

RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY UNDER PUTIN:

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR INDIA?

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The special and privileged strategic partnership between India and Russia has been under renewed scrutiny since the latter launched an invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. New Delhi has continued to carry out a fine balancing act in maintaining its engagement with Moscow while also managing close ties with its Western partners. Driven by national interests and geostrategic calculations, bilateral ties have remained strong despite a sense of stagnation in recent years. What factors account for this development, what are the opportunities and challenges, and how have Russian foreign policy decisions impacted its relationship with India? This issue brief traces the history of Indo-Russia ties in the 21st century to answer these questions and understand their current trajectory amidst the ongoing war.

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The Indian stance on the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been the topic of much debate and discussion within the country and outside, bringing into a renewed focus the role that Russia has in its foreign policy. Over the past years, the impact of external factors—those not directly related to bilateral issues—has been one of the leading challenges for the otherwise stable, if a bit stagnant, Indo-Russia strategic partnership.

The Russian decision to violate the territorial integrity of its neighbor once again in 2022 has

set in motion changes that could have far-reaching impact on the post-Soviet nation and its future foreign policy. As the implications of Russia's actions and the responses to it (from Ukraine, the West, the non-West and Russia itself) continue to evolve, it will also reflect in India's strategic choices. But at this active phase in the war, where definitive conclusions about the outcomes remain unclear, it would be relevant to understand how the conduct of Russian foreign policy under President Vladimir Putin for the past two decades has progressed in terms of its implications for India. This is a process

that has evolved considerably in the 21st century, and has informed the Indian response during the current war, and will be an important consideration once the situation on the ground becomes clearer.

Russian Foreign Policy: Evolution under Putin

After a chaotic 1990s when the Soviet Union collapsed, the post-Soviet Russian Federation underwent a painful, long-drawn political, economic and strategic restructuring. Putin's first two terms in office were largely a period of consolidation of Russian power. An extensive reform of the economy, high energy prices, and efficient use of revenues, all contributed to the return of economic stability and growth in Russia. This in turn led to a revival of its positioning in various regional and global settings, and a continuation of efforts to increase Russia's engagement with both the East and the West. Even during this period, Moscow's relations with the West continued to be a mix of agreements and disagreements.¹

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As the height of the US unipolar moment declined and other powers increased their prominence on the international stage, Russia too sought to build on this moment in history where it could position itself as one of the major, independent powers. India, which was writing its own reform story in the post-Cold War period, continued its cordial engagement with Russia, which had been its key partner during the Soviet period. As the two countries stabilized their economies and expanded their foreign policy ambitions, they had common interests in following multi-vector policies that would help them maximize national interests and avoid hegemony of any power. Both the sides at the time were interested in pursuing their relations with the US as part of their own national goals, and even though Russia was dissatisfied at the post-Cold War settlement, the divergences had not led to a breakdown of its engagement with the West. China too was building close economic ties with the West, and while seen as an emerging power, its rivalry with the US was yet to emerge in its present form.

This was a particular post-Cold War moment which offered an opportunity to various states to build a more diversified foreign policy based on non-bloc engagement. As the developing world hedged

its choices among a variety of powers,² a period of higher economic growth in these countries contributed to this process, and by 2001 Jim O'Neill coined the term BRIC arguing that their growing economic power would have 'important implications for global-governance arrangements.'³ This resurgence led to increasing calls for reform of international institutions, and a desire among the developing world to actively engage on regional/global issues without getting into confrontation with the major powers.

These headwinds in 2001 also contributed to the signing of the declaration on the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the first meeting of foreign ministers under the Russia-India-China format (RIC) in 2002 (with regular annual meetings from 2007) and first summit of the BRIC in 2009 (becoming BRICS in 2010). Eventually, with its candidature backed by Russia, India became an observer at SCO in 2005 and gained full membership in 2017. For Russia, these non-Western institutions were an important part of its positioning as an independent pole in the international system that would lead to building

of its status as a great power.⁴ This also highlighted its efforts to strengthen its position in the post-Soviet periphery and beyond, while also expanding cooperation with two of its Asian strategic partners, China and India—that were emerging as important powers in their own right.

India, which has steadily framed its relations with Russia in a realist framework of 'national and geopolitical interests,'⁵ saw an engagement in these formats as useful to promote its own status in the global arena, with the multilateral processes also adding to the overall bilateral strategic partnership framework between India and Russia. In other words, this period of consolidation of Russian influence in its immediate neighborhood of continental Eurasia, its political and economic stability, and its desire for a multi-vector foreign policy were seen as a net positive in India. New Delhi, which was already strengthening relations with the US in the new millennium while seeking to stabilize the ties with China, saw a friendly Russia as an asset in maintaining the overall balance of power.

Moscow's contribution was considered vital for defense modernization as it emerged as the only player to share some of the most sensitive technologies with India, and even engage in joint production of weapons systems.⁶ Given the legacy of Soviet and post-Soviet arms imports, about 80 percent of Indian defense forces are dependent on Russian platforms. Even though India has been diversifying its arms imports in the past years, Russia still remains a major supplier, making New Delhi wary of alienating its partner.⁷ The fact that there are no active bilateral issues of conflict only adds to a realist agenda of continuing to engage with the former superpower despite its differences with the West. Thus, bilateral and multilateral cooperation between India and Russia continued apace during this period, though economic ties remained at a low level.

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But several other factors were already in play that are today contributing to complicating the Indo-Russia partnership. There was increasing acrimony in US-Russia ties as the latter expressed opposition to NATO expansion, missile defense systems in Europe, and American unilateral actions in different parts of the world. Moscow wanted to be recognized as an equal partner, renegotiate the European security architecture and be recognized as the pre-eminent power in the post-Soviet space,⁸ which was not seen as desirable in the EU and the US, and no compromises were offered by any side. There was also considerable paranoia in Russia about color revolutions in its neighborhood, where it often exaggerated the role of the US while neglecting local factors.⁹

By 2007, these differences were out in the open, as Putin in his speech at the Munich Conference on Security Policy attacked American unilateral actions as illegal and called the unipolar model as unacceptable.¹⁰ The 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit that promised membership to Ukraine and Georgia in the future, the 2008 Russia-Georgia war followed by the 2009 Eastern Partnership focusing on six post-Soviet states further strained Russia-West engagement. These issues of fundamental divergence could not be addressed during the much-publicized 'Reset' during the Medvedev-Obama presidencies. Meanwhile, Russia's relations with China were undergoing their own transformation, following the settlement of the border in 2004, with convergences across economic, security and political spheres at bilateral and global levels.

While these developments did not directly impact the Indo-Russia partnership, signs of a transformation in Indian foreign policy were already apparent. New Delhi was at this time in the process of recalibrating its ties with the US.¹¹ And even as Indo-China trade rose and New Delhi sought stability on the border, it became increasingly

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concerned about a more assertive China in the aftermath of the global financial crisis.¹² This alignment of India and Russia with two rival major powers has slowly introduced divergences in a bilateral relationship that does not have any direct areas of conflict.

This is not to say that Moscow is an ally of Beijing. In fact, it has sought to rely on engagement with traditional partners like India and Vietnam in Asia to avoid an over-dependence on the rising power. It has also been common wisdom in India to allow Russia a strategic space to maneuver so that it can have multiple partners, and prevent any alliance-like engagement with China from emerging.¹³

Today, from the Indian view point, it is this dynamic that has been most adversely affected as a result of Russia's breakdown of relations with the West, especially in the aftermath of events that took place after Putin returned to power in 2012. The US operation in Libya had already miffed Russia, which accused the superpower of overstepping the limits of the UN-sanctioned operation. Having consolidated its economic base, initiated reforms of its military, and strengthened its position in the post-Soviet space, the former superpower now felt confident in its power projection capacities.

Putin returns: 2012 and beyond

The large-scale protests in Russia against rigged parliamentary elections in 2011-12 were blamed by the Kremlin on the US, without much evidence, and led to a further hardening of Russian stance towards the Western powers. Even relations with the EU progressively worsened, regardless of growing economic engagement between the two sides.¹⁴ The subsequent period was characterized by both a stronger crackdown on opposition at home and a more assertive foreign policy abroad after growing disagreements with its Western counterparts.¹⁵ This also coincided with a renewed effort to define Russian identity, characterized by an emphasis of its Eurasian roots as distinct from a predominantly European identity. Meanwhile, the non-achievement of its desired status in the West was also seen as another cause of its efforts to turn to the East.¹⁶

In policy terms, this was reflected in the pivot to the East in 2012, combining the needs of domestic economic growth and the strategic imperative to build a stronger position in Asia-Pacific that was becoming the center of world geopolitics and geo-economics. Russia took steps to avoid taking sides while positioning itself as an independent balancer by engaging with multiple regional powers.¹⁷ Its attempts to bring in powers like Japan, South Korea and India in the Russian Far East, apart from western investors and China was also part of its multi-vector policy.

Following its intervention in Syria in 2015, Russia also succeeded in consolidating its broader presence in West Asia through engagement with a wide variety of regional actors including Turkey, Israel, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. Thus, it strengthened its influence in Central Asia, West Asia, Caucasus, and even Afghanistan—all geographies where India has varied interests but limited power—and India saw Moscow's presence as important given that its Western partners either had limited presence

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or were reducing their engagement. Especially on continental Eurasia, India sees the presence of a strong, independent, friendly Russia as an asset.¹⁸ As China expands its presence westwards, it is an economically and politically strong Russia that would have the capacity to prevent emergence of a Chinese hegemony in continental Eurasia.

These factors also explain India's stance on the ongoing war, and its refusal to issue an outright condemnation of Russia. However, clearly disappointed by Russian actions, it has called for respect for sovereignty and expressed disappointment that the path of diplomacy was abandoned.¹⁹ Russia's continued tensions with the West, which hit a new post-Cold War low after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, has complicated the overall strategic environment for India. On the one hand, continued confrontation with the West and limited economic prowess has ensured that Russia's turn to the East remained piecemeal without enough resources being devoted to make it a regional influential power. Russia continues to see the West and its interaction with the immediate periphery as being both the source of its status

ambitions and its security concerns. On the other hand, it has resulted in strengthening the position of China as its key external partner. As its largest neighbor that is now a peer-competitor of the US, Moscow believes that China will remain its most important partner in the coming years and accords top priority to building these ties.²⁰

For India, this has led to a curious mix of advantages and disadvantages of close engagement with Russia.

Indian Response: Opportunities and Dilemmas

Since 2014, the further blossoming of the Russia-China relationship alongside a breakdown of Russia-West ties has created an unenviable situation for India. Over the years, New Delhi has believed in providing Russia the strategic space with regard to China in Asia and beyond. This has been considered a no-brainer, given the belief that a closer Russia-China engagement would strengthen Beijing's position because despite its weaknesses, Moscow still remains a formidable power in impacting

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the emerging world order.²¹ This policy, which also offered India a strategic space to maneuver among different partners, seemed to be viable till Russia's engagement with the West was more stable. The balancing act, which had already become complicated after 2014, is now requiring more deft diplomacy than ever before.

As US-China rivalry intensified in the past years, and India's concerns about an aggressive China skyrocketed, Russia's closer alignment with Beijing became a cause of concern. Moscow addressed this by maintaining sustained neutrality on issues that involve disputes between China and one of its many neighbors, while building a diverse set of partners in Asia. It also used the presence of other powers in multilateral forums like SCO, BRICS and RIC (Russia-India-China) to avoid Beijing from gaining a dominant position.

However, as several Asian states (including both of Russia's other key partners in the region, India and Vietnam) became increasingly wary of China, they leaned towards the US and other like-minded partners to re-imagine their neighborhood as the Indo-Pacific. India alongside several other regional powers put its weight behind plurilaterals like the Quad, Quad Plus, JAI (Japan-America-India), etc.

For India, these groupings are critical to manage an aggressively rising power in its neighborhood.

Russia's position has been critical of both the Indo-Pacific and the Quad, looking at the issue through an anti-West lens.²² While this not only neglects regional concerns about China, it also introduces a clear divergence with its long-standing partner on a critical issue. In addition, as noted earlier, the collapse of Russia's relations with the West have created conditions for an even closer alignment with China. This makes India's goal of providing strategic space to Russia in dealings with China increasingly difficult, especially as Russia's pivot to the East is yet to make it a major power in Indo-Pacific and its own vision of Greater Eurasian Partnership remains vague both conceptually and in its implementation on the ground. Any strengthening of the Russian position in the Indo-Pacific and diversification of relations will become only more difficult in the current circumstances, raising concerns about its neutrality among partners, even as Asia continues to change rapidly.

In addition, RIC, BRICS and SCO have had limited success in meeting the lofty expectations that were imagined at the time of their founding.

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These organizations now have to deal with internal contradictions as they try to continue to be of top priority to their members in advancing their agenda, making their future a contested one.²³

Conclusion

The above discussion highlights both the strengths of Russian power, which has made it a valuable partner for India, and its weaknesses that complicate this cordial engagement. The limits of Russian power are particularly evident in the East and the challenges of dealing with a changing world order wherein Russia's status remains contested. There is no doubt that Russia has revived itself after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and has emerged as an influential power in various sub-regional settings in Eurasia. But its economic base has remained weak and that is a major challenge over the longer term. It also has to deal with the rise of multiple powers, which are changing regional politics in very different ways. As a clear multipolarity has not been established, Russia is also operating in a world in a flux, where its limitations have been steadily exposed. It no longer occupies the space it did during the Soviet period, and it is the US-China rivalry that is set to define the future world order. The reaction of many non-western states to the ongoing war can also be attributed to the fact that it is not seen as being decisive in shaping the emerging global system.²⁴

India, in a fiercely pragmatic understanding of its complicated geopolitical standing, has steadily argued that it needs both the US and Russia to effectively manage China.²⁵ And while true, this goal has just become very difficult, as the outcome of the ongoing war will have far reaching consequences on the conduct of Russian foreign policy, both in the East and the West. Therefore, while the arguments for maintaining the Indo-Russia relationship remain, the impact on mutual

areas of convergence and long-term ramifications of breakdown of relations with the West due to the war cannot be neglected by India, even as it currently walks a fine balancing act.

This was a period when Moscow needed to not only instil its Eurasian pivot with meaning, but also create capacity to address the challenges of the future emerging from the impact of fourth industrial revolution, climate change, evolving geo-economics and the shift of global geopolitics to Asia-Pacific. But now, the weak economic basis of its international engagement is expected to worsen as a result of unprecedented western sanctions, which will further negatively impact its weak positioning in the Indo-Pacific, a region that is shaping the future world order. It also creates vulnerability for its ability to maintain influence in Eurasia, with the Chinese economic influence both an opportunity and a challenge.

It is hard to deny that an open confrontation with the West has created problems for Russian foreign policy that go far beyond its engagement with the US and Europe. Not only is it economically a much weaker power, its military strength is also now pinned down in Ukraine. As western sanctions

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gradually hobble its capacity to deal with the evolving world order, it directly impacts Russia's aims of establishing itself as a great power and hurt its ability to be an independent pole in a changing international system. In this regard, the combined effect of diversion of state resources to the war effort in Ukraine and long-term stringent sanctions could end up creating a net strategic loss for Russia over the longer term, regardless of the outcome of the war.

If this scenario is realized, it would have an inevitable impact on the strategic partnership with India. Russia has often presented the refusal of non-western states to join the western sanctions as a victory, and in a certain sense it does reveal the limits of western efforts to isolate the former superpower. However, neither has much of the non-West fundamentally altered its own engagement with the West. The refusal to condemn Russia does not automatically translate into a win, especially if Russia cannot convert this stance into tangible gains for its economy and foreign policy strategy in the longer term.

At this point, it is unclear which of the scenarios being discussed will pan out. The outcome depends on several variables including the extent of transatlantic unity, the ability to weather sanctions by Russia, success or failure of Ukraine/Russia on the battlefield, future outcome of negotiations, policies of major non-Western powers, etc.—all of them unknown at the moment. Yet, the fact that its gamble in Ukraine is unlikely to alter the course of the evolving world order, and is being seen as such by a large section of the globe, should concern Russia regarding its status in a new world order.

It is this weakness to deal with a fundamentally different world and Asia that could negatively impact Russia's plans for the future as well as its relations with India. New Delhi would be keenly watching the Russia-China relationship and how

it develops, and if Moscow can demonstrate continued neutrality on issues involving China and maintain its independent stance in the aftermath of the current crisis. The bilateral economic relationship was already lagging behind, addressing which has now become more difficult, and there had been a sense of stagnation creeping into the partnership. While Russia has moved towards an anti-West agenda based on its understanding of its own interests, India has moved in the opposite direction.

However, this does not mean New Delhi would underestimate the strength of its strategic partner, and it will avoid hasty decisions while monitoring Moscow's actions and examining whether it is continuing to be an effective player in Eurasia. Given that Russia has been an important partner in a successful conduct of India's own foreign policy for decades makes this caution a necessity since India seeks to avoid alliances and instead cultivates multiple partners to further its national interests.

In service of these interests, the reasons that have guided India's Russia policy have not completely disappeared at present. If Russia can demonstrate its continued strength on areas of convergence, the engagement will continue to move forward. However, if Russia significantly weakens itself and can no longer be a partner on issues on which India has relied on it, then a reconfiguration of India's goals will also be in order. But this will be a much longer process, depending on how Russia comes out of this war and recalibrates its own foreign policy, after the end of the active fighting phase of its invasion of Ukraine.

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