as the Kremlin's biggest trading partner.⁷⁶

It helps that the economic relationship is facilitated by their mutual complementarities. Russia remains a huge repository of natural resources to power China's growth. Beijing, meanwhile, has the capacity to meet Moscow's household consumption and high-technology requirements. Interestingly, President Putin had presciently spoken about "catching the winds of China's sails" in 2012.⁷⁷

As such, China occupies a central position in the Russian economy. Chinese footprints are prevalent in practically every conceivable sector. The exponential growth of Chinese car imports by 594 per cent in 2023 compared to the previous year is emblematic of China's inroads.⁷⁸ Incidentally, Russia has emerged as China's largest external vehicle

⁷⁵ "Kluge, J., "Russia-China Economic Relations", *SWP*, 24 May, 2024 at <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2024RP06/> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

⁷⁶ "Media statement following Russia-China talks", *President of Russia*, 16 May, 2024 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74049> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

⁷⁷ "Vladimir Putin on Foreign Policy: Russia and the Changing World", *Valdai Discussion Club*, 27 February, 2012 at https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/vladimir_putin_on_foreign_policy_russia_and_the_changing_world/ (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

⁷⁸ Exports of vehicles from China to Russia", *The Bell* at https://thebell.io/storage_v2/images/fe6/3c9/fe63c92f-7bb2-435d-af29-2bf1373f4404_1728_0.webp (Accessed on December 10, 2025).

market.⁷⁹ Chinese companies have filled the void left behind by European, Japanese and South Korean companies.

The quantum jump in bilateral economic linkages is also reflected in trade statistics. Both sides traded goods worth US\$ 240 billion in 2023.⁸⁰ In comparison, the figure during the pre-war period in 2021 stood at US\$ 145 billion.⁸¹ The balance of trade remains in Russia's favour. Russian exports to China were valued at US\$ 129 billion while imports from China stood at US\$ 111 billion in 2023.⁸² In this, almost 80 per cent of Russia's exports comprised of raw materials. This included energy, timber, coal, minerals, fisheries and agriculture.⁸³

In the same vein, energy remains a pillar of economic cooperation. Fossil fuels comprised 73 per cent of Russia's exports to China.⁸⁴ Amidst the loss of European markets, Russian companies have shifted their focus towards the world's biggest consumer of energy in China. Today, amidst discounts, Russia has overtaken Saudi Arabia as China's biggest source of oil. In 2023, Russia exported oil worth US\$ 87 billion that is 19 per cent of China's oil requirements.⁸⁵

⁷⁹ "Exclusive: Chinese car sales boom in Russia levels off amid shaky local recovery", *Reuters*, 24 November, 2023 at <https://www.reuters.com/business/autos-transportation/chinese-car-sales-boom-russia-levels-off-amid-shaky-local-recovery-2023-11-24/> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

⁸⁰ Ibid (31).

⁸¹ "No limits? Why Vladimir Putin's latest visit will test China-Russia ties", *South China Morning Post*, 16 May, 2024 at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3262780/no-limits-why-vladimir-putins-latest-visit-will-test-china-russia-ties> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

⁸² A. Gabuev, "Putin and Xi's Unholy Alliance: Why the West Won't Be Able to Drive a Wedge Between Russia and China", *Foreign Affairs*, 9 April, 2024 at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/print/node/1131588> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ "Russia is China's top oil supplier for a 12th month in April", *Reuters*, 20 May, 2024 at <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/russia-is-chinas-top-oil-supplier-12th-month-april-2024-05-20/> & "Russia becomes China's

Russia also remains a key supplier of gas to China. The Power of Siberia-1 pipeline supplied 22.7 billion cubic meters (bcm) in 2023 versus 15.4 bcm in the preceding year. LNG exports too have risen from 6.5 million tonnes in 2022 to 8 million tonnes in 2023. In effect, 20 per cent of Russia's LNG production is exported to China. Incidentally, Chinese companies hold a 30 per cent stake in Russia's Yamal LNG plant.⁸⁶

Beyond fossil fuels, Russia and China are also collaborating in nuclear power generation. Rosatom is setting up nuclear power plants in Tianwan and Xudapu apart from participating in an experimental fast-neutron facility in China. Similarly, China is participating in building the NICA accelerator complex near Moscow. NICA is expected to be the incubator of new innovative scientific projects.⁸⁷

Meanwhile, mutual investments remain robust. 80 projects worth US\$ 800 billion are said to be in the pipeline.⁸⁸ Both sides are also seeking to overcome non-tariff barriers. This includes infrastructure bottlenecks. The priority areas identified involve the Trans-Siberian and Baikal Amur Railways connectivity.⁸⁹

Crucially, the Yuan has today become the currency of exchange between Russia and China. Amidst weaponisation of the US dollar, almost 90

top crude oil supplier, shipping 107 Mt in 2023 (+24%)", *Enerdata*, 23 January, 2024 at <https://www.enerdata.net/publications/daily-energy-news/russia-becomes-chinas-top-crude-oil-supplier-shipping-107-mt-2023-24.html> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

⁸⁶ J. Kluge, "Russia-China Economic Relations", *SWP*, 24 May, 2024 at <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2024RP06/> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

⁸⁷ "Media statement following Russia-China talks", *President of Russia*, 16 May, 2024 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74049> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

per cent of their bilateral trade in 2023 took place in Yuan.⁹⁰ Similarly, the Yuan has replaced the US dollar as the preferred currency for trading at the Moscow Stock Exchange with 42 per cent of the total transactions taking place in Chinese currency. Yuan-denominated loans and savings accounts have also gained traction in Russia.⁹¹ Its attractiveness lies in insulating the depositors' money from the volatility of the Russian rouble. As such, apart from gold, yuan is the de-facto reserve currency of Russia today, even though the Chinese currency is not fully convertible. Interestingly, Bangladesh paid Russia for the construction of Rooppur nuclear power plant in Yuan through China's Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS).⁹² This was done to overcome the difficulties in making direct payment to Russia due to the overhang of Western sanctions. Incidentally, Beijing has promoted CIPS as an alternative to the dollar-dominated SWIFT system.

Meanwhile, defence requirements too have emerged as a motive in driving Russia's outlook towards China. The Kremlin has been increasingly relying on dual-usage products from Beijing. This is evident in the exponential jump in imports. From China meeting 32 per cent of Russia's dual-usage needs in the pre-war period of 2021, the figure in 2023 stood at a whopping 90 per cent, translating to imports worth US\$ 600 million every month in 2023.⁹³ It includes machine tools,

⁹⁰ "Trade with China mainly settled in yuan, rubles: Russian deputy PM", *Global Times*, 28 March, 2024 at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202403/1309666.shtml#:~:text=About%2092%20percent%20of%20trade,in%20South%20China's%20Hainan%20Province>. (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

⁹¹ "China's yuan replaces US dollar, euro as Russia's 'primary' foreign currency for overseas economic activity", *South China Morning Post*, 1 February, 2024 at <https://www.scmp.com/economy/global-economy/article/3250599/chinas-yuan-replaces-us-dollar-euro-russias-primary-foreign-currency-overseas-economic-activity> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

⁹² "Bangladesh to pay Russian nuclear firm in yuan, further sign of de-dollarization", *Global Times*, 18 April, 2023 at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202304/1289372.shtml> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

⁹³ M. Trudolyubov, "China's Balancing Act Between the U.S. and Russia", *Wilson Center*, 24 May, 2024 at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/chinas-balancing-act-between-us-and-russia> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

semiconductors, optical devices and telecommunication equipment. This comes amidst Russia having fallen behind in upgrading its indigenous chip manufacturing ecosystem. The 65-nanometre chips being currently built in Russia are a few generations behind the most advanced ones being built in the West.⁹⁴

Significantly, the West has accused Russia of deploying these dual-usage products in Russian weapons systems. While these may not have the same durability when compared to the requirements of the military yet, they seemingly can still pack a punch. Unsurprisingly, the dual-usage trade has been caught in the crosshairs of Western sanctions. The G7 has earmarked 50 dual-usage products, identified by six-digit Harmonized System (HS) codes, in the Common High Priority List (CHPL). Divided into four tiers, the highly publicised list outlines the products that Russia is likely to divert to meet its war requirements.⁹⁵

Similarly, Russia and China have stepped up their joint military exercises at the three-service level. Apart from the army's land drills on Russian and Chinese territories, their navies and air forces have conducted several joint manoeuvres. It includes the Black and Baltic Seas, Sea of Japan and South and East China Seas. This is seen as a show of support and solidarity in their spheres of influence amidst the ongoing Western pressure. Russia and China have frequently lashed out at the perceived 'bloc' formation by the West in the waters around their peripheries. Military exercises could be seen as a pushback against the Western design.

Incidentally, Russia has restarted high-technology defence exports to China on a big scale. For almost fifteen years in the new millennium, Russia had been hesitant in providing its cutting-edge equipment amidst

⁹⁴ "Russian firms bought spare parts for 25-year-old ASML machines, says newspaper Trouw", *Reuters*, 5 September, 2024 at <https://www.reuters.com/technology/russian-firms-bought-spare-parts-25-year-old-asml-machines-says-newspaper-trouw-2024-09-05/> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

⁹⁵ "Common High Priority List", *Bureau of Industry and Security, U.S. Department of Commerce*, 23 February, 2024 at <https://www.bis.doc.gov/index.php/all-articles/13-policy-guidance/country-guidance/2172-russia-export-controls-list-of-common-high-priority-items> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

fears of China reverse engineering Russian technology. Today, export orders include S-400 air defence systems, SU-35 fighter jets, Mi-171 helicopters and fighter jet engines.⁹⁶ This inevitably helps boost the climate of mutual trust apart from earning vital hard currency. Perhaps, strengthening China could even distract the US from the European theatre to focus more on the Indo-Pacific. A strong China against a common adversary is likely in Russia's interests.

Interestingly, Russia seeking new equations with China is perhaps even driven by its own Cold War experience. The Soviet Union practically fought two Cold Wars from 1971 onwards till its disintegration. The US-China tandem sought to box in the USSR anchored to their shared animosity towards Moscow. In this, the US had exploited the fissures in the Sino-Soviet relationship to open new pathways of cooperation with Beijing.⁹⁷

As such, the lesson from this experience would have been to have stable relations with at least one of the other two major powers in this triangular power dynamic. Incidentally, today, Russia appears to be the weakest of the trio in terms of their Comprehensive National Power (CNP). Therefore, securing one flank by building interdependence with China would carry the hallmark of *realpolitik*. In this, apart from the economic and defence linkages, Russia has sought to strengthen people-to-people exchanges. This is seen as an attempt to overcome the quintessential historically negative image of China in the Russian national consciousness.

Promoting tourism, education, sports and cultural exchanges are a vital part of this calculus. Statistics reveal a significant uptick. There has been a two-fold increase in Russia and China issuing student visas in 2023 when compared to 2022.34,000 student visas were issued in 2023.

⁹⁶ "Russia completes delivery of second S-400 missile system regimental set to China – source", *Tass*, 27 January, 2020 at <https://tass.com/world/1113113> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

⁹⁷ "Rapprochement with China, 1972", *Office of the Historian, Department of State, United States of America* at <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/rapprochement-china> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

Today, 50,000 Chinese students are based in Russia while 16,000 Russian students are studying in China. Similarly, more than 4.5 lakh Chinese tourists visited Russia in 2023 while 7.3 lakh Russians hopped across the border.⁹⁸

Against the backdrop of these drivers, it is unsurprising that the latest Russian Foreign Policy Doctrine of 2023 prioritises ties with China. It states:

“Russia aims at further strengthening the comprehensive partnership and the strategic cooperation with China and focuses on the development of a mutually beneficial cooperation in all areas, provision of mutual assistance, and enhancement of coordination in the international arena to ensure security, stability and sustainable development at the global and regional levels, both in Eurasia and in other parts of the world.”⁹⁹

China's Drivers

Multiple factors drive China's strategy towards Russia.

Economics plays a vital role. Moscow's requirement for household products has allowed Beijing to consolidate its presence in the 143-million-strong Russian market. This is crucial at a time of domestic economic slowdown in China which can lead to excess capacity. Similarly, Western attempts at de-risking their dependence on China, especially high-technology products, is likely to bring down the demand of Chinese products in China's most lucrative markets.¹⁰⁰ The wheels

⁹⁸ “Media statement following Russia-China talks”, *President of Russia*, 16 May, 2024 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74049> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

⁹⁹ “The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation”, *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, 31 March, 2023 at https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/ (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹⁰⁰ “West's de-risking starts to bite China's prospects”, *Reuters*, 28 November, 2023 at <https://www.reuters.com/business/wests-de-risking-starts-bite-chinas-prospects-2023-11-27/> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

of motion already seem to be in play. The US and the EU have imposed significant tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles (EVs).¹⁰¹ The tariff barrier may make Chinese EVs uncompetitive in the Western market.

Notably, robust trade with Russia is seen as a key enabler in the internationalisation of the Yuan. This may still be early days. However, the opportunity to carry out more than US\$ 200 billion worth of trade in Yuan along with its growing usage on MSE allows Beijing to iron out the creases.

Similarly, energy linkages continue to be a pillar of Russia-China bilateral ties. Russian oil and gas at discounted prices ensure both energy affordability and security for the world's biggest market. Geographical proximity and pipelines ensure that costs can be kept lower than available market rates. It also enables China to avoid its 'Malacca Dilemma' of the US potentially blocking the vital sea lines of communication in the Indo-Pacific through which China's other producers transfer their fossil fuels.

A robust bilateral relationship also enables China to tap Russia's diplomatic heft. In the last few years, Russia has been increasingly batting for China on its core concerns. This includes the Indo-Pacific. In the same vein, Russia has supported China's global initiatives such as Community of Common Destiny and Global Development Initiative. These initiatives are seen as geopolitical tools to strengthen China's global standing.¹⁰²

Meanwhile, China also gets an opportunity to tap into Russia's military prowess, including in areas where China has been found wanting; and more importantly, within the niches of air defence and fighter jet engines. Pooling of resources would also help both sides to utilise each other's

¹⁰¹ "Commission imposes provisional countervailing duties on imports of battery electric vehicles from China while discussions with China continue", *European Commission*, 4 July, 2024 at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_3630 (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹⁰² Ibid (1).

expertise in jointly developing a heavy helicopter (AHL).¹⁰³ Similarly, cooperation in the cyber and information space to deal with the challenge posed by the West holds promise. In the same vein, joint military exercises provide Chinese armed forces vital, out-of-area operations in contested spaces.

Interestingly, a closer engagement with Russia gives China a ringside view of the Western military and economic toolkit deployed to pressurise Moscow. The lessons learnt from the ongoing conflict can be vital in China beefing up its own resilience. This is particularly relevant amidst speculation of Beijing's eventual Taiwan game plan. In fact, continuation of hostilities in Europe inevitably ensures an American distraction from the Indo-Pacific theatre.

As such, securing the 4,500-kilometre-long border with Russia enables China to channelise its resources against its principal adversary viz. the United States. China would anyway continue to require Russia's acquiescence for the success of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) which passes through Central Asia to Europe. Today, despite its perceived diminished status in Eurasia, Russia continues to have significant levers of influence with the CARs.

Against the backdrop of these drivers, it would appear that China remains invested in stability in the Kremlin. This is particularly relevant amidst speculation of a change in regime in Russia upending Moscow's outlook. It could lead to a fundamental re-orientation of Russia's foreign policy away from 'pivot to the East' to pivot to Russia's traditional home in the West. Such a scenario could alter the triangular major power dynamics against China. Beijing bailing out Moscow in its proxy war with the West ensures that Russia continues to remain invested in the ongoing strategic embrace.

In fact, the war can provide China with an opportunity to burnish its global diplomatic standing. Its ten-point peace plan for the Ukraine

¹⁰³ "Russian-Chinese heavy helicopter project implemented on schedule — First Deputy PM", *Tass*, 17 May, 2024 at <https://tass.com/economy/1789333> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

conflict is seen as an attempt to mediate between Russia and the West. This comes amidst Beijing having successfully mediated a peace deal between arch enemies Iran and Saudi Arabia in 2023.¹⁰⁴ Success in Ukraine could truly raise its global diplomatic profile since China has been viewed for long solely as an economic actor.

Interestingly, China can even leverage its robust ties with Russia in its dealings with the West. Beijing holds the Russia card as a retaliation tool against Western de-risking and decoupling strategies aimed at it. The overhang of China going all-in to support Moscow in the war, anchored to a military alliance, can prevent the West from further upping the geopolitical ante against China. Beijing's weapons aid can decisively shape the outcome of war in favour of the Kremlin.

Notably, today, the Russia-China partnership is anchored to their robust political engagement. Driven from the top, the two heads of state have met more than 42 times in the last decade.¹⁰⁵ This is reflected in their bonhomie as well. Moreover, China has sought to assuage Russia's historical concerns by emphasising on mutual benefit, mutual trust and mutual support. President Xi Jinping's statement, while welcoming his Russian counterpart for their summit in Beijing in May 2024, echoes this sentiment:

“President Putin and I share the view that we have been able to develop a new model enabling neighbouring major powers to develop their relations based on the principles of respect and equality. We also demonstrate mutual and resolute support on matters dealing with the core interests of both parties and address each other's current concerns. This is the main pillar of the Russia-

¹⁰⁴ “China brokers deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran, opening new possibilities for the Middle East region”, *Global Times*, 11 March, 2023 at <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202303/1287094.shtml> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹⁰⁵ “No limits? Why Vladimir Putin's latest visit will test China-Russia ties”, *South China Morning Post*, 16 May, 2024 at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3262780/no-limits-why-vladimir-putins-latest-visit-will-test-china-russia-ties>(Accessed on September 10, 2025).

China comprehensive partnership and strategic cooperation for a new era.”¹⁰⁶

II) PROSPECTS OF A FORMAL ALLIANCE

The Russia-China entente has given rise to speculation of a formal military alliance. This has been further reinforced by statements from the Russian side. President Putin recently stated that “the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation are allies in every sense of the word.”¹⁰⁷ Both sides continue to add commitments to their bilateral ties.

However, Russia and China are not natural allies. A deep dive highlights the undercurrents in their “no limits” partnership. It appears that their shared history, power dynamics and equations with others continue to cast a shadow on the bilateral relationship between the nations.

There remain apprehensions in Russia about the imbalanced nature of ties. Today, 31 per cent of Russia’s exports go to China while 38 per cent of Russia’s global imports come from Beijing.¹⁰⁸ This dependence is further accentuated in Yuan being the de facto reserve currency. Any devaluation of the Yuan by China to boost Chinese exports will inevitably devalue Russia’s holdings.

Meanwhile, fears of Moscow being squeezed by China especially in Russia’s sphere of influence in Eurasia hangs like the proverbial Sword

¹⁰⁶ “Media statement following Russia-China talks”, *President of Russia*, 16 May, 2024 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74049> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹⁰⁷ “Open lesson “Conversation about important things”, *President of Russia*, 2 September, 2024 at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74982> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹⁰⁸ A. Prokopenko, “What Are the Limits to Russia’s “Yuanization”?”, *Politika*, 27 May, 2024 at <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/05/china-russia-yuan?lang=en> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

of Damocles.¹⁰⁹ China's growing economic and military footprints in the region have led to concerns of a *Pax Sinica* which would inevitably undermine Moscow's interests. The web of connectivity initiatives being implemented by China would allow landlocked CARs to bypass Russia, thereby diluting their dependence on Moscow. A sentiment of China exploiting Russia's prevailing weakness is also reflected in negotiations over the stalled Power of Siber-2 pipeline. The two sides have been unable to find the sweet spot price.¹¹⁰ Moreover, Beijing remains concerned about its growing energy dependence on Russia. It has instead begun focussing more on accessing Turkmen gas.¹¹¹

Today, amidst China's rise and Russia's weakened position, there also exist fears in Moscow about Beijing seeking to undo the historical injustice of the unequal 1860 Treaty of Peking. This agreement between Tsarist Russia and Qing Dynasty had led to China ceding large swathes of what is today the Russian Far East to imperial Moscow.¹¹² Beijing's 2023 map already depicts several regions of the Far East as Chinese territory.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ D. Trenin, "How Russia Can Maintain Equilibrium in the Post-Pandemic Bipolar World", *Carnegie*, 1 May, 2020 at <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2020/04/how-russia-can-maintain-equilibrium-in-the-post-pandemic-bipolar-world?lang=en> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹¹⁰ "As Power of Siberia 2 Pipeline Stagnates, So Do Russia's Hopes for Pivoting Gas Exports Eastward", *The Moscow Times*, 20 June, 2024 at <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/06/20/as-power-of-siberia-2-pipeline-stagnates-so-do-russias-hopes-for-pivoting-gas-exports-eastward-a85468> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹¹¹ D. Kondratov, "Prospects for Russian Gas in China", *Far Eastern Affairs*, 4 (51), 2023, pp: 51-79.

¹¹² "The Convention of Peking of 1860 is concluded", *Presidential Library* at [https://www.prlib.ru/en/history/619718#:~:text=2%20\(14\)%20November%201860%2C,possessions%20of%20Russia%20and%20China](https://www.prlib.ru/en/history/619718#:~:text=2%20(14)%20November%201860%2C,possessions%20of%20Russia%20and%20China). (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹¹³ "Far East territorial dispute tests PRC-Russia ties", *South China Morning Post*, 7 March, 2024 at <https://ipdefenseforum.com/2024/03/far-east-territorial-dispute-tests-prc-russia-ties/> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

There also remain apprehensions about Chinese companies ruthlessly exploiting Russia's natural resources. These include fears of environmental degradation of the fragile Far Eastern ecosystem.¹¹⁴ Incidentally, this incipient distrust appears to be playing out in official circles too. Chinese officials have seemingly been forbidden from carrying smart phones on official visits to Russia. This indicates fears of snooping and espionage.¹¹⁵

Meanwhile, China has not gone all in to support Russia in its existential war in Ukraine. It has refrained from supplying weapons, at least officially. While exports of dual-use products have contributed to Russian resilience, yet a major dip in numbers can be observed in the first half of 2024. Exports have fallen from US\$ 600 million per month to US\$ 300 million.¹¹⁶ This comes amidst the tightening of Western sanctions on financial institutions aiding Russia's cause.¹¹⁷

It has led to major Chinese banks halting payments for Russian products leading to delays in delivery timelines.¹¹⁸ A workaround through small

¹¹⁴ "Xenophobia masquerading as environmentalism How politics, money, and racism turned Irkutsk against a Chinese bottling factory at Lake Baikal", *Meduza*, 18 May, 2019 at <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2019/05/17/xenophobia-masquerading-as-environmentalism> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹¹⁵ "Is the China-Russia friendship facade set to crumble?", *Nikkei Asia*, 7 July, 2024 at <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Comment/Is-the-China-Russia-friendship-facade-set-to-crumble> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹¹⁶ N. Sher, "Behind the Scenes: China's Increasing Role in Russia's Defense Industry", *Politika*, 6 May, 2024 at <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia- Eurasia/politika/2024/05/behind-the-scenes-chinas-increasing-role-in-russias-defense-industry?lang=en> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹¹⁷ "U.S. Takes Aim at Chinese Banks Aiding Russia War Effort", *The Wall Street Journal*, 23 April, 2024 at <https://www.wsj.com/politics/national-security/u-s-takes-aim-at-chinese-banks-aiding-russia-war-effort-fcf76dcc> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹¹⁸ "No limits? Why Vladimir Putin's latest visit will test China-Russia ties", *South China Morning Post*, 16 May, 2024 at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3262780/no-limits-why-vladimir-putins-latest-visit-will-test-china-russia-ties> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

Chinese banks with no exposure to the West has been initiated. However, the focus appears to be on intermediaries in the UAE, Turkey and Kyrgyzstan.¹¹⁹ This strategy of insulating China from sanctions comes with the baggage of high commissions, thereby cutting into economic viability.

Interestingly, outbound investments from China into Russia appear to have slowed as well. This highlights the reluctance of Chinese companies to invest in the Russian market. No joint projects have been announced since the start of the war.¹²⁰ Companies seem more interested in exporting finished products to Russia. This runs the risk of Chinese goods hollowing out of Russia's domestic manufacturing.

As such, China's existing position is anchored to the need to balance economic ties between Russia and the West. This stems from the attractiveness of the far bigger Western market for China's export-driven economy. China's bilateral trade of US\$ 240 billion with Russia is overshadowed by Beijing's trade with the EU at US\$ 739 billion.¹²¹ China's exports to Russia comprised only 3.3 per cent of its overall exports while imports from Russia were at 5 per cent of its global imports in 2023.¹²² This highlights Beijing's reluctance to jeopardise economic ties with the West. The *modus operandi* of Western sanctions,

¹¹⁹ "Exclusive: Russia payment hurdles with China partners intensified in August", *Reuters*, 30 August, 2024 at <https://www.reuters.com/business/finance/russia-payment-hurdles-with-china-partners-intensified-august-sources-say-2024-08-30/> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹²⁰ J. Kluge, "Russia-China Economic Relations", *SWP*, 24 May, 2024 at <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2024RP06/> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹²¹ "EU Trade Relations with China", *European Commission* at https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/china_en#:~:text=China%20is%20the%20EU's%20second,and%20the%20biggest%20for%20imports. (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹²² A. Prokopenko, "What Are the Limits to Russia's "Yuanization"?", *Politika*, 27 May, 2024 at <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/05/china-russia-yuan?lang=en> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

anchored to economic isolation, would severely undermine China's growth. There does not appear to be an appetite in Beijing to be the collateral in Russia's proxy war with the West.

Incidentally, Russia and China have not always been on the same page in their foreign policy outlook. Moscow's weapons sales to New Delhi remain a point of friction.¹²³ Similarly, Russia's growing outreach to North Korea may complicate matters for China in its periphery. An emboldened Kim Jong-Un could up the military ante leading to Japan and South Korea seeking a more robust embrace of the United States. This may give the US a pretext to expand its footprints on the Korean peninsula, which would be to the detriment of China's interests.

In the same vein, Russia has adopted a nuanced position on the territorial disputes of the South China Sea (SCS). This stems from its own strategic equations with the other regional stakeholders including Vietnam, Philippines and Indonesia. Russia and India, as part of their joint venture, are also supplying Philippines with BrahMos missiles.¹²⁴ Manila is likely to position these weapons systems to deter China in the SCS.

The underlying theme is about Russia projecting itself as a global and independent pole. It cannot succeed in this endeavour if it is seen to be riding the coattails of China. Its 'Pivot to Asia' is anchored to engaging Asian stakeholders beyond China. As such, it is not a part of Russia's DNA to be a junior partner to any major power. Therefore it is unlikely

¹²³ "Chinese government mouthpiece People's Daily urges Russia not to sell arms to India", *India Today*, 23 June, 2020 at <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/chinese-government-mouthpiece-people-s-daily-urges-russia-not-to-sell-arms-to-india-1691982-2020-06-23> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹²⁴ "Indian BrahMos missiles delivered to the Philippines: The missile's significance", *The Indian Express*, 19 April, 2024 at <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/brahmos-missiles-philippines-development-9280055/#:~:text=Here's%20a%20look%20at%20how%20BrahMos%20was%20developed.&text=India's%20BrahMos%20supersonic%20cruise%20missiles,2022%2C%20news%20agency%20ANI%20reported.> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

to be subservient to Beijing.¹²⁵ In this, a “friendly balancing” of China is being increasingly advocated by Russian experts.¹²⁶ Its broad contours involve expanding Russia’s engagement with other actors, including those who may have difficult relations with Beijing, without ruffling China’s feathers.

Incidentally, a Trump Presidency 2.0 could test the Russia-China partnership. This stems from Trump’s call for a détente with Russia vis-à-vis a hawkish policy on China. It has led to speculation that Russia may seek a new *modus vivendi* with the US, thereby diluting its shared outlook with China on the West.

A military alliance, under these conditions, appears unlikely. Alliances, in fact, inherently remove the flexibility of choice while drawing members into the conflicts of partners.

However, all bets would be off in the advent of simultaneous US military strikes on Russia and China.

III) IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

The new equations between Russia and China complicate India’s geostrategic calculus. Today, Moscow is seen to be battling for Beijing on the diplomatic stage. It includes rejection of the Indo-Pacific – a concept which India has deeply invested in. Similarly, sales of sophisticated Russian weapons systems to China too are back on the agenda. China, in fact, appears to be the biggest beneficiary of Russia’s war in Ukraine. A weakened Russia which is increasingly dependent on

¹²⁵ F. Lukyanov, “‘Being in Order’ Also Means Being in the World Order”, *Russian International Affairs Council*, 29 May, 2024 at <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/interview/being-in-order-also-means-being-in-the-world-order/> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹²⁶ S. Karaganov, “An Age of Wars? Article Two. What Is to Be Done”, *Russia in Global Affairs*, 22 (2), 2024, pp: 96-111.

China, has led to the prospect of a new balance of power not just in Eurasia but also in Asia.

Against this backdrop, questions have been raised on Russia's traditional unconditional support to India. Moscow has historically supported New Delhi on its issues of core concern. This includes countering India's external adversaries who have sought to undermine Indian interests.

Today, amidst India and Russia following multi-vectored foreign policies, it is inevitable that both sides have diverging priorities. It has seen India strengthen ties with the US while Russia has embraced China more closely than ever before. As such, New Delhi and Moscow may have to factor in their equations with their other indispensable strategic partners in determining the trajectory of their own bilateral relations. This balancing requirement anchored to neutrality, therefore, appears to be the new normal. It has seen India stay neutral on the war in Ukraine with Russia adopting a similar position on Galwan.

Nevertheless, India-Russia ties stand on their own ground. They remain mutually beneficial. Crucially, both countries have shared concerns about China's rise.¹²⁷ Beijing's assertiveness, unilateralism and revanchism affect both India and Russia. In this light, it is unlikely that Russia would allow China to shape the Kremlin's foreign policy. Russia's strategic autonomy was evident during the Galwan crisis when it fast-tracked weapons exports to India¹²⁸, notwithstanding China's objections.¹²⁹ It has also

¹²⁷ S. Karaganov, "An Age of Wars? Article Two. What Is to Be Done", *Russia in Global Affairs*, 22 (2), 2024, pp: 96-111.

¹²⁸ "Rajnath Singh goes arms shopping to Russia", *India Today*, 17 August, 2020 at <https://www.indiatoday.in/india-today-insight/story/rajnath-singh-goes-arms-shopping-to-russia-1691688-2020-06-22> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹²⁹ "Chinese government mouthpiece People's Daily urges Russia not to sell arms to India", *India Today*, 23 June, 2020 at <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/chinese-government-mouthpiece-people-s-daily-urges-russia-not-to-sell-arms-to-india-1691982-2020-06-23> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

supported New Delhi on the abrogation of Article 370¹³⁰ as well as UNSC membership¹³¹, unlike Beijing. These dynamics highlight the hyperbole of “no-limits” Russia-China partnership.

Nevertheless, it is in India’s interests to try to wean Russia away from China by adding more pillars to the India-Russia strategic partnership. This may give Russia renewed incentives to not side with China in undermining India’s interests.

¹³⁰ “Russian support to India on Kashmir is rooted in history”, *The Economic Times*, 20 January, 2020 at https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/russian-support-to-india-on-kashmir-is-rooted-in-history/articleshow/73411150.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹³¹ “Joint Statement following the 22nd India-Russia Annual Summit”, *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*, 9 July, 2024 at <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dt1/37940/Joint+Statement+following+the+22nd+IndiaRussia+Annual+Summit> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

RUSSIA AND THE INDO-PACIFIC: EXPLORING CONGRUENCE

Today, the Indo-Pacific appears to be gaining traction. It has emerged as a theatre of greatpower competition. This has led to a tussle encompassing ideas, values, rules, laws, partnerships and models of governance.¹³²

Crucially, it appears that their ongoing scrimmage will sharpen due to their fundamental differences. Some of the emerging structures in this jostling like the AUKUS and the Quad have given rise to polarised opinions.¹³³ Similar views exist on a “free and open” maritime space and “rules-based order”.¹³⁴ However, this has complicated options for those having linkages with either Washington or Beijing or both.

In this context, Russia is no exception. As a power that straddles Europe and Asia, with almost 60 per cent of Russian territory being in the latter, the ongoing churnings make Russia a stakeholder in the Indo-Pacific. This is particularly relevant at a time when Russia is seeking a revival of its ‘Great Power’ status anchored in its ‘Pivot to Asia’ and

¹³² S. Chinoy, *World Upside Down*, Harper Collins, New Delhi, 2023.

¹³³ “Media statement following Russia-China talks”, *President of Russia*, 16 May, 2024 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74049> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹³⁴ “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks at the general meeting of the Russian International Affairs Council, Moscow, December 8, 2020”, *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, December 8, 2020 at https://archive.mid.ru/web/guest/evropejskij-souz-es/-/asset_publisher/6OiYovt2s4Yc/content/id/4470074?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_6OiYovt2s4Yc&_101_INSTANCE_6OiYovt2s4Yc_languageId=en_GB (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

‘Greater Eurasia’ concepts.¹³⁵ It has seen Russia looking to expand its strategic footprints in the maritime space straddling the Indo-Pacific.

However, Russia’s ongoing confrontation with the West has inevitably complicated Moscow’s scope for manoeuvre. Its partners in the region have shrunk. Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Australia and New Zealand have imposed sweeping sanctions¹³⁶ on Russia for its war against Ukraine. Russia has also found it difficult to realise the potential of relations with neutral countries amidst the overhang of Western sanctions.

In the same vein, Russia’s ongoing rapprochement with the hitherto pariah North Korean regime, amidst the signing of their mutual defence agreement,¹³⁷ can undermine the North-East Asian theatre’s status quo. The blame of a potentially emboldened Kim Jon-Un raising the ante can fall on Moscow. This may cause Russia to suffer a significant reputational damage among the regional stakeholders, who remain apprehensive of a military escalation. It may also make Russia’s outreach within the region more complicated.

These dynamics have led Russia to a closer embrace of China. Currently, the Kremlin is increasingly battling for Beijing.¹³⁸ It has supported China’s

¹³⁵ “Vladimir Putin’s annual news conference”, *President of Russia*, December 23, 2021 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67438> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹³⁶ “Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova’s comment on the APEC trade ministers’ meeting”, *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, 25 May, 2022 at https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/rso/atr/1814710/ (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹³⁷ “Russia-DPRK talks”, *President of Russia*, 19 June, 2024 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74330> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹³⁸ “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks and answers to media questions during a joint news conference with PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi following talks, Beijing”, *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, 9 April, 2024 at https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/rso/forum-aziatsko-tihookeanskoe-ekonomiceskoe-sotrudnicestvo-ates/1943226/ (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

claims of the Indo-Pacific being a Western strategy of containment. Russia has also rejected the emphasis on a “rules-based order”, on the grounds of it being a Western attempt to maintain dominance by proxy since this circumvents the UN where Russia has veto power.

Unsurprisingly, Moscow has rejected the coinage of “Indo-Pacific” and continues to emphasise on “Asia Pacific”. This move comes despite the fact that the Indo-Pacific could be a strategic opportunity for Russia to strengthen its Great Power credentials amidst an increasing global bipolarity.

The Russian rejection of the Indo-Pacific has, in many ways, complicated India’s foreign policy endeavours. New Delhi has consistently espoused the *raison d’être* of Indo-Pacific — the creation of an inclusive security architecture. Today, New Delhi and Moscow, the two traditional partners, do not appear to be on the same page regarding the Indo-Pacific.

This was particularly reflected in Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov’s statement of “India being an object of the Western countries persistent, aggressive and devious policy” to “engage in anti-China games by promoting Indo-Pacific strategies”.¹³⁹

Therefore, the pertinent questions are about the factors driving Russia’s position on the Indo-Pacific; whether Indo-Pacific can be a strategic opportunity for Russia; and if India and Russia can find common ground on the Indo-Pacific.

I) CURRENT STATUS

Russian practitioners have largely refrained from using the terminology of Indo-Pacific. Instead, they have stuck to the concept of “Asia-

¹³⁹ “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s Remarks at the General Meeting of the Russian International Affairs Council, Moscow, December 8, 2020”, *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, December 8, 2020 at https://archive.mid.ru/web/guest/evropejskij-souz-es/-/asset_publisher/6OiYovt2s4Yc/content/id/4470074?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_6OiYovt2s4Yc&_101_INSTANCE_6OiYovt2s4Yc_languageId=en_GB (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

Pacific”. In this light, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov’s statement that “the Indo-Pacific region is another artificially imposed construct”¹⁴⁰, is an indication of Russia viewing it through the lens of American strategy of containment. Similar views were expressed by President Putin who termed the Indo-Pacific “un-Asian to begin with and is at odds with the current state of affairs in Asia”.¹⁴¹

When juxtaposed with the Kremlin’s stated goal of establishing a polycentric world order¹⁴², the Russian strategic calculus can be interpreted as looking at the Indo-Pacific through the lens of a zero-sum game in its ongoing confrontation and rivalry with the United States. Any American strategy that strengthens the US global position goes against the Russian grain of multipolarity.

Crucially for Russia, the countries that fit the bill of being a source of investment and technology comprise of China, Japan, Taiwan and South Korea. With Tokyo, Taipei and Seoul being part of the Western camp, Russia has been forced to increasingly rely on Beijing to withstand the ongoing American geopolitical pressure. This, therefore, explains Russia endorsing China’s views on the Indo-Pacific as a *quid pro quo*, on what Beijing considers as its core strategic issue.

Moreover, Russia and China appear to be on the same page in their perception of a “rules-based Indo-Pacific” being a Western strategy to bypass international law. This would enable the West to sidestep the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) where Moscow and Beijing

¹⁴⁰ “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s Remarks and Answers to Media Questions During The Russia-Vietnam Conference of the Valdai Discussion Club”, *Valdai Discussion Club*, February 26, 2019 at <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/foreign-minister-sergey-lavrov-remarks/> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

¹⁴¹ “Valdai Discussion Club Session”, *President of Russia*, October 3, 2019 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61719> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

¹⁴² “Conversation with President of China Xi Jinping”, *President of Russia*, June 28, 2021 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65940> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

are part of the P5. As a show of support to each other, Russia and China have held joint exercises in the South and East China Seas and in the Sea of Japan.¹⁴³

Additionally, Russia remains opposed to the Indo-Pacific in the belief that it excludes from its purview, not only Africa and the Gulf but also the central position accorded to Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) vis-à-vis the “Asia-Pacific”.¹⁴⁴

However, there appears to be much more to Russia’s approach to the Indo-Pacific than just merely supporting China. Moscow has sought to diversify¹⁴⁵ ties beyond China particularly due to apprehensions of being the “junior partner” in the Moscow-Beijing relationship.¹⁴⁶ But, this strategy could be upended if a division into military camps in the Indo-Pacific takes place. The AUKUS and the Quad are seen in several quarters, as an American attempt to build an Asian NATO¹⁴⁷.

II) ASSESSMENT OF RUSSIA’S POSITION

Arguably, the Asia-Pacific does not reflect the spread of economic and political vibrancy to a more boarder region. This includes South Asia as well as Africa and the Persian Gulf. The fact also remains that the concept of “Indo-Pacific” has been in existence far longer than

¹⁴³ “Iran, Russia and China begin naval drill”, *The Hindu*, January 21, 2022 at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/iran-russia-and-china-begin-naval-drill/article38304811.ece> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹⁴⁴ “Valdai Discussion Club session”, no. 141.

¹⁴⁵ “Eastern Economic Forum plenary session”, *President of Russia*, 7 September, 2022 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69299> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹⁴⁶ Dmitri Trenin, “Russia and China in the Arctic: Cooperation, Competition, and Consequences”, *Carnegie Moscow Center*, March 31, 2020 at <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/81407> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹⁴⁷ Andrey Dikarev & Alexander Lukin, “Russia’s approach to South China Sea territorial dispute: it’s only business, nothing personal”, *The Pacific Review*, January, 2021 at <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2020.1866652> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

“Asia-Pacific”. The two oceans were connected even during the colonial times. On the other hand, Asia-Pacific is largely an artificial construct that connects an ocean with a continent. It is a post-World War II construct linked with the development of economic centres of power.

The exclusion of India from the Asia-Pacific construct is also a glaring anomaly. This is particularly relevant in the context of India’s billion-plus population, four-trillion-dollar economy and geostrategic location comprising a large coastline. In fact, the proximity of the Andamans to the Malacca Straits accords India a key position in attempts to build a “stable and secure regional security architecture”.

Meanwhile, it would be imprudent to look at the Indo-Pacific solely through the lens of being an American construct. The fact remains that it was coined by an Indian and given form and substance by Japan¹⁴⁸. Similarly, today, a number of countries, whose foreign policies are anchored in strategy autonomy, have adopted the concept of the Indo-Pacific. This includes the ASEAN states, earlier seen Asia-Pacific’s core. In fact, ASEAN states, who have been courted by all key major powers, have been vocal about their recalibration.

The ASEAN “Outlook on Indo-Pacific” acknowledges this shift:

“Southeast Asia lies in the center of these dynamic regions and is a very important conduit and portal to the same. Therefore, it is in the interest of ASEAN to lead the shaping of their economic and security architecture and ensure that such dynamics will continue to bring about peace, security, stability and prosperity for the peoples in the Southeast Asia as well as in the wider Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions or the Indo-Pacific”.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ “Confluence of the Two Seas” Speech by H.E. Mr Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan at the Parliament of the Republic of India”, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, August 22, 2007 at <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹⁴⁹ “ASEAN Outlook On The Indo-Pacific”, *ASEAN*, June 23, 2019 at https://asean.org/asean2020/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

Today, given the regional stakeholders' economic inter-dependence with China, a strategy of containing Beijing appears untenable. In fact, several of them have welcomed the opportunities presented by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). These sentiments are also reflected in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement. Its members include China as well as the Quad countries of Japan and Australia.

There exists a broad consensus on building an inclusive security architecture. With security being indivisible, this would also reflect the reality of the "Indian and Pacific Oceans being interconnected and interdependent".

Notably, regional stakeholders have a shared interest in strengthening developmental partnerships amidst slowing economic growth. They also have a shared concern about China's unilateralism, assertiveness and coercion. China's gaming of globalisation that has seen it emerge as a vital cog in global supply chains has also raised the stakes. Similarly, Beijing's clarion call of an "Asia for Asians" is viewed in many circles as an attempt to dominate the continent.¹⁵⁰ Pertinently, these concerns are prevalent even among Russian experts. This is unsurprising given the nature of China's rise and the historical baggage of the Russia-China relationship.

In this context, it appears that the next course of action is to "put diplomatic pressure" on Beijing to ensure "peaceful co-existence". This strategy, however, seems applicable to all and is not China-specific. Moreover, there also appears to be a consensus on inclusion of Africa in the ambit of the Indo-Pacific as well as for according centrality to ASEAN.

¹⁵⁰ "Xi Jinping's 'Asia for Asians' mantra evokes imperial Japan", *South China Morning Post*, July 14, 2014 at <https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1553414/xi-jinpings-asia-asians-mantra-evokes-imperial-japan> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

Meanwhile, the Quad, contrary to Russia's view, is largely a plurilateral dialogue structure. Its objective appears to "complement the Indo-Pacific in building synergies in infrastructure, capacity building, connectivity and tackling non-traditional security threats". Several states are on the same page on these issues. Notably, the Quad Plus structure could alleviate Russia's concerns of establishment of "cliques". The meetings of the Quad Plus format involving New Zealand, South Korea and Vietnam¹⁵¹ could help in diluting this perception.

In light of these developments, Russia's opposition to the Indo-Pacific is in fact, preventing it from shaping the incipient processes underway in building an inclusive regional architecture.

DOES RUSSIA STAND TO REAP STRATEGIC GAINS FROM THE INDO-PACIFIC?

Interestingly, despite Russia's aversion to the Indo-Pacific, its regional footprints paint a different picture. Anchored in its "weapons and natural resources diplomacy", Russia has sought new congruence with the regional stakeholders.

This has seen Russia acquire a port in Sudan for a 25-year lease.¹⁵² It is Moscow's first major military toehold in Africa since the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Notably, Port Sudan's geostrategic location overlooking one of the world's most critical lanes of communication in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden is unmistakable. For a country that has largely focussed on its continental threats since its independence, this acquisition highlights Russia's attempts at playing a more prominent role in regional geopolitics.

¹⁵¹ "Focus on Covid in Quad Plus meet", *The Times of India*, May 13, 2020 at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/jaishankar-discusses-covid-19-with-counterparts-in-us-5-other-countries/articleshow/75702875.cms> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹⁵² "Russia set to establish naval logistics base in Sudan", *Tass*, November 11, 2020 at <https://tass.com/defense/1222673> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

The genesis of this calculus, however, dates back to the first Russia-Africa Summit held in October 2019.¹⁵³ The Summit had laid down the marker for Russia to expand its footprints in Africa, including in the oceanic space. The second Summit in 2023 reinforced Russia's outreach to the continent.¹⁵⁴ Over the last few years, Russia has emerged as a vector in the regional calculus of Mozambique¹⁵⁵ and Madagascar¹⁵⁶. The Kremlin has also conducted maritime exercises with South Africa in the Indian Ocean.¹⁵⁷ Besides, Russia is an active participant in tackling piracy off the coast of Somalia.¹⁵⁸

Similarly, Russia has sought to expand its linkages with ASEAN, both at the multilateral and bilateral levels. Russia is an active participant in the "East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) and ASEAN Plus One mechanisms".¹⁵⁹ The first Russia-ASEAN joint naval military exercise,

¹⁵³ "Russia—Africa Summit", *President of Russia*, October 24, 2019 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61893> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹⁵⁴ "Second Summit Russia—Africa Economic And Humanitarian Forum", *Roscongress* at <https://summitafrica.ru/en/> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹⁵⁵ "Mozambique, Russia sign energy, security deals", *France 24*, August 22, 2019 at <https://www.france24.com/en/20190822-mozambique-russia-sign-energy-security-deals> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹⁵⁶ "Russia, Madagascar sign agreement on military cooperation", *TASS*, October 5, 2018 at <https://tass.com/defense/1024770> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹⁵⁷ "China, Russia and South Africa team up for first joint naval drill", *South China Morning Post*, November 27, 2019 at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3039469/china-russia-and-south-africa-team-first-joint-naval-drill> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹⁵⁸ "UN Security Council high-level debate on maritime security", *President of Russia*, August 9, 2021 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66352> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹⁵⁹ "ASEAN-Russia Dialogue Partnership Overview", *Mission of the Russian Federation to ASEAN* at https://asean.mid.ru/en_GB/dialogue-partnership (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

held in Indonesia in December 2021¹⁶⁰, is a reflection of Russia qualitatively stepping up its engagement with this South-east Asian organisation. The Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) has also been negotiating with the ASEAN for a Free Trade Agreement (FTA).

In Southern Asia, Russia has sought new congruence with Bangladesh¹⁶¹, Pakistan¹⁶², Sri Lanka¹⁶³ and Myanmar¹⁶⁴, besides strengthening the ‘Special and Privileged Strategic partnership’ between India and Russia. In fact, Russia is constructing a nuclear power plant in Bangladesh in collaboration with India.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁰ “Russia, Southeast Asia conclude first joint naval exercise”, *Reuters*, December 4, 2021 at <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/russia-southeast-asia-conclude-first-joint-naval-exercise-2021-12-04/> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹⁶¹ “Russia to deliver 2 Mi-171A2 multirole helicopters to Bangladesh in 2023”, *TASS*, November 19, 2021 at <https://tass.com/defense/1363931> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

¹⁶² “Russian foreign minister arrives in Islamabad on two-day visit — first in 9 years”, *DAWN*, April 6, 2021 at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1616752> (Accessed on September 15, 2025).

¹⁶³ “Interview of Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov with the Daily News Sri Lankan newspaper, published on January 13, 2020”, *The Embassy of the Russian Federation to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Island*, January 14, 2020 at <https://www.rusemb.org.uk/article/586> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹⁶⁴ “Russia to step up military cooperation with Myanmar — deputy defense minister”, *TASS*, August 26, 2021 at <https://tass.com/defense/1329011> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹⁶⁵ “India, Russia, Bangladesh sign pact for Rooppur atomic plant”, *Live Mint*, March 1, 2018 at <https://www.livemint.com/Industry/QD5ex7YkwRkooAmYgWPVHK/India-Russia-Bangladesh-sign-pact-for-Rooppur-atomic-plant.html> and “Russia extends \$11.38 bln loan to Bangladesh to build nuclear power plant”, *TASS*, January 13, 2017 at <https://tass.com/economy/925025> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

Notably, Russia was accorded the status of a “dialogue partner” in the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) in November 2021.¹⁶⁶ This eponymous organisation comprises of Indian Ocean littoral states¹⁶⁷, indicating Russia’s attempts to be a part of the evolving regional dynamics. Interestingly, Russia was the only major power that was not a part of any major multilateral structure in the Indian Ocean till that point of time. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova’s statement following the admission of Russia, as a “dialogue partner” of IORA aptly highlights the Russian calculus:

“This decision confirms broad recognition of Russia’s constructive role in strengthening multilateral cooperation based on the norms and principles of international law. It also reflects the high assessment of Russia’s tangible contribution to ensuring sustainable dynamics in the development of the Indian Ocean zone.... Russia is attaching much importance to this region. The country consistently supports UN General Assembly Resolution 2832 (passed in 1971) that declared the Indian Ocean a zone of peace. Considering its dense network of sea routes, it is difficult to overestimate its importance for the global economy as well.... Russia intends to continue working (now as an IORA dialogue partner) on strengthening interconnected relationships in the Indian Ocean. Its priorities coincide with the goals and tasks of the forum in such areas as maritime security, resistance to piracy, trade and investment, prompt emergency response, tourist and cultural ties, education, science and technology.... Naturally, one of the priorities is countering the COVID-19 pandemic and other infectious diseases and cooperation on vaccines. Russia is willing to share its groundwork and experience in developing remote territories and expand humanitarian aid programmes. At Southeast Asian summits (a forum close to IORA,) Russia has repeatedly

¹⁶⁶ “Russia to promote development of international ties as IORA partner — statement”, *TASS*, November 18, 2021 at <https://tass.com/politics/1363251> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹⁶⁷ “Dialogue Partners”, *IORA* at <https://www.iora.int/en/about/dialogue-partners> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

suggested thinking about ways of developing practical cooperation between a system of interstate communication mechanisms that took shape around ASEAN in the Asia-Pacific Region and multilateral associations of the Indian Ocean. This idea is still on the table. Russia is ready to discuss it with all interested parties”.¹⁶⁸

Amidst these developments, its Pacific Fleet’s area of operation extends from the Far East to the Persian Gulf.¹⁶⁹ This is an indication of Russia “effectively practising” an Indo-Pacific strategy. Today, the Fleet is undergoing a major modernisation drive.¹⁷⁰ New vessels are expected to be commissioned in the future. This would provide Russia with additional tools to expand its footprints in the Indian Ocean through power projection, joint military exercises and ports of call. These new partnerships could even help achieve Russia’s historical endeavour of accessing the warm waters of the Indian Ocean.

Interestingly, Russia’s Asia-Pacific advocacy is at times at odds with its policies in practice. For instance, Russia has adopted a nuanced position on the South China Sea dispute than supporting Beijing outright in its core strategic issue. This has seen the Kremlin call for “preventing the dispute’s internationalisation”.¹⁷¹ It has also supported “ASEAN’s efforts

¹⁶⁸ “Comment by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova on the granting of dialogue partner status to Russia by the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)”, *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, November 18, 2021 at https://archive.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4946409 (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹⁶⁹ “Pacific Fleet”, *Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation*, at <https://eng.mil.ru/en/structure/forces/navy/associations/structure/forces/type/navy/pacific/about.htm> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹⁷⁰ “Russian Pacific Fleet’s resurgence sets off alarm bells in Washington”, *Russia Beyond*, February 6, 2017 at https://www.rbth.com/blogs/continental_drift/2017/02/06/russian-pacific-fleets-resurgence-sets-off-alarm-bells-in-washington_696366 (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹⁷¹ “Chinese Foreign Ministry Commends Lavrov’s Stance on South China Sea”, *TASS*, April 13, 2016 at <https://tass.com/world/869259> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

to establish a Code of Conduct for the South China Sea". These sentiments were expressed by President Putin when he stated:

"We believe that interference by any power outside the region will only hurt the resolution of these issues. I believe the involvement of any third-party powers from outside the region is detrimental and counterproductive".¹⁷²

"We support and advocate the full observance of the Declaration on Conduct of the Parties in the South China Sea, and speak in favour of a prompt adoption of a Code of Conduct of the parties as a legally binding document".¹⁷³

While Russia has supported China's rejection of the Permanent Court of Arbitration's (PCA) ruling, several Russian experts¹⁷⁴ are of the opinion that this Russian action was driven by the need to use the Chinese precedence to reject any potential PCA ruling on Ukraine's maritime rights in the Black Sea. Russia considers the Black Sea as a vital area of operation with its Black Sea fleet based in this region. It has assumed even more significance amidst the ongoing Russia-West faceoff.

Russia's position in the South China Sea is, perhaps, emblematic of the need to maintain its strategic autonomy. Notably, Russia remains apprehensive of the equilibrium in the Russia-China relationship shifting towards Beijing. There also exist other festering issues. This includes Russia and China competing with each other in the lucrative weapons markets of Asia and Africa. The two countries also do not appear to

¹⁷² "Answers to journalists' questions", *President of Russia*, September 5, 2016 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52834> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹⁷³ "Press statements following Russian-Vietnamese talks", *President of Russia*, September 6, 2018 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/58474> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹⁷⁴ Vasily Kashin, "The Ukrainian Crisis: Impact on Sino-Russian Relations", *RSIS*, October 14, 2016 at <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/CO16257.pdf> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

be on the same page on Russia's weapons exports to India. Meanwhile, it is likely that China's aggression and assertiveness on the issue of territory, despite economic interdependence with the opposing side, would have increased Russia's strategic apprehensions. China retains a grouse over the Tsarist takeover of large swathes of the Far East as part of the Unequal Treaties (1860). Also, a bipolar world appears more suited to China than a polycentric one with the latter being a key Russian endeavour.

Amidst these dynamics, Russia has expanded its strategic engagement with regional countries like Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines¹⁷⁵, despite these states having ongoing territorial disputes with China.

In this context, Russia is one of Vietnam's key strategic partners. President Putin paid a much-publicised visit to Hanoi in June 2024, a rare foreign visit undertaken by him since the war began in Ukraine. It led to the signing of several agreements related to health, science and technology, customs, energy and mutual investment.¹⁷⁶ Hanoi's continued investment in ties with Russia was evident in the red-carpet welcome given to the Russian President. Vietnamese President too emphatically highlighted the importance of ties with Moscow:

Our countries share traditional bonds of friendship and have forged a comprehensive strategic partnership. We have always been keen to express our deep gratitude for the assistance and support we received from the Russian people in the past, when we were fighting for our independence, as well as at the current stage in the development of our country. Vietnam follows an independent, self-reliant, peaceful, friendly and multifaceted

¹⁷⁵ "Arms trade fuels Russia's inroads into Southeast Asia", *The ASEAN Post*, February 19, 2018 at <https://theaseanpost.com/article/arms-trade-fuels-russias-inroads-southeast-asia> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹⁷⁶ "State visit to Vietnam", *President of Russia*, 20 June, 2024 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74344> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

foreign policy, and has always viewed Russia as one of its priority foreign policy partners. We want to work with Russia to further enhance our traditional friendship which results from the constructive efforts by many generations of our two countries' leaders and their people."¹⁷⁷

Today, their relationship encompasses a range of economic and military interests. Russia has even entered into joint weapons production.¹⁷⁸ These form the frontline of Vietnam's calculus to preserve its territorial integrity and sovereignty, ostensibly from the challenge posed by China. The two sides have also inked an energy exploration project in the disputed South China Sea.¹⁷⁹ In fact, Russian energy majors Gazprom, Rosneft and Lukoil, apart from the Russia-Vietnam joint venture of Vietsovetpetro, are involved in hydrocarbon exploration in the South China Sea.¹⁸⁰

Similarly, Russia had been invited by the former president of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte, to explore energy reserves off the country's coast in the disputed South China Sea¹⁸¹, which Manila refers to as the West Philippine Sea (WPS). Interestingly, Philippines has, over

¹⁷⁷ "Vladimir Putin and President of Vietnam To Lam's statements to the media", *President of Russia*, 20 June, 2024 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/74348> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹⁷⁸ "Russia, Vietnam aim for further promotion of partnership — statement", *TASS*, December 1, 2021 at <https://tass.com/politics/1368907> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹⁷⁹ Andrey Dikarev & Alexander Lukin, "Russia's approach to South China Sea territorial dispute: it's only business, nothing personal", *The Pacific Review*, January, 2021 at <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2020.1866652> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹⁸⁰ "Commitments made for expansion of Russian ties", *Vietnam Investment Review*, October 5, 2021 at <https://vir.com.vn/commitments-made-for-expansion-of-russian-ties-88201.html> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹⁸¹ "Courting Russia with South China Sea oil is a 'dangerous gamble' for Duterte", *South China Morning Post*, October 8, 2019 at <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3031980/courting-russia-south-china-sea-oil-dangerous-gamble-duterte> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

the years, relied on the US for its weapons requirements. Today, India exporting BrahMos missiles that were co-developed with Russia, to Manila, highlights Moscow's approval in this strategic transaction. Philippines is likely to deploy these state-of-the-art missiles to deter China.

In a sign of Russia retaining its equities in the region, Indonesian President Joko Widodo paid a visit to Moscow amidst the war in Ukraine. It was business as usual during official discussions. Both sides sought to add more pillars to their engagement, including defence, security and economic.¹⁸²

Meanwhile, Russia has conducted military exercises with Brunei, Malaysia and Thailand in the region, even though these were not in the disputed waters of the South China Sea. From these initiatives, it appears that Russia is keeping channels of communication open with the majority of regional stakeholders. This is similar to the Russian playbook in Syria.¹⁸³

Therefore, Russia's strategy appears anchored to deftly balancing China's sensitivities on one hand while maintaining its scope for manoeuvre on the other.

OPPORTUNITY

The Indo-Pacific can be an opportunity for Russia to strengthen its credentials as a global pole. Today, Russia runs the risk of being left behind in the global bipolarity narrative on account of Moscow's relative decline. In fact, Russia appears to be the weakest in the triangle of Great Powers comprising Russia, China and the US. This calls for Russia to take independent positions.

¹⁸² Press statements following Russian-Indonesian talks", *President of Russia*, 30 June, 2022 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68789> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹⁸³ Dmitri Trenin, *What is Russia Up To In The Middle East?*, Polity Press, Cambridge,, 2018.

Arguably, “multipolarity and multilateralism” that the Indo-Pacific seeks to strengthen benefits Russia. A “strategic repositioning” could allow Russia to expand the boundaries of its Pivot to Asia. This could also help dilute the Western attempts to isolate Moscow.

It, therefore, makes strategic sense to explore congruence with the nuanced Indo-Pacific vision of non-Western countries.¹⁸⁴

However, this is likely predicated on Russia’s willingness to reimagine a new geostrategic maritime role for itself. Russia’s unique geographical position of straddling the Heartland and Rimland, at a time when the Indo-Pacific’s emphasis has been on visualising the continental and maritime areas of the two oceans as a seamless strategic space; does seem to provide it the necessary tools.

Today, when Russia is recalibrating its identity from a European to a Eurasian one, its Greater Eurasia construct, envisioned as a harmonious strategic space stretching across the continent, seems to aptly complement the Indo-Pacific.

Interestingly, at a fundamental level, there appear to be a number of similarities between Greater Eurasia¹⁸⁵ and the Indo-Pacific. This includes the emphasis on being “open and inclusive, developmental partnerships and building connectivity, respecting international law, and eschewing confrontation”.¹⁸⁶ The very fact that Russia has envisaged the Greater Eurasia project being open to all¹⁸⁷ is a reflection of its inclusivity and openness.

¹⁸⁴ “Japan-Russia Summit Telephone Talk”, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, October 7, 2021 at https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/rss/northern/page1e_000359.html (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹⁸⁵ “Expanded meeting of the Foreign Ministry Board”, *President of Russia*, November 18, 2021 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67123> (Accessed on September 10, 2025).

¹⁸⁶ Sergei Karaganov, “From Eastward Pivot to Greater Eurasia”, *International Affairs (Moscow)*, 63 (4), 2017, pp: 1-12.

¹⁸⁷ “Valdai Discussion Club Session”, no.141.

The Russian Far East could be the proverbial “connecting tissue” between Greater Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific. This could allow Russia to tap into the expertise of the Indo-Pacific countries, beyond China, to develop this underdeveloped region of Russia. It could also enable Russia to explore synergies of collaboration with the regional stakeholders in the ongoing attempts to build new supply chains. These vectors may perhaps, concomitantly, help Russia to address its Achilles’ heel i.e. its weak global economic foundation.

Russia appears to be positioning itself to benefit from the emerging opportunities. This was reflected in President Putin’s statement:

“There is one more prospective route, the Arctic – Siberia – Asia. The idea is to connect ports along the Northern Sea Route with ports of the Pacific and Indian oceans via roads in East Siberia and central Eurasia”.¹⁸⁸

Notably, these nuances could be an opportunity to wean Russia away from China. Moscow’s strategic compulsion of an entente with China amidst the Russia-West standoff further strengthens Beijing. As an independent pole, Russia strengthens the trend towards multipolarity.

EXPLORING AN INDIA-RUSSIA COMMON GROUND

With India and Russia seemingly having diverging priorities in this emerging geopolitical landscape, the key challenge will be to find the proverbial sweet spot of collaboration.

It is, therefore, imperative to remain invested by exploring new areas of congruence. The fact that India and Russia have a similar outlook on a “stable security architecture”, apart from “shared concerns over hegemonism” should hold them in good stead. As a result, instead of getting stuck on the semantics of “Indo-Pacific” or “Asia-Pacific”, both sides could focus on their mutual convergences. This stems from the opportunities that exist in finding a common ground.

¹⁸⁸ “Valdai Discussion Club Session”, no. 141.

Notably, India's Indo-Pacific outlook emphasises on not just ASEAN centrality but also inclusion of East Africa within the ambit of this construct. In many ways, it also complements Russia's Greater Eurasia concept as one seamless strategic region that connects the continental and the maritime spaces. Russia too has highlighted the centrality of ASEAN in the regional maritime space.¹⁸⁹

As External Affairs Minister Dr S. Jaishankar had stated in 2019, "Russia is a Pacific Power which has Indian Ocean interests" while "India is an Indian Ocean power with very strong and growing Pacific interest".¹⁹⁰

Notably for India, Russia is no stranger to the region. The presence of the Soviet Pacific Fleet's armada in the Indian Ocean during the 1971 War is etched in the folklore of the Indo-Russian strategic partnership.¹⁹¹ USSR's maritime move had possibly thwarted American designs in the region in support of Pakistan.

Today, a broad structure of New Delhi-Moscow collaboration already exists. This was elaborated by Prime Minister Modi in Vladivostok in 2019, when he launched the "Act Far East" policy. He stated:

"Vladivostok is a confluence of Eurasia and the Pacific. This presents opportunities for the Arctic and the Northern Sea routes. About three quarters of Russia's land is Asia. The Far East reinforces the Asian identity of this great country. India will provide a \$ 1-billion line of credit to further contribute to the development of the Far East. This is the first time that we are

¹⁸⁹ "Vladimir Putin and President of Vietnam To Lam's statements to the media", *President of Russia*, 20 June, 2024 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/74348> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

¹⁹⁰ "External Affairs Minister's Conversation with Valdaï Discussion Club, Moscow on 27 August 2019", *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*, October 19, 2019. <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/31957> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

¹⁹¹ "Calling the U.S.'s bluff in 1971", *The Hindu*, December 19, 2019 at <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/calling-the-uss-bluff-in-1971/article30341831.ece> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

giving a line of credit to a particular region of a country. My Government's Act East Policy has actively engaged with the East Asia. Today's announcement will prove to be the take-off point of the Act Far East policy and it is my firm belief that this step adds a new dimension to our economic diplomacy. We will be active participants in the development of the regions of our friendly countries according to their priorities".¹⁹²

This was seen as the "anchor for harmonising the two countries strategic outlook". The proposed Chennai-Vladivostok maritime corridor is a key pillar of this objective. This was elaborated by Prime Minister Modi:

"We are about to start a new era of cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. When the ships will start sailing between Vladivostok and Chennai, and when Vladivostok will become India's springboard in North East Asia market, India-Russia partnership will further deepen and flourish. Then the Far East will become a confluence of the Eurasian Union on one side and the open, free and inclusive Indo-Pacific on the other. Our relations in this region will have a strong foundation of rule-based order, respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity and abstaining from interfering in the internal affairs of a country".¹⁹³

The Indo-Pacific also came up for discussion during the Annual Summit held in December 2021. The joint statement reflected the attempts being made at finding a common ground:

"The Sides reaffirmed that the emerging regional security architecture should be free, open, transparent and inclusive, based

¹⁹² "Translation of Prime Minister's speech in Plenary Session of 5th Eastern Economic Forum", *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*, September 5, 2019 at <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/31798/translation+of+prime+ministers+speech+in+plenary+session+of+5th+eastern+economic+forum+september+05+2019> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

¹⁹³ Ibid.

on universally recognized principles of international law and aimed at maintaining international peace and security, developing friendly relations and mutually beneficial cooperation in the region. They agreed to strengthen joint efforts to build an architecture of equal and indivisible regional security. The Sides agreed to intensify consultations on complementarities between integration and development initiatives in greater Eurasian space and in the regions of Indian and Pacific oceans. They underscored their recognition of the ASEAN centrality in the regional architecture of security and cooperation and reiterated the importance of closer cooperation and consultations in various regional fora and initiatives such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD), to jointly contribute to regional peace, security and stability”.¹⁹⁴

India and Russia have agreed to “deepen cooperation in building stable and efficient transport corridors” including the Northern Sea Route.¹⁹⁵

Moreover, President Putin’s participation in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) debate on maritime security¹⁹⁶ chaired by Prime Minister Modi in August 2021 was seen as Russia’s tacit support to India’s vision of the Indo-Pacific. In a meeting skipped by the Chinese Premier, the event focussed on building a stable regional security

¹⁹⁴ “Joint Statement following the 23rd India - Russia Annual Summit”, *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*, December 5, 2021 at <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/40410> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ “UN Security Council high-level debate on maritime security”, *President of Russia*, August 9, 2021 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66352> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

architecture.¹⁹⁷ This debate was inherently critical of China's regional maritime playbook. Similarly, Russia's weapons exports to India, despite reported Chinese objections in the aftermath of the Galwan incident, is an indication of the Kremlin not letting Beijing have a veto over its foreign policy. These dynamics highlight Moscow's abiding interest in an enduring partnership with India.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Modi's July 2024 visit to Moscow, followed by the reciprocal visit of President Putin to New Delhi in December 2025, were a statement of intent to strengthen bilateral ties. A common theme across the two annual summits was the focus on joint projects in the Arctic and the Russian Far East. Similarly, the complementarities in their maritime outlook were evident in the joint statement even though both sides refrained from using the term, "Indo-Pacific":

“The Sides agreed to strengthen joint efforts to build an architecture of equal and indivisible regional security and to intensify consultations on complementarities between integration and development initiatives in Greater Eurasian space and in the regions of Indian and Pacific oceans.... Sides underlined the importance of strengthening cooperation within various regional fora, aimed at deepening regional peace and security, including East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum on Security (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus).”¹⁹⁸

Crucially, it appears that both sides remain engaged in exploring a congruence. India had strongly backed Russia's application for dialogue

¹⁹⁷ “Issuing Presidential Statement, Security Council Underlines Importance of Maritime Safety, Safeguarding Oceans for Legitimate Use”, *United Nations Security Council*, August 9, 2021 at <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sc14598.doc.htm> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

¹⁹⁸ “Joint Statement following the 22nd India-Russia Annual Summit”, *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*, 9 July, 2024 at https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dt1/37940/Joint_Statement_following_the_22nd_IndiaRussia_Annual_Summit (Accessed on September 15 2025).

partner status in the IORA. This has inevitably opened up new vistas of maritime cooperation. Similarly, the two sides have conducted a “joint PASSEX in the Arabian Sea”. The “exercise showcased cohesiveness and interoperability between the two navies and included tactical manoeuvres, cross-deck helicopter operations and seamanship activities”.¹⁹⁹ The export of BrahMos missiles to Philippines²⁰⁰ would not have taken place without the implicit approval of Russia, on account of India and Russia jointly developing this missile.

Needless to say, the key test of the “Special and Privileged” India-Russia partnership will be to “harmonise each other’s viewpoints”. A white shipping agreement along with a logistics sharing pact could provide the necessary ballast.

¹⁹⁹ “Indian Navy Passex With Russian Navy”, *Press Information Bureau*, January 16, 2022 at <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1790311#:~:text=Indian%20Navy's%20indigenously%20designed%20and,2022%20in%20the%20Arabian%20Sea>. (Accessed on September 15 2025).

²⁰⁰ “Philippines envoy hails BrahMos missiles as a ‘game changer’”, *The Hindu*, 24 June, 2024 at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/philippines-envoy-hails-brahmos-missiles-as-a-game-changer/article68328182.ece#:~:text=In%20January%202022%2C%20the%20Philippines,missiles%20was%20delivered%20this%20April>. (Accessed on September 15 2025).

GROWING WARMTH IN RUSSIA-PAKISTAN TIES

“The relationship between our states is marked by friendship. Our bilateral cooperation across various areas, along with our coordinated efforts to address many current regional challenges, including on the counterterrorist and Afghan tracks, has yielded significant benefits. I am confident that the constructive ties between Russia and Pakistan will continue to develop productively for the benefit of our nations and in the interests of international security and stability”

— statement by Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2024.²⁰¹

“No doubt, you did mention about the potential, which we do see and appreciate, that it’s a lot more than that. Be it in the energy sector, be it in the agricultural sector, be it in its security capacities, in its defence capabilities. There are so many areas where I personally feel that Pakistan and Russia have a convergence of interest – terrorism, for one. And the regional approach, which emanates particularly from Afghanistan and in and around the area which is traditionally more influenced by the Russian Federation, and the neighbourhood in which we reside along with China – deserves a regional and common approach other than extra-regional powers”

— statement by former Acting Prime Minister of Pakistan Anwar-ul-Haq Kakar during a meeting with President Putin in 2023.²⁰²

The two recent statements mentioned above aptly reflect the growing warmth in Russia-Pakistan ties. This is a remarkable turnaround given

²⁰¹ “Greetings to President of Pakistan Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister of Pakistan Shehbaz Sharif”, *President of Russia*, 14 August, 2024 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74867> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

²⁰² “Meeting with Acting Prime Minister of Pakistan Anwar-ul-Haq Kakar”, *President of Russia*, 17 October, 2023 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72523> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

their chequered history. It is also a sign that both sides have largely overcome the historical baggage that has marked Moscow's engagement with Islamabad, post the dissolution of the Soviet Union. These dynamics inevitably reaffirm the adage of "only permanent interests" shaping international diplomacy.

Notably, Russia and Pakistan were in the opposite camps of the Cold War bipolar confrontation. Islamabad's membership of SEATO and CENTO military pacts established its status as a frontline ally of the United States. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union signing the 1971 Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation agreement with India brought forth the Cold War rivalry in the Indian subcontinent. The agreement ensured that the USSR emerged as a bulwark for India against Pakistan.²⁰³ New Delhi relied not just on Soviet assistance in developing its comprehensive national power but also on the USSR's political backing at the UN to thwart Islamabad's anti-India advocacy. Similarly, Soviet support was a key factor in India's relatively smoother liberation of Bangladesh from the clutches of Pakistan – an event which inevitably scarred Islamabad's national psyche. This marked a period of Soviet Union's India-centric approach towards South Asia.

However, it was Pakistan's complicit role in being the staging ground for the United States containment strategy against Soviet Union in Afghanistan, that led to acute acrimony in mutual outlook. The Pakistan-US bloc's support to the Mujahedeen led to the biggest military defeat in Soviet history. The USSR's withdrawal took place against the backdrop of a casualty list that comprised 15,000 deaths and 30,000 injuries among Russian soldiers.²⁰⁴ Some argue that this epochal event

²⁰³ "Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Co-operation", *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*, 9 August, 1971 at <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/5139/Treaty+of> (Accessed on October 15 2025).

²⁰⁴ "7 Lessons Russian Strategists Learned From Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan", *The Moscow Times*, 23 December, 2019 at <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/12/23/seven-lessons-russian-strategists-inferred-from-soviet-intervention-in-afghanistan-a68726> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

in the Cold War rivalry hastened the dissolution of the Soviet Union.²⁰⁵ It inevitably left a bitter taste in Russian policy circles as well as in public opinion.

Today, with Pakistan adopting a neutral position on the Kremlin's war in Ukraine²⁰⁶, it would appear that the wheels of engagement have come a full circle. The Soviet Union had assisted Pakistan's nation building efforts in the 1950s and 1960s before bilateral ties nosedived. This had led to the establishment of the Karachi Steel plant as well as thermal power facilities in Muzaffargarh, Multan-II and Guddu. The USSR also helped in the setting up of Oil and Gas Development Corporation Ltd (OGDCL) and in the development of the agriculture sector.²⁰⁷

The pertinent questions, therefore, are on the key drivers and salience of this partnership; the challenges that both sides are likely to encounter; and the implications of this rapprochement for India.

I) GENESIS OF RECONCILIATION

Geopolitics and realpolitik appear to have played a crucial role in the reconciliation. The real boost to the détente seemingly came against the backdrop of Ukraine 1.0 in 2014. Russia's friction with the West reinforced the Kremlin's Pivot to Asia. Moscow's exploration of new partnerships, coincided with Pakistan's strategy of diversifying its foreign policy options. Incidentally, this period also coincided with India's perceived drift towards the West.

²⁰⁵ "Afghanistan Has Never Been Moscow or Washington's to Win or Lose", *The Moscow Times*, 16 August, 2021 at <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/08/16/afghanistan-has-never-been-moscow-or-washingtons-to-win-or-lose-a74801> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

²⁰⁶ "Pakistan stance on Ukraine unchanged: FO", *The Express Tribune*, 15 October, 2022 at Pakistan stance on Ukraine unchanged: FO (tribune.com.pk) (Accessed on September 15 2025).

²⁰⁷ "Pakistan-Russia Relations", *Embassy of Pakistan, Moscow* at <https://parepmoscow.com/en/pakistan-russia-relations/> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

The 2014 Defence Cooperation Agreement²⁰⁸ signed between Russia and Pakistan was, therefore, about both sides adjusting to new realities anchored to mutual benefit. Today, the transformation in ties is reflected in Pakistan's nuanced neutral position on the conflict in Ukraine. It has seen Islamabad abstain on resolutions critical of Russia at the UN while simultaneously calling for diplomatic solutions to conflict and respect for territorial integrity. This was reflected in the Permanent Representative of Pakistan to the UN Ambassador Munir Akram's explanation of vote on abstention:

“Pakistan fully supports the resolution's call for respect for the principle of the sovereignty, sovereign equality and territorial integrity of States and non-acquisition of territory by the threat or use of force....We attach highest priority to the immediate cessation of hostilities and the resumption of a dialogue to achieve a just and durable solution – through direct or indirect negotiations, mediation or other peaceful means.... Pakistan continues to hope that, in a constructive approach, the parties will soon accept a mutual and early cessation of hostilities. We also hope for the resumption of a dialogue for durable resolution of the conflict based on the principles of the UN Charter and past agreements, and bearing in mind the legitimate security interests of all States.”²⁰⁹

The abstentions are a major volte-face in Pakistan's traditional position of siding with the United States. Incidentally, the reactions of the US and Russia highlight their comfort levels with Pakistan's stand. While the US has been critical, Russia has viewed it as tacit support in line with several of Moscow's key traditional partners adopting similar

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ “Ambassador Munir Akram, Permanent Representative of Pakistan to the UN delivering Explanation of Vote by Pakistan after adoption of resolution during General Assembly: Eleventh Emergency Special Session (Ukraine)”, *Permanent Mission of Pakistan to the United Nations New York*, 23 February, 2023 at <https://pakun.org/official-statements/02232023-01> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

positions. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's statement to his Pakistani counterpart highlights Russia's approval:

"We are grateful to our Pakistani friends for their unbiased and balanced position on issues that, under the pretext of the Ukrainian crisis, are being thrown onto the agenda of international organisations.... Pakistan is our important foreign political partner. Relations with your country have intrinsic value for Russia and remain unaffected by changing, time-serving foreign policy considerations. Certainly, it is important to continue foreign policy exchanges and to compare our positions at this time of profound changes that we are witnessing on the international scene. This will make it possible to better see prospects for our movement forward. Pakistan and Russia share similar positions on most topical international and regional issues. We cooperate closely at the UN, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and other venues."²¹⁰

Unsurprisingly, ties between Russia and Pakistan are today acquiring form and substance. This is evident in the diverse nature of their engagement.

Political ties have become robust. There exist annual Foreign Ministry consultations. High-level visits have also become a recurring event. This has seen Foreign Ministers of both sides pay reciprocal visits apart from pull-aside meetings at the UN and at the SCO. Similarly, President Putin has met Pakistani Prime Ministers on the side-lines of each SCO summit since Pakistan became a member in 2018. Notably, former Prime Minister Imran Khan paid the first official visit to Russia in 23 years in 2022²¹¹, although the event was overshadowed by Russia

²¹⁰ "Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions during a joint news conference following talks with Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan Bilawal Bhutto Zardari", *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, 30 January, 2023 at <https://www.mid.ru/en/maps/pk/1851133/> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

²¹¹ "Meeting with Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan", *President of Russia*, 24 February, 2022 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67844> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

initiating its “special military operation” in Ukraine on the day of bilateral talks. In the same vein, inter-parliamentary delegations have paid reciprocal visits highlighting a desire on both sides to strengthen institutional engagements.²¹² This has seen Russia and Pakistan also cooperate in various multilateral mechanisms of the SCO. Incidentally, Pakistan’s application for BRICS membership in 2024²¹³ highlights its calculation to ride the wave of new equations with Moscow during Russia’s annual BRICS Presidency in the same year. It has also evinced interest in joining the EEU.²¹⁴

Meanwhile, economic ties are on an upswing. Bilateral trade touched a record US\$ 1 billion in 2024.²¹⁵ Russia will assist Pakistan in modernising Soviet-era steel plants. The flagship project, however, is the 1,100-kms-long Pakistan Stream gas pipeline project from Karachi to Lahore. Russia also provided 1 lakh tonne oil to Pakistan in their first government-to-government contract.²¹⁶ This deal, executed under the overhang of Western sanctions, was paid for in Yuan.²¹⁷ The two sides

²¹² Interview of Russian Ambassador to Pakistan H.E. Mr. Albert Khorev to the TASS News Agency”, *Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan*, 2 February, 2024 at https://pakistan.mid.ru/en/news/on_the_interview_of_russian_ambassador_to_pakistan_h_e_mr_albert_khorev_to_the_tass_news_agency/ (Accessed on September 15 2025).

²¹³ “BRICS move meant to position Islamabad alongside strong economies, says Mushahid”, *Dawn*, 20 June, 2024 at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1840766> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

²¹⁴ Interview of Russian Ambassador to Pakistan H.E. Mr. Albert Khorev to the TASS News Agency”, *Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan*, 2 February, 2024 at https://pakistan.mid.ru/en/news/on_the_interview_of_russian_ambassador_to_pakistan_h_e_mr_albert_khorev_to_the_tass_news_agency/ (Accessed on September 15 2025).

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ “Exclusive: Pakistan paid in Chinese currency for discounted Russian oil”, *Reuters*, 13 June, 2023 at <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/pakistans-russian-crude-shipment-paid-chinese-currency-minister-2023-06-12/> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

have even discussed barter trade of other commodities to circumvent sanctions.²¹⁸

Health and food diplomacy too have gained traction. Russia provided 2 lakh Sputnik vaccines during the pandemic.²¹⁹ It also sold 1 million tonne of food grains in 2024.²²⁰

Incidentally, the economic content of ties is driven by the Russia-Pakistan Inter-Governmental Commission (RPIGC) on Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation.²²¹ IGC is Russia's toolkit for shaping ties with close partners.

Security cooperation too is on the agenda, though on a limited scale. After Russia lifted the weapons embargo on Pakistan in 2014, it has sold 4 Mi-35 helicopters apart from a few small arms and light weapons (SALWs).²²² Military exercises dubbed "Friendship" take place on an annual basis. There are also frequent military and ministerial official

²¹⁸ "Meeting with Prime Minister of Pakistan Shehbaz Sharif", *President of Russia*, 3 July, 2024 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74458> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

²¹⁹ "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news conference with Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan Makhdoom Shah Mahmood Qureshi", *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, 7 April, 2021 at <https://www.mid.ru/en/maps/pk/1419105/> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

²²⁰ "Meeting with Acting Prime Minister of Pakistan Anwar-ul-Haq Kakar", *President of Russia*, 17 October, 2023 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72523> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

²²¹ Interview of Russian Ambassador to Pakistan H.E. Mr. Albert Khorev to the TASS News Agency", *Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan*, 2 February, 2024 at https://pakistan.mid.ru/en/news/on_the_interview_of_russian_ambassador_to_pakistan_h_e_mr_albert_khorev_to_the_tass_news_agency/ (Accessed on September 15 2025).

²²² "Russia begins delivery of advanced assault helicopters to Pakistan", *The Express Tribune*, 15 April, 2018 at https://tribune.com.pk/story/1686177/russia-begins-delivery-advanced-assault-helicopters-pakistan#google_vignette (Accessed on September 15 2025).

visits apart from Pakistani armed forces personnel receiving anti-terrorist training in Russian institutions.

The structured defence engagement is evident in the consultative mechanisms at play. These include²²³:

1. Working Group on Defence Cooperation
2. Military Advisory Committee on Defence and Security Issues
3. Joint Working Group (JWG) on Combatting International Terrorism and Other Challenges to Security

Interestingly, Russia and Pakistan appear to be making a concerted effort to shape their public opinion favourably towards this partnership. This stems from the need to address residual suspicion in the public eye. The media as well as think-tanks are vital tools in this Russian and Pakistani approach.

II) DRIVERS AND SALIENCE OF TIES

Russia

It appears that both tactical as well as strategic calculations are involved in Russia's outreach to Pakistan.

One of the key drivers seems to be Afghanistan. Over the last one-and-a-half decade, Russia has increasingly looked at Pakistan through the prism of ensuring stability in Afghanistan. In this, a perception of Islamabad being an indispensable actor on the Afghan geopolitical chessboard has gained traction in Moscow.²²⁴

²²³ "The fourth meeting of the Russian-Pakistani military advisory committee on defense and security issues was held in Moscow", *Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation*, 14 December, 2023 at https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12491165@egNews (Accessed on September 15 2025).

²²⁴ O. Barabanov, "Prospects for Cooperation Between Russia and Pakistan", *Valdai Discussion Club*, 6 June, 2022 at <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/prospects-for-cooperation-russia-and-pakistan/?ysclid=m0qdwkf8ke797300427> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

Russia remains concerned about a spill-over of radicalisation and terrorism from Afghanistan into neighbouring Central Asia. Ethnic linkages and porous borders have facilitated this transmission in the past. Radical elements in CARs have a track record of inciting violence in Russia.

Similarly, Russia and Pakistan appear to have a shared convergence on tackling terrorism emanating from Afghanistan. This includes the threat posed by the Islamic State (IS) and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The Moscow terror attacks in April 2024 carried out by Tajik elements of IS highlight the continuing danger emanating from the region.²²⁵ The IS is known to have proclaimed the Khorasan Caliphate which encompasses most of Central Asia and parts of Russia.²²⁶

To ensure stability in Afghanistan, Russia continues to engage the Taliban 2.0 regime. This includes the ongoing initiative to remove the organisation from Russia's banned terror organisations list.²²⁷ Moscow has also sought to proactively engage other regional stakeholders in finding a way out of the quagmire. These involve the Moscow Format, the Regional Quartet and the Neighbours of Afghanistan Format.²²⁸

²²⁵ "Russia Says Found Link to Ukraine on Concert Attack Suspect's Phone", *The Moscow Times*, 5 April, 2024 at <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/04/05/russia-says-found-link-to-ukraine-on-concert-attack-suspects-phone-a84750> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

²²⁶ "How ISIS-K leader forged one of Islamic State's most fearsome groups", *Reuters*, 26 March, 2024 at <https://www.reuters.com/world/leader-isis-group-linked-moscow-attack-has-global-ambitions-2024-03-25/> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

²²⁷ "Russian ministries propose to Putin to remove Taliban from terrorist list — envoy", *TASS*, 27 May, 2024 at <https://tass.com/politics/1793853> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

²²⁸ "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions during a joint news conference following talks with Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan Bilawal Bhutto Zardari", *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, 20 January, 2023 at <https://www.mid.ru/en/maps/pk/1851133/> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

Unsurprisingly, Pakistan finds a place in all these dialogue mechanisms. Coordinating positions with Pakistan, therefore, appears to be a key part of the Russian strategic compass.

In fact, a key focus of official discussions between Moscow and Islamabad is on tackling terrorism. This is evident in their joint anti-terror exercises as well as training imparted to Pakistani armed forces personnel in Russia. The Kremlin's perception of Pakistan's central role in the region is evident in President Putin's following statement:

"After all, Afghanistan is aspiring to be a modern state. And it seems to me that Pakistan plays a no less important part in this than Russia or China. This is why we are interested in promoting cooperation, including with your country, to achieve a common, desirable result."²²⁹

A similar sentiment on tackling terror was echoed by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov during his meeting with his Pakistan counterpart in 2023:

"The fight against terrorism is the most important area of our joint efforts. We talked about this in detail today. During the talks, news came of another terrorist attack near a mosque in Peshawar. There are casualties. We join in the condolences. At the same time, we insist that the fight against terrorism must be intensified throughout the world and conducted without applying double standards or flirting with terrorist groups in order to achieve political goals. Some of our Western colleagues are often guilty of this sin. We have decided to continue our pragmatic partnership in the anti-terrorist area, both bilaterally (we have relevant working groups at the level of deputy ministers) and in multilateral formats, primarily in the UN and the SCO."²³⁰

²²⁹ "Valdai Discussion Club meeting", *President of Russia*, 21 October, 2021 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66975> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

²³⁰ "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions during a joint news conference following talks with Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan Bilawal Bhutto Zardari", *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, 20 January, 2023 at <https://www.mid.ru/en/maps/pk/1851133/> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

Meanwhile, Russia's Ambassador to Pakistan had earlier remarked:

“I want to laud Pakistan's role and sacrifices in the war against terrorism. Pakistan lost lives and suffered huge economic losses....Pakistan stands like a pillar in the global war against terrorism, and this role of Pakistan should be acknowledged by everyone internationally.”²³¹

Incidentally, Russia taking a lead in regional discussions helps Moscow convey a message to the global community that it remains relevant and cannot be isolated. In fact, these dialogue formats are a vital toolkit of Russia projecting itself as a global pole.

From this flows Russia's Greater Eurasia concept. In this, Pakistan's strategic location at the crossroads of South, Central and West Asia appears to drive Russia's outlook. The concept seeks to promote the creation of a Russia-led, pan-Eurasian zone of collaboration. Its success would depend on carrying every stakeholder along. Robust connectivity linkages could fulfil Russia's historical endeavour of accessing the warm waters of the Indian Ocean.

Similarly, Pakistan's membership in the SCO makes it a key point of focus for Russia. Over the last decade, Moscow has sought to promote the SCO as a credible, non-Western organisation. This is part of Russia's larger gameplan to provide countries options beyond the West in the Kremlin's efforts to dilute Western dominance in the global order. As such, the efficacy of the SCO would depend on the deliverables it can produce in the spheres of economic growth, security, cultural ties, education and connectivity.

Meanwhile, Pakistan's cooling-off in ties with the United States during the Biden Presidency was unlikely to have been lost on Moscow. Amidst

²³¹ “Envoy terms Pakistan buying Russian oil a bilateral strategic deal”, *The Nation*, 1 May, 2023 at <https://www.nation.com.pk/01-May-2023/envoy-terms-pakistan-buying-russian-oil-a-bilateral-strategic-deal> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

the Russia-US geopolitical tussle, Moscow and Washington D.C. have often viewed engagements of their partners with their rivals through the lens of a zero-sum game. In this, strengthening Islamabad's strategic autonomy would be a part of Russia's realpolitik. This could also firewall Russia from any future US endeavour to use Pakistan as a staging ground in containing Russia.

Interestingly, a robust engagement with Pakistan, an Islamic country, could help build the Kremlin's domestic equities. Almost 15 per cent of Russia's population, which stands at 19 million, comprises of Muslims — majority of them being Sunni.²³² Ties with Islamabad are likely to be looked upon favourably by this big section. This is particularly relevant at a time when foreign policy is a source of domestic legitimacy. Notably, Russia has supported Pakistan's initiative to establish an International Day to Combat Islamophobia. Russia's Ambassador to Pakistan sought to reinforce Moscow's secular credentials by highlighting the country being a melting pot of religions. He stated: "We have over 800 big mosques all across the country. Russian Christians, Muslims and other confessions live side by side in peace".²³³

Similarly, engaging with Pakistan may open up new pathways of cooperation with West Asian countries. Islamabad appears to retain a few equities with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. In fact, states like UAE have emerged today as a key bulwark for Russia against the Western sanctions.²³⁴

In this outreach to Pakistan, Russia appears to be relying on the areas where it retains a competitive edge over others. This includes energy and defence. In fact, energy-deficit Pakistan offers Moscow a new

²³² "Pakistan a friend and a reliable partner", *Daily Times*, 12 June, 2023 at https://dailytimes.com.pk/1102564/pakistan-a-friend-and-a-reliable-partner/#google_vignette (Accessed on September 15 2025).

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ "U.S., allies press UAE over Russia trade, sanctions", *Reuters*, 1 May, 2024 at <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-allies-press-uae-over-russia-trade-sanctions-2024-05-01/> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

market amidst the Western boycott of Russian energy. Unsurprisingly, bilateral dialogue is increasingly anchored to hydrocarbon and security cooperation.

Pakistan

Pakistan's outreach to Russia can be seen through the prism of a recalibration in its geostrategic outlook. Presently, Islamabad appears keen to diversify its foreign policy options. Inherently, alliances undermine flexibility of choice especially in a world in flux. Pakistan's new strategy includes leveraging its geographical location to strengthen its regional position. The National Security Policy (NSP) (2022-2026) aptly highlights Pakistan's calculus:

“Cultivate broad-based relationships with global powers through a proactive, pragmatic, and unapologetic approach based on shared convergence on strategic and economic interests. Minimise potential threats, maintain diversified foreign policy options, and enhance the role of economic diplomacy in our foreign policy initiatives.... Our geoeconomically pivotal location affords Pakistan the ability to offer itself as a melting pot of regional and global economic interests through connectivity initiatives.”²³⁵

This was echoed by the Foreign Ministry spokesperson's statement that Pakistan wants to have “broad-based, objective, balanced and mutually beneficial relationships with all major powers”.²³⁶

In this light, a robust relationship with Russia would inevitably strengthen Islamabad's strategic autonomy. Pakistan may even play the Russia card to seek concessions from the United States.

²³⁵ “National Security Policy of Pakistan 2022-2026”, Government of Pakistan at <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://static.theprint.in/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/NSP.pdf> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

²³⁶ “Pakistan stance on Ukraine unchanged: FO”, *The Express Tribune*, 15 October, 2022 at <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2381692/pakistan-stance-on-ukraine-unchanged-fo> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

Meanwhile, the rapprochement is perhaps also a recognition of Russia's levers of influence in Eurasia. This is particularly relevant at a time when Pakistan has sought to expand its footprints in Central Asia. Syncing up with Russia's Greater Eurasia concept would, as such, appear to be a prudent move. This could even allow Pakistan to co-opt Eurasian states into the CPEC, thereby not only making the project financially viable but also strengthening Islamabad's regional position. The country's Eurasian approach, as such, is broadly spelt out in its NSP:

“Pakistan's geoeconomic pivot is focused on enhancing trade and economic ties through connectivity that links Central Asia to our warm waters. Under 'Vision Central Asia', Pakistan is working towards actualising agreements on energy and transit with the Central Asian Republics. Pakistan is committed to reimagining its partnership with Russia in energy, defence cooperation, and investment. The relationship is already witnessing a positive trajectory and Pakistan will continue to strive to maximise mutual gains. Russia, Central Asian countries, and Pakistan are also important partners in our shared objectives of peace and stability in Afghanistan.”²³⁷

In the same vein, its application for the BRICS membership is anchored to entailing concomitant benefits. This includes access to the grouping's New Development Bank's loans. Incidentally, Pakistan's chequered financial engagement with the IMF, including stringent conditionality attached to its loans, has often caused much heartburn in Islamabad.²³⁸ The Fund's lending is also seen as a Western geopolitical tool to shape a country's outlook.²³⁹

²³⁷ Ibid (35).

²³⁸ “Dar's diatribe against the IMF”, *Dawn*, 12 September, 2024 at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1858471/dars-diatribe-against-the-imf> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

²³⁹ Ibid.

Today, Pakistan can tap into Russia's diplomatic, energy and weapons heft. For a country which is overwhelmingly energy dependent and grappling with a balance of payment crisis amidst energy occupying the lion's share of imports²⁴⁰, discounted Russian oil can significantly cushion the blow. Energy affordability goes hand in glove with energy security. Similarly, Russian grains are a key component of Pakistan's food security. Also, Russian weapons could give Pakistan options while enabling it to strengthen ties with a major weapons producer. Arms sales are known to create a favourable lock-in scenario between the sellers and buyers.

Crucially, realpolitik would dictate Pakistan leveraging the ongoing reconciliation to try to wean Russia away from India or at least temper Russia's perceived pro-India position on several of Pakistan's core concerns.

Unsurprisingly, in bilateral engagements, Pakistan has sought to project a pre-eminent role of Russia in the region. This is evident in the following statements by the Pakistani leadership when meeting their Russian counterparts:

“Your Excellency, we want to build our relations with your great country with full commitment and full dedication, because you are a superpower. Pakistan stands to gain from this mutual cooperation, mutual understanding, promoting trade, investment, and other areas.”²⁴¹

“This is the Asian century. Eurasia has to work together. We are particularly happy to get oil from Russia, and work on closer diplomatic and political relationship. We reject any new cold war and expansion of NATO. We feel, in the 21st century, peace, cooperation and

²⁴⁰ “Pakistan a major fossil fuel importer”, *The Express Tribune*, 6 January, 2023 at <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2394481/pakistan-a-major-fossil-fuel-importer> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

²⁴¹ “Meeting with Prime Minister of Pakistan Shehbaz Sharif”, *President of Russia*, 15 September, 2022 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69355> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

connectivity is the need of the hour. We want to be on the side of connectivity and moving progress and building the Asian Century. Russia, China, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey would be partners in this goal for a better tomorrow.”²⁴²

“We are even more close culturally in terms of value systems. The Orthodox Christianity does represent cultural values which are very close to home – family, ethical values, which is probably not that much popular beyond this region, which has more...well, Russia has a Eurasian identity, you have a presence in Europe and a presence in Asia. But at core, at heart, we feel we are more Asians, and we feel more near you.”²⁴³

III) CHALLENGES

However, since the devil lies in the details as always, it may not be smooth sailing. Western sanctions hang like the proverbial Sword of Damocles while doing business with Russia. Pakistan’s reluctance to fast-track projects was implicitly highlighted by the Russian Ambassador to Islamabad who stated:

“I can tell you that we already have a flagship project, the Pakistani Stream, which would transport gas from the Karachi area to the Punjab. The problem lies with the Western sanctions, because the United States is threatening the participants of this project with consequences. And you understand that we are in a direct conflict with the United States. So basically it is a question which the Government of Pakistan should find its own answer to. Because we cannot and we will not try to influence sovereign

²⁴² “Purchasing oil from Russia win win situation for Islamabad, Moscow: envoy”, *Dawn*, 28 April, 2023 at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1749640?ref=whatsapp> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

²⁴³ “Meeting with Acting Prime Minister of Pakistan Anwar-ul-Haq Kakar”, *President of Russia*, 17 October, 2023 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72523> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

decisions of the sovereign Pakistani Government. We understand that your country faces certain economic difficulties and we would not like to impose anything on your government. I stress – we would never condemn Pakistan for its refusal to expedite something which may hurt your country. The bottom line is that in order to make progress we need a political decision.”²⁴⁴

Unsurprisingly, most of the bilateral economic projects have not taken off. This includes the flagship Pakistan Stream pipeline which has been re-negotiated several times since its signing in 2015. Discussions on barter system have also stalled due to the failure in arriving at a fair value of exchange. Similarly, the proposed gas pipeline from Russia is fraught with security risks, posed by it having to pass through Afghanistan, apart from having a long gestation period. The two sides have also been unable to agree upon an investor protection agreement.²⁴⁵ With regard to weapons sales, questions have been raised on whether Pakistan has the resources to purchase modern arms amidst an acute financial crisis.

In the same vein, Pakistan’s aspiration to join the EEU can be vetoed by Armenia. This is on account of Islamabad refusing to recognise Yerevan as a sovereign state.²⁴⁶ It is also a key partner of Armenia’s archrival in Azerbaijan. Pakistan’s aspiration for gaining the BRICS membership too may not look very promising. India’s presence in the grouping can scuttle its membership aspirations.

²⁴⁴ “Pakistan a friend and a reliable partner”, *Daily Times*, 12 June, 2023 at https://dailytimes.com.pk/1102564/pakistan-a-friend-and-a-reliable-partner/#google_vignette (Accessed on September 15 2025).

²⁴⁵ “No Obstacle in purchase of Russian oil, says Nikolay Shulginov”, *The Nation*, 18 January, 2023 at <https://www.nation.com.pk/18-Jan-2023/no-obstacle-in-purchase-of-russian-oil-says-nikolay-shulginov> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

²⁴⁶ “Ambassador: Pakistani Embassy is determined to do everything possible to deepen cooperation with Baku”, *Azernews*, 14 August, 2024 at <https://www.azernews.az/nation/229859.html> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

The two sides also have had to navigate reports of Pakistan providing 155 mm shells to Ukraine for its offensive against Russia, a charge that has been vehemently denied by Islamabad.²⁴⁷

Against the backdrop of these dynamics, Pakistan's Ambassador to Russia, unsurprisingly, has recently stated that "substantial and tangible steps are required to pave the way of the visit of President Putin to Pakistan".²⁴⁸

IV) IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

The growing warmth in Russia-Pakistan ties is a new reality in the Indian subcontinent. Traditionally, Russia has been the bulwark for India on issues concerning Pakistan. This included the Soviet Union vetoing Pakistan's insidious resolutions on Kashmir at the UN. It was also the Soviet posturing in the waters of the Indian Ocean in support of India during the 1971 war which deterred the US from coming to the aid of Pakistan. Russian weapons have formed the core of India's defence and deterrence against India's adversaries including Pakistan.

Today, Russia's position on some of India's sensitive matters appears more measured. This includes the issue of terrorism. Russia has appreciated Pakistan's role in tackling terrorism apart from empathising with it when Islamabad had been at the receiving end of terror attacks. A pro-Pakistan sentiment appears to be gaining ground in Russia as well, particularly within the Russian think-tanks and academia.

As such, Pakistan might use this rapprochement to try to wean Russia away from India. It could also seek to attach itself to Russia to expand

²⁴⁷ "Pakistan signed contracts with US firms for arms sales to Ukraine: report", *Dawn*, 15 November, 2023 at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1789451> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

²⁴⁸ "More Substantial And Tangible Steps Are Required For Putin's Visit To Pakistan : Russian Envoy", *Pakistan in the World*, 13 September, 2023 at <https://pakistanintheworld.pk/live/more-substantial-and-tangible-steps-are-required-for-putins-visit-to-pakistan-russian-envoy/> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

its footprints in Central Asia. In the process, Pakistan could carry out its anti-India advocacy in the region. Notably, Russia seems to be reverting to its 1960s posture of de-hyphenating its approaches to India and Pakistan.

However, it would appear that this engagement is par for course for countries which follow a multi-vectored foreign policy. This necessitates a more pragmatic approach towards engagement with others. It includes adjusting to the reality of having diverging priorities. At the end of the day, international relations is not a zero-sum game.

In fact, India-Russia ties stand on their own merit. India can play the strategic card to temper Russia's rapprochement with Pakistan if it turns out to be inimical to India's interests. This includes leveraging not just the size of India's market but also India's growing profile on the global stage.

However, it is also crucial to be aware of each other's sensitivities and red lines through frequent conversations to overcome misgivings. In this light, Russia's actions seem to be within India's comfort zone. It has also backed India on Article 370²⁴⁹ and refrained from conducting military exercises or joint projects in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK). It has not sold lethal weapons to Islamabad which can alter the balance of power between India and Pakistan, seemingly on the request of Prime Minister Modi to his Russian counterpart. Russian leaders have sought to assuage India's concerns as well. This includes Foreign Minister Lavrov emphasising on the focus of military exercises being limited to anti-terror while Russia's ambassador to Pakistan had stated that the CPEC remains a bilateral project between Pakistan and China.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁹ “‘Within framework of the Constitution’: Russia backs India on Kashmir move”, *Hindustan Times*, 13 June, 2020 at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/russia-backs-india-on-kashmir-issue/story-4ZQWFxW56lev3kmHPHGQ8J.html> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

²⁵⁰ “PM Khan's Russia visit to strengthen bilateral ties: Russian ambassador”, *The Nation*, 22 February, 2022 at <https://www.nation.com.pk/22-Feb-2022/pm-khan-s-russia-visit-to-strengthen-bilateral-ties-russian-ambassador> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

INDIA-RUSSIA PARTNERSHIP IN A CHANGING WORLD

Prime Minister Modi's landmark trip to Moscow in July 2024 and President Putin's reciprocal visit to New Delhi in December 2025, highlight a statement of strategic intent on the part of India and Russia to strengthen bilateral ties. In fact, it was pointed out that the Government of India had accorded its "warmest welcome" to Putin till date.

It has set the tone for the future by laying down a definitive blueprint. In this, the economic agenda, seen as the weakest link in ties, has been prioritised. It involves unlocking its potential by addressing the prevailing gaps. These include connectivity, banking and payments channels, trade in national currencies, trade imbalance and tariff and non-tariff barriers. Participating in each other's growth stories through mutual investments is also one of the stakes. The trade target of US\$ 100 billion by 2030 would place Russia in India's hundred-billion-dollar trade club comprising of China, US and the EU.²⁵¹ Incidentally, this economic agenda will inevitably clash with Western attempts to isolate Russia.

The visits, perhaps, also signal a shift away from the overwhelming focus on their defence partnership often described as the backbone of ties. This is notwithstanding the agreement on joint spare parts manufacturing not just for India but also for third countries using

²⁵¹ "Leaders' Joint Statement on the development of strategic areas of Russia-India economic cooperation for the period up to 2030", *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*, 9 July, 2024 at https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dt1/37939/Leaders_Joint_Statement_on_the_development_of_strategic_areas_of_RussiaIndia_economic_cooperation_for_the_period_up_to_2030 (Accessed on September 15 2025).

Russian weapons, thereby adding a new dimension to bilateral defence ties.

Incidentally, the bonhomie between Prime Minister Modi and President Putin really stood out during their discussions. The two have met each other more than 17 times in the last decade.²⁵² It is pertinent to note that the optics of their very public association is in sharp contrast to the demonisation of Putin in the West, amidst Western attempts to isolate Russia for its war against Ukraine. Prime Minister Modi also appreciated the Russian leader's stewardship of Russia during the last quarter of a century.²⁵³

The importance attached by India and Russia to their bilateral relationship was aptly reflected in the statement of the two leaders:

*"Over the past nearly 25 years, Russia-India relations have grown stronger across all areas. . . . Our relations are blossoming and getting stronger as time goes by. Our cooperation relies on partnerships between people. These partnerships grow into hope for a better future for our people. Moreover, it represents a guarantee for the future of our people. . . . Our relationship is extremely important not only for our two countries, but is also of great significance for the entire world. In the current global context, India and Russia, as well as their partnership, have taken on a new importance. We are both convinced that further efforts are needed to ensure global stability and peace. In the future, we will continue to work together to achieve these goals."*²⁵⁴

– Statement by Prime Minister Modi.

²⁵² "English rendering of PM's address to the Indian Community in Russia", *Press Information Bureau, Government of India*, 9 July, 2024 at <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=2031686> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

²⁵³ "English rendering of PM's address to the Indian Community in Russia", *Press Information Bureau, Government of India*, 9 July, 2024 at <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=2031686> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

²⁵⁴ "Presenting the Order of St Andrew the Apostle to Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi", *President of Russia*, 9 July, 2024 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74517> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

*“Our countries have long-time friendship and good relations that have evolved over the decades. This year, we are marking the 77th anniversary of diplomatic relations.... Today, our relations have the status of a specially privileged strategic partnership. We are in permanent contact, and we prioritise the development of trade and economic ties. Certainly, their development meets the interests of the people of India and the peoples of the Russian Federation.”*²⁵⁵

– Statement by President Putin.

However, the rejuvenation of bilateral ties can only take place if both sides implement their new blueprint. It would involve navigating the pulls and pressures of their often diverging, geostrategic agenda. Their vastly different external environments have necessitated robust engagements with countries which India and Russia equate as their respective adversaries.

The pertinent questions, therefore, are regarding the geopolitical context in which India-Russia ties operate; salience of their partnership; nature of strategic dissonance; and the way ahead in their relationship.

GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT OF INDIA-RUSSIA TIES

India and Russia have been a key constant in their foreign policy calculus in the last half a century. It certainly appears that the genesis of their ties lies in geopolitics. The 1960s and the 1970s brought India and the Soviet Union closer on account of their shared convergence on China. Their friction with Beijing was a key common denominator. The added involvement of the US in propping up China and Pakistan against USSR and India respectively, concretised their partnership. It eventually led to the epochal 1971 Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation. From here on, the Soviet Union played an invaluable role in strengthening India's comprehensive national power. It involved aid and technical support for fast-tracking India's transformation from an agrarian society, within the spheres of defence, energy, space research,

²⁵⁵ “Beginning of the Russia-India talks”, *President of Russia*, 9 July, 2024 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/74519> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

nuclear technology, education and infrastructure. The robust bilateral engagement translated into an equally potent support at the UNSC. The USSR shielded India from Pakistan's anti-India advocacy especially on Kashmir. The Soviet armada's presence in the waters of the Indian Ocean during India's war with Pakistan in 1971, played a pivotal role in deterring the US from coming to the aid of Islamabad. These dynamics created an enormous reservoir of mutual goodwill which, incidentally, exists even today. Most Indians have warm memories of Russia being a reliable partner. This was aptly reflected by Prime Minister Modi in his speech to the Indian diaspora in Russia:

"I have long been an admirer of the special bond between India and Russia. When we hear the word Russia, every Indian immediately thinks of our partner in joy and sorrow, our trusted friend. Our Russian friends call it "Druzhba," and in Hindi, we call it 'Dosti' (friendship). Despite the severe winters in Russia, the warmth of India-Russia friendship has always remained strong and positive. This relationship rests on a solid foundation of mutual trust and respect."²⁵⁶

Meanwhile, India stood by Moscow amidst the turbulence caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union. This involved the signing of the Rupee-Rouble debt agreement. Similarly, New Delhi's defence orders kept the Russian military industrial complex's production lines going. It enabled generation of employment as well as valuable hard currency. It also acted as an "innovation stimulus". India's requirements forced Russia to push the S&T envelope. Moscow deployed the newly developed advanced technologies not only for its own armed forces but also sought to diffuse the military technology into the civilian sector, for its economic modernisation. India also backed Putin in his early years when majority of the countries had written off Russia. Subsequent Indian leaderships remained invested in Russia. Even today, there is a broad political consensus that ties with Russia be preserved.

²⁵⁶ "English rendering of PM's address to the Indian Community in Russia", *Press Information Bureau, Government of India*, 9 July, 2024 at <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=2031686>(Accessed on September 15 2025).

Unsurprisingly, Putin remains the key architect from the Russian side in driving the “Special and Privileged” bilateral ties in the last 25 years. His contribution was acknowledged by Prime Minister Modi who recently stated:

“I must especially commend the leadership of my dear friend President Putin for nurturing this enduring friendship between India and Russia over more than two decades. I have visited Russia six times in the last decade, meeting President Putin on 17 occasions during these years. Each meeting has strengthened our mutual trust and respect.”²⁵⁷

Today, however, geopolitics appears to cast a shadow on India-Russia ties. This includes the war in Ukraine and China’s growing assertiveness. The weaponisation of interdependence across trade, energy and technology has increasingly led to a division of camps. The stasis at the UNSC has contributed to major rebalancing. In this, India’s border friction with China and Russia’s proxy war with the US has led to new alignments in New Delhi’s and Moscow’s foreign policies. India has qualitatively stepped up its engagement with the United States and Europe. Russia is relying on China to withstand the Western geopolitical pressure. However, these alignments apparently come with a price — of being more accommodative of their new partner’s concerns, which is in effect choosing sides. This has seen India face Western pressure to boycott Russia. Similarly, China has called upon Russia to refrain from selling weapons to India, thereby effectively diluting the core of India-Russia strategic partnership.

These dynamics make for difficult choices amidst the strategic necessity of India and Russia’s new engagements. While deft balancing is seen as a way out of the quandary, yet it often makes for uncomfortable equations with both their old as well as new partners.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

In this light, Prime Minister Modi's visit to Moscow is a benchmark of the importance attached by New Delhi and Moscow to their bilateral relationship. The symbolism as well as signalling of the trip stood out. It included Russia being the first foreign destination of Modi's third term in office — a privilege he had earlier accorded to India's immediate neighbours as part of the country's Neighbourhood First policy. Interestingly, Prime Minister Modi had the option of combining the annual summit with Russia's BRICS Presidency scheduled for October 2024 instead of undertaking a standalone visit in July. His expected participation in the BRICS summit is likely to lead to an unprecedented second meeting with the Russian President to "close the books on joint work in implementing the agreements reached during visit to Moscow and outline some prospects for the near future"²⁵⁸. Similarly, the conferment of Russia's highest national award, the Order of St Andrew the Apostle on Prime Minister Modi, highlighted Russia's abiding interest in strengthening ties with India. The affinity for the Indian Prime Minister was evident in Putin's statement:

"By presenting the Order of St Andrew the Apostle, we express sincere gratitude for the contribution you have made to strengthening friendship and mutual understanding between our countries and nations. You have always been a strong advocate of expanding contacts with Russia. Back when you were the chief minister of the state of Gujarat, you proposed establishing sister ties with Russian regions, in particular, with the Astrakhan Region. As the head of the Indian government for the past ten years, you have made tangible efforts to ensure that Russia-India relations become a specially privileged strategic partnership. It is with your direct support that largest Russia-India projects have been implemented successfully in trade and the economy, in the military-technical industry, nuclear and hydrogen energy, in high technology and space development. It is hard to overestimate your contribution to shaping a steady foundation for Russia-

²⁵⁸ "Meeting with National Security Advisor of India Ajit Kumar Doval", *President of Russia*, 12 September, 2024 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/75088> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

India cooperation in the international arena, where both our countries protect the principles of multipolarity and strict compliance with international law.”²⁵⁹

Crucially, it was India signalling its strategic autonomy anchored to the country's national interests. The implication in this is that ties with both Russia and the US remain vital for India. And that it would not let one country influence India's ties with the other. This posture is evident in India continuing to engage with Moscow. India has also maintained neutrality on the war in Ukraine. Incidentally, India's emphasis on an independent course of action has seen New Delhi step up its engagement with the US as well. Prime Minister Modi's visit to Russia was followed by robust discussions between the two countries' NSAs as well as their Defence Ministers.

Meanwhile, the visit enabled Russia to convey the message of its continuing relevance on the global stage and that a decoupling from Moscow is a Herculean task. This is particularly relevant at a time when Russia has sought to expand its engagement with the Global South. When one of the leading voices of the Global South continues to engage with Russia despite overwhelming Western pressure, it can lead to a ripple effect of other non-Western countries building new equations with Moscow.

Russia also leveraged the annual summit to highlight its strategic autonomy. This comes amidst the Kremlin's increasing dependence on China. Today, there exists a growing perception that China would try to wean Russia away from India.

SALIENCE OF TIES

India and Russia have a long history of collaboration. This has fostered trust as well as comfort of working with each other. Today, amidst the global geopolitical turmoil, bilateral ties continue to be mutually

²⁵⁹ “Presenting the Order of St Andrew the Apostle to Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi”, *President of Russia*, 9 July, 2024 at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74517> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

beneficial. It helps that neither India nor Russia interfere in each other's internal affairs. Similarly, both sides have shown mutual sensitivity to some of their core concerns. It includes Kashmir, Ukraine and Syria. This is often in sharp contrast to India's ties with Western countries. India's record of human rights, freedom of speech and religion and democratic credentials have been frequently discussed threadbare, with India accusing the foreign nations of prejudice. This has festered irritants in India's engagement with the West.

External Affairs Minister (EAM) Dr Jaishankar's statement that,"if I look at the history of India post-independence, Russia has never hurt our interests" aptly sums the India-Russia strategic equations.²⁶⁰

As such, robust ties with Russia inevitably strengthen India's strategic autonomy. It is particularly relevant at a time when the need of the hour is flexibility of options. Hitching the wagon with a singular major power is inevitably counter-productive. Overdependence can be easily leveraged to seek uncomfortable concessions. On the other hand, diversifying foreign policy can help to maximise gains from each actor while also maintaining an independent course of action.

In the same vein, a strong Russia strengthens strategic stability at both the global and regional levels. Trump 2.0's America First policy has significantly undermined the existing global order. The unilateral resetting of international rules of engagement by the United States has significantly eroded multilateralism. Russia, on its part, has called for greater multipolarity as well as multilateralism. In many ways, this blends in with India's own clarion call for reform of global multilateral institutions in order for the Global South to have more say in decision-making processes.

Notably, Russia's presence is also crucial for a stable balance of power in Eurasia. Despite its perceived diminished status in the region, Moscow

²⁶⁰ "We are open if approached: Jaishankar on possibility of India mediating to end Russia-Ukraine conflict", *Deccan Herald*, 20 February, 2024 at <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/we-are-open-if-approached-jaishankar-on-possibility-of-india-mediating-to-end-russia-ukraine-conflict-2902807> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

still retains several economic, diplomatic, cultural and military leverages with the Central Asian countries. Thus, having Russia on board is critical for shaping regional equilibrium. This is particularly relevant at a time when India has sought to re-energise its partnerships with the CARs. In this, both India and Russia have a shared concern about China's rise as a Eurasian continental power. In the last few years, Beijing has expanded its footprints in the region, encompassing several strategic sectors, including defence and security. This runs the risk of a *Pax Sinica*, which would be to the detriment of both Indian and Russian interests. Pooling of resources to subtly balance Beijing is in their mutual interests. Unsurprisingly, Russia has encouraged greater Indian strategic presence in CARs, Arctic and Far East to counter its growing dependence on China. Similarly, the INSTC, jointly promoted by India and Russia, gives regional countries options beyond the BRI.

Meanwhile, Russia's geography flanking the vast Eurasian space inevitably impacts India's continental interests. Moscow's engagements with China, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran and CARs — part of India's immediate and extended neighbourhood — can shape India's geostrategic calculus. Similarly, Russia's location in the Far East has the potential to influence outcomes in the Indo-Pacific — a key priority area of India's foreign policy outlook.

Incidentally, Russia's vast geography has also bequeathed it with abundant natural resources. This includes oil, gas, coal, lithium, gold, nickel, copper and cobalt. Today, amidst Russia offering India significant discounts on oil imports, the share of Russian oil in India's energy basket has increased to a whopping 40 per cent. This involves a 10x rise in oil purchase since the war began in February 2022. Earlier, Russian energy would comprise a measly 2 per cent of India's overall oil imports.²⁶¹ As such, energy affordability as well as reliability are crucial pillars of India's growth. For a predominantly oil-importing country,

²⁶¹ "Share of Russian crude in India's imports rises to nearly 40% in April", *The Economic Times*, 3 May, 2024 at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/energy/oil-gas/share-of-russian-crude-in-indias-imports-rises-to-nearly-40-in-april/articleshow/109795265.cms?from=mdr> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

savings in foreign exchange are a key vector in tackling inflation. Interestingly, the discount offered by Russia has forced some of India's traditional suppliers like Iraq to follow suit for the fear of losing share in the world's third biggest oil market.²⁶² This puts India in the proverbial sweet spot to negotiate better oil deals with the producers. Similarly, India's intake of Russian oil amidst the Western boycott has kept global oil prices in check. If India had followed the West, experts estimate a major spike in oil prices due to the impending global scarcity.

Similarly, Russia's share in India's other vital minerals which it imports has gone up exponentially. Fertilizers have seen a 300 per cent jump while coal imports have gone up by 53 per cent.²⁶³ Discounts offered by Russia are in the range of 15-20 per cent from the prevailing market rate. In the same vein, LNG as well as precious metals such as lithium can aid India's green transition. These can also be vital concerns with regard to the need to have reliable supply chains. The Covid-19 pandemic had highlighted the deleterious impact of overdependence on a singular supply chain source.

Crucially, Russia also remains a key pillar of India's civilian nuclear sector. Rosatom is the only foreign company which has active collaboration with its Indian counterparts in this field. While reactors 1 and 2 of the Kundankulam power plant have started generating electricity, the other 2 units are in different stages of completion.²⁶⁴ These add to not just India's energy security but also clean fuel transition.

²⁶² "Indian refiners likely saved at least \$10.5 billion by buying discounted Russian oil, data suggests", *The Indian Express*, 11 July, 2024 at <https://indianexpress.com/article/business/indian-refiners-likely-saved-at-least-10-5-billion-by-buying-discounted-russian-oil-data-suggests-9445660/> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

²⁶³ "PM Modi indicates import of fertilisers & crude oil unlikely to stop", *The Times of India*, 10 July, 2024 at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/pm-modi-indicates-import-of-fertilisers-crude-oil-unlikely-to-stop/articleshow/111616725.cms> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

²⁶⁴ "Alexey Zhukov: "The nuclear power plant has become a symbol of growing partnership between India and Russia", *Rosatom*, 10 November, 2023 at <https://www.rosatom.ru/en/press-centre/opinion/alexey-zhukov-the-nuclear-power-plant-has-become-a-symbol-of-growing-partnership-between-india-and-r/> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

Meanwhile, defence partnership continues to be a key vector of India's national defence and deterrence. More than 40 per cent of India's military equipment is of Russian origin. New pillars in the form of the S-400 missiles (which proved their mettle during Operation Sindoor) as well AK-203 rifles indicate Russia's continuing relevance in this space. Russian assistance was perceived to be critical in the development of India's nuclear submarine project.²⁶⁵ Russia has also provided vital assistance to India in the country's humanoid programme. The initial training imparted to Indian cosmonauts took place in Russia.²⁶⁶

The salience of their cooperation extends to the multilateral sphere as well. India and Russia have a shared interest in the success of BRICS and the SCO. It includes reformulation of economic and security architectures. There also exists a convergence of views on preventing these non-Western organisations from becoming China-centric.

Likewise, a strong India which follows an independent foreign policy is in Russia's interests in multiple ways. New Delhi's push for greater representation of emerging powers dovetails with Russia's vision of a polycentric world order. This is also vital to prevent a potential G2 situation which can jeopardise Russia's great power aspirations. It also helps Russia dispel the notion of Moscow's international isolation.

Similarly, the size of India's market is alluring at a time when Russia has been boycotted by the West. Russian raw materials have a readymade market in the world's fastest growing large economy. India has also made several advances in science and technology. These could even meet Russia's consumer and technology requirements — a fact acknowledged for the first time by President Putin during his visit to India in December 2025.

²⁶⁵ "How India's pride INS Arihant was built", *Business Standard*, 19 August, 2013 at https://www.business-standard.com/article/specials/how-india-s-pride-ins-arihant-was-built-113081100745_1.html (Accessed on September 15 2025).

²⁶⁶ "Space Cooperation Between India and Russia", *Sputnik*, 1 October, 2023 at <https://sputniknews.in/20231001/space-cooperation-between-india-and-russia-4504446.html> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

Notably, ties with India help Russia balance its increasing dependence on China. In a way, this strengthens Russia's own scope for manoeuvre. It also makes its Pivot to Asia more meaningful and inclusive. Arguably, Russia's ability to project itself as a pole is anchored to it taking independent actions rather than riding the coattails of China.

India's membership in the SCO and in the BRICS, promoted by Russia as alternatives to Western-dominated institutions, add to the organisations' credibility. Without India's presence, these groupings run the risk of being perceived as anti-West cliques.

As such, it is in Russia's interest to aid India's rise. Supplies of advanced Russian weapons to India can dilute New Delhi's growing focus on acquiring Western arms. India continuing to buy Russian military equipment amidst the overhang of CAATSA is deeply appreciated in Moscow.

It is, therefore, unsurprising that India and Russia continue to seek mutual congruence. Russia's Foreign Policy Concept of 2023 spells out Russia's outlook vis-à-vis India:

“A comprehensive deepening of ties and enhancement of coordination with friendly sovereign global centres of power and development, which are located on the Eurasian continent and committed to approaches which coincide in principle with the Russian approaches to a future world order and solutions for key problems of the world politics, is particularly important for achieving strategic goals and major objectives of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation.... Russia will continue to build up a particularly privileged strategic partnership with the Republic of India with a view to enhance and expand cooperation in all areas on a mutually beneficial basis and place special emphasis on increasing the volume of bilateral trade, strengthening investment and technological ties, and ensuring their resistance to destructive actions of unfriendly states and their alliances.”²⁶⁷

²⁶⁷ “The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation”, *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, 31 March, 2023 at https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/ (Accessed on September 15 2025).

STRATEGIC DISSONANCE

Today, a few wrinkles have crept into the bilateral partnership. This largely stems from their multi-aligned foreign policies which have seen India and Russia often pursue diverging priorities. It has seen India seek robust ties with the US and Europe while Russia has increasingly embraced China. This has led Moscow to frequently bat for Beijing especially on the Indo-Pacific. Weapons sales are also back on the agenda. A formal Russia-China alliance can truly complicate India's geostrategic environment.

Similarly, both sides have not always been on the same page on Russia's engagement with Pakistan. Moscow's position on several issues considered sensitive to India is more measured today when compared to its outright support in the past.

In the same vein, Russia remains uncomfortable with India qualitatively strengthening ties with the US. Moscow also views the Quad and the Indo-Pacific as US tools to contain both Russia and China. The growing US equities in India's foreign policy calculations have raised apprehensions in Russia, of New Delhi abandoning its independent foreign policy where Russia is one of its key pillars, even though the two annual India-Russia summits post the Covid-19 pandemic, seem to have allayed these concerns for the time being.

Interestingly, while Russia has unequivocally supported India's standalone candidature of the UNSC²⁶⁸, its position is seemingly more nuanced on the expansion of the P5 involving other countries. This is not only linked to the potential dilution of Moscow's privileged status but also Russia's suspicion of probable new members such as Japan and Germany, inherently supporting the US.

²⁶⁸ "Joint Statement following the 22nd India-Russia Annual Summit", *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*, 9 July, 2024 at <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/37940/Joint+Statement+following+the+22nd+IndiaRussia+Annual+Summit#:~:text=Russia%20appreciated%20India's%202021%2D22,UN%20peacekeeping%20and%20counter%2Dterrorism>. (Accessed on September 15 2025).

Meanwhile, some dissonance has risen in bilateral equations as well. Indian citizens being duped into joining the Russian army has raised a political storm in India. The slow release of these conscripts despite perceived assurance from President Putin continues to be an irritant.²⁶⁹

Similarly, delays in weapons deliveries can undermine India's defence and deterrence. The S-400s have been inordinately delayed.²⁷⁰ Amidst its pre-occupation with the war in Ukraine, Russia may find it difficult to meet delivery timelines, including those of spare parts.

In the same vein, trade deficit in excess of US\$ 60 billion has raised concerns in India.²⁷¹ Questions have been raised on its long-term sustainability. Russia too has expressed apprehensions of not being able to fully utilise the rupees accumulated in Vostro accounts.

WAY AHEAD

This is a relationship which has served both countries well. But the time has perhaps come to look for new pragmatic templates to adjust to the reality of having diverging priorities too often. The challenge will be to firewall the India-Russia bilateral relationship from the pulls and pressures of their engagements with others, especially when they happen to be their respective adversaries. In this, neutrality is a viable

²⁶⁹ "Awaiting release of 69 Indian nationals from Russian Army: External Affairs Minister Jaishankar in Lok Sabha", *The Hindu*, 9 August, 2024 at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/awaiting-release-of-69-indian-nationals-from-russian-army-external-affairs-minister-jaishankar-in-lok-sabha/article68504848.ece>(Accessed on September 15 2025).

²⁷⁰ "Amid growing bonhomie, India asks Russia to advance S-400 missile system deliveries", *The Economic Times*, 13 July, 2024 at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/amid-growing-bonhomie-india-asks-russia-to-advance-s-400-missile-system-deliveries/articleshow/111695171.cms?from=mdr> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

²⁷¹ "Crude imports widen trade deficit with Russia by 33% in FY24", *The Mint*, 20 May, 2024 at <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/crude-imports-widen-trade-deficit-with-russia-by-33-in-fy24-11716205715554.html> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

tool to possess in navigating some of the tricky situations. From it flows the fact that international relations is not a zero-sum game.

It should, however, be in India's interests to try and wean Russia away from China by adding pillars. Moscow's interest in India is then expected to prevent it from colluding with Beijing to undermine New Delhi's interests.

Incidentally, India and Russia's mutual convergences remain strong at both the bilateral and multilateral levels. Adding more stakes would help maximise their strategic congruence for mutual benefit. However, this would require nurturing as well as mutual sensitivity to their core concerns. Robust communication can help remove potential misgivings on account of their engagement with their new partners.

Notably, the comfort of working with each other was evident during Prime Minister Modi's bilateral discussions with President Putin. The fact that the Indian leader could forcefully express displeasure at Russia's war in Ukraine without impinging on bilateral ties is a testament of the maturity of this partnership. Similarly, India and Russia have remained sensitive to their core concerns. It includes Ukraine and Kashmir. In fact, Russia was the only P5 country which supported India during the abrogation of Article 370. India has, meanwhile, abstained on UN resolutions. It has also factored in Russia's sensitivities in the Quad leaders' joint statements. Incidentally, at the bilateral level, India's largest FDI in a single project is in Rosneft's acquisition of Essar energy. Other unique features include a successful joint defence production in BrahMos missiles as well as Rosatom being the only foreign company on Indian shores.

Today, both sides should take steps to implement the expansive blueprint identified during the two recent annual summits. It includes diversifying ties beyond defence and addressing the economic gaps. "Areas of new collaboration can involve strengthening contacts with the new generation as well as academia. This will help overcome the prevailing information gap. In the same vein, stationing Indian correspondents in Russia will provide a more accurate assessment of trends there. At present, information about Russia is largely gleaned through Western media who have often been accused of prejudice. The opening of the RT office in New Delhi — one of the biggest outside Russia — should help in addressing the information gap. Russia's

shift to a four-day, e-visa availing facility from its cumbersome in-person application process is a positive development in promoting people-to-people ties.

Similarly, involvement of the private business sector is vital for making the relationship more broad-based. Mutual investments in each other's growth story also hold promise. This includes the Arctic and the Far East as well as infrastructure construction in India. Strengthening connectivity nodes like the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and Chennai–Vladivostok maritime corridor will strengthen economic linkages. So will the proposed Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the EEU. Other sectors which hold significant potential include pharmaceuticals, IT, agriculture, energy and health. India can fill in the void left behind by the Western boycott of these sectors.

Collaboration in third countries as well as developmental partnerships in Central Asia will also add a new dimension to ties. However, the key challenge in boosting economic partnerships is the overhang of Western unilateral sanctions. Deftly navigating this roadblock will truly unlock the economic potential.”

Some offshoots of progress appear visible. Russian money held in Vostro accounts has halved in 2024 from US\$ 8 billion to US\$ 3.5 billion while the rupee-rouble trade has doubled during the same period.²⁷² This highlights India stepping up exports as well as Russia's growing investments in India.

India's recalibration of defence ties is also a natural evolution of cutting down on overdependence. Russia will, nevertheless, remain a key ally for the foreseeable future. Most of India's frontline defence equipment is of Russian origin. These have a shelf life of decades. The recent

²⁷² “Russian funds in Indian rupee vostro accounts halve in the past 12-15 months as Russia invests, makes purchases”, *Mint*, 5 September, 2024 at <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/russian-funds-indian-rupee-vostro-accounts-11725445189898.html> (Accessed on September 15 2025).

induction of AK-203 rifles, a joint Indo-Russian venture, is a reflection of Russia's competitive relevance in new sectors. These guns are expected to be the mainstay of Indian armed forces. Perhaps, the onus is on Russia to complement the 'Make in India' initiative by offering unmatched cutting-edge defence technologies. In this, its track record in co-developing the BrahMos could hold Russia in good stead." Russia also retains a competitive edge over hypersonic missiles, aircraft jet engines and missile defence.

"A drift in ties, on the other hand, can have repercussions across a wide spectrum. None perhaps more significant than on their strategic autonomy as well as strategic balance in their neighbourhoods. A Russia without partners of global and regional heft is likely to lean further on China. This would inevitably strengthen Beijing's position, both in Asia and the world."

INDIA AS PEACE BROKER IN UKRAINE

A peace deal in Ukraine is likely to lead to Russia emerging stronger on the international stage by virtue of a major reset in ties between the Moscow and the West.²⁷³ This could present new opportunities for India to engage all key stakeholders – US, Europe, Russia and even Ukraine. It is also hoped that these dynamics would lessen Russian dependence on China. As such, India has a stake in lasting peace in Europe.

There has been a speculation on India playing a role in the de-escalation of tensions in Ukraine. This stems from Prime Minister Modi expressing an interest in finding a way out of the hostilities. The world has seen the Indian Prime Minister pay back-to-back visits to Moscow and Kiev. The common message was on reverting to dialogue and diplomacy.

Incidentally, India has strong credibility with all the key stakeholders. It had played a behind-the-scene role in the Black Sea Grain Initiative.

²⁷³ Russia and Ukraine have engaged in direct talks in 2025. President Trump's 28-point peace plan has raised the prospects of a peace deal.

India also pulled off the seemingly impossible of achieving consensus on the joint declaration of India's G20 Presidency in 2023. India also continues to expand strategic engagement with the West. The first ever prime ministerial visit from India to Ukraine has helped dispel the notion of India's pro-Russia neutrality.

However, the devil as always lies in the details. There are a few strands which would perhaps need to be accommodated.

The first is that the key protagonists would need to agree on a mediator. The second is that India may have to reconcile the idea of mediation in Ukraine to the official Indian position of bilateral disputes being resolved bilaterally.

Meanwhile, the differences between the stakeholders appear irreconcilable. The conflict is not just over territory. It is also not a just a war between Russia and Ukraine but involves shadow boxing between Russia and the West. Here, the differences between Russia and the West are anchored to Russia's position and place in the global as well as regional order.

Russia has traditionally sought equality with the West in jointly shaping European security architecture and they feel that their outreach has been consistently rebuffed. The West, on the other hand, views Russia as a revisionist state seeking to undermine Western interests. As such, there does not seem to be any appetite in Europe to "appease" Russia after having seemingly done so, after the Kremlin's invasion of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine 1.0 in 2014. There is a perception that this "appeasement" emboldened Moscow, culminating in the war of February 2022.

Notably, Russia today is looking at a generational break with the West. This is evident in the fundamental reorientation of its foreign policy. Amidst their mutual insecurity and trust deficit, Russia's insistence on maintaining the territorial status quo as well as the West's repudiation of Ukraine's NATO membership would appear to be a deal-breaker in any negotiation. Incidentally, Russia and Ukraine seem to be poles apart on the peace formula.

CONCLUSION

Russia today appears to be undergoing a fundamental reorientation of its foreign policy. Its emphasis on the 'East' likely marks the breaking away from the country's historical quest of integrating with the West. Gorbachev's clarion call of a "common European home" as well as Putin's "Greater Europe" stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok now appear consigned to being a footnote of history. Europe increasingly sees Moscow as its biggest security threat. Russia, in turn, no longer believes that it can find a *modus operandi*. Deep-seated mutual insecurity and trust deficit anchored to fundamental differences over Russia's place in the European order seem to have convinced Moscow of a generational break in ties with the West. Diluting the perceived Western global dominance now appears to be a key Russian national agenda. At stake is Russia's position and place on the world stage amidst a hostile external environment.

Notably, the war in Ukraine has strengthened Russia's insecurity. It has also highlighted Moscow's vulnerabilities. Its Achilles' heel continues to be its weaker technology base. The gains of 30 years of it seeking economic integration with the West since its independence now appear to have been wiped out. This calls for a fresh economic start.

However, the asymmetry in comprehensive national power with the West makes it an uphill task to overcome the extreme Western pressure across multiple fronts – military, diplomatic, economic, technological, information-wise and with regard to basic tenets. Western sanctions have targeted virtually the entire Russian economy. This can be seen as a de facto economic blockade of Russia. "Weaponisation of interdependence" in a globalised world has made it more difficult to engage the "world majority" – Russia's euphemism of the non-Western countries.

Interestingly, despite the upheaval, there appears a continuity in Russia's geostrategic goals similar to the pre-war period. This includes its

aspiration to be counted as a global pole. From this flows Russia's national idea of being a great power. Promoting multilateralism and multipolarity is seen as a vital strategy of transforming the global order away from the perceived domination of the US.

Similarly, Russia today is seeking new partners who follow an independent foreign policy, on the global stage. It is also looking for new investments and technologies. This has seen Russia engage with the Global South. The Kremlin has also sought to promote non-Western multilateral organisations like the SCO and BRICS. In this, Russia's toolkit of engagement continues to be its major power diplomacy anchored to its P5 membership, as well as supplying the raw material resources and defence technologies at its disposal.

Pivot to Asia anchored to the "Greater Eurasia" concept, inevitably, is the core of Russia's new grand strategy. It fundamentally involves recalibrating Russia's identity from a European to a Eurasian one. The Greater Eurasia construct envisions a harmonious strategic space involving the states of Eurasia, SCO, SAARC and ASEAN. A frequent reiteration in Russian policy circles is about tapping into the emerging opportunities in Asia amidst the shift in centres of growth and power from the west to the east.

These dynamics are increasingly leading to new alignments in Russia's foreign policy. Friendly Asian countries are seen as natural partners of Russia and Moscow is seeking to draw upon the region's potential to develop its Far East and the Arctic. Notably, these sparsely populated regions comprising 66 per cent of Russian territory are seen as the next incubator of Russia's growth. Their huge repository of diverse natural resources remains untapped. Unsurprisingly, Russian officials and scholars seem to be increasingly focussing on building a positive narrative of Russia engaging with Asia.

Today, Russia's repositioning presents both opportunities as well as challenges. There exist several states who value their strategic autonomy. This has seen them follow an independent foreign policy. They do not want to be presented with binary choices or be a collateral in the great power rivalry between the US and China in the Indo-Pacific. Often, Russia is seen as a balancer. Its repository of natural resources, especially hydrocarbons, is vital for their growth and progress. Moscow's

traditional linkages with several Asian countries facilitate these inroads. Unsurprisingly, a large number of Asian countries have maintained neutrality on the Ukraine war. They have also engaged with Russia diplomatically while continuing to do economic business with the Kremlin. Asian countries, therefore, have emerged as a symbol of Russia's messaging that it cannot be isolated on the global stage.

However, there also exist several challenges. It stems from the necessity to allocate adequate resources to the pivot. Today, Russia appears preoccupied with the war. The Russian economy is de facto a war economy geared up to meet conflict requirements. This raises questions on whether Russia can translate its aspirations into practical outcomes.

In this, Russia runs the risk of its 'Pivot to Asia' policy being limited to pivot to China. The overhang of Western sanctions has made it increasingly difficult for the regional states to engage with Moscow. This has strengthened Russia's dependence on Beijing to withstand the Western geopolitical pressure. It inherently runs the risk of China squeezing Russia at both the geostrategic and geoeconomic levels. Russia anyways has been batting for China, especially on the Indo-Pacific. Their tandem on the global stage appears to be the new normal. A seemingly weakened Russia ceding strategic space to China in Eurasia can facilitate Beijing's rise as a continental power.

However, being perceived of as China's junior partner runs the risk of undermining Russia's overtures towards Asia. Notably, several states, including ASEAN members, have bought into the concept of the Indo-Pacific. They are pursuing their regional agenda accordingly. Russia siding with China in criticising the Indo-Pacific may implicitly involve criticism of these friendly countries. It, therefore, makes strategic sense to explore congruence with the nuanced Indo-Pacific vision of non-Western countries. This is predicated on Russia's willingness to reimagine a new geostrategic maritime role for itself. Russia's unique geographical position of straddling the Heartland and Rimland, at a time when the Indo-Pacific's emphasis has been on visualising the continental and maritime areas of the two oceans as a seamless strategic space, does seem to provide it the necessary tools.

Meanwhile, Russia's anti-West approach may not be amenable to all. There are several states, including India, who have often pursued non-West vis-à-vis anti-West approaches.

As such, to project itself as a pole, Russia must make its pivot to Asia more inclusive. This includes overcoming the perception of its episodic engagement with the region. Being part of value chains and investment linkages can facilitate its ability to shape the regional agenda. Failure to do so runs the risk of a collapse of the pivot strategy.

Incidentally, Russia's vast geography is both a boon as well as bane. It allows Russia to straddle multiple locations, thereby giving it the platform to shape outcomes in several regions akin to that of a great power. However, this is dependent on both economic as well as human resources at Russia's disposal. Today, questions have been raised on Moscow's ability to direct additional resources towards Asia.

This evolving geopolitical environment can have an impact on the India-Russia 'Special and Privileged' strategic partnership. It becomes particularly relevant at a time when both sides have diverging priorities.

Nevertheless, ties remain mutually beneficial. Prime Minister Modi and President Putin's recent reciprocal visits have outlined a new vision for the India-Russia relationship in order to stay relevant in their respective foreign policy priorities. As Russia focuses on the East, it retains several key leverages on the global and regional stages. Both countries also have shared concerns about geopolitical developments in their neighbourhood, including the rise of China.

However, the expectations, perhaps, need to be lowered and deliverables made more realistic. The prevailing trends, therefore, present challenges as well as opportunities to find common synergies between a new India and a new Russia.

The war in Ukraine appears to have accelerated Russia's long-standing "Pivot to Asia," reshaping Moscow's geopolitical orientation. This monograph, framed within a balance-of-power lens, examines the drivers, scope and durability of this pivot through Russia's deepening but asymmetric partnership with China, its rejection of the Indo-Pacific construct and its warming ties with Pakistan. For India, these emerging dynamics often complicate the traditional "special and privileged" partnership with Russia, as Moscow's rift with the West intersects with New Delhi's own multi-alignment with the Western countries. The monograph concludes that India-Russia ties retain independent strategic value, anchored to new recalibrations and realistic expectations.

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