

## INDIA AND THE GRAMMAR OF DIPLOMACY: RELOS AND ASYMMETRIC MULTIPOLARITY

by

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The Reciprocal Exchange of Logistics (RELOS) agreement between India and Russia was signed in February 2025, ratified by Moscow’s State Duma in late 2025, and kept low-profile by New Delhi, with virtually no official comments on its implications. When the Russian parliamentary ratification brought it into public view, the interpretive split was immediate: one faction of analysts claimed it to be “[path-breaking](#),” unlocking new geographies for both navies, while the other faction—the skeptics—viewed it as merely [procedural](#), dealing with port calls, troop movements, and logistical support during naval exercises.

However, when analyzed comprehensively, both readings seem inadequate. Agreements between states rarely derive their significance solely from their clauses; rather, they derive it from their context, from what they communicate to third parties, and from the strategic architecture within which they are embedded. This agreement permits simultaneous stationing of up to five warships, ten aircraft, and 3,000 troops on each other’s territories, unlike India’s Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) with the United States. The RELOS explicitly allows troop stationing and barter-based payments—a [structural hedge](#) against dollar-dominated sanction regimes.

**The Diplomatic Signaling of New Delhi and Moscow**  
India has, over the past decade, deepened its strategic partnership with the United States more substantially than at any prior point. From concluding the foundational agreements of military interoperability, such as LEMOA, COMCASA and BECA, to participating in the Quad and hosting naval exercises in the Bay of Bengal, India has actively been a part

of U.S.-led initiatives for regional stability. However, this has not stopped India from maintaining its ties with Russia. India, notwithstanding U.S. threats of CAATSA sanctions, maintained its acquisition of S-400 air defense systems, and also absorbed Russian crude with a structured opacity that frustrated Washington without quite triggering [punitive action](#). This is not inconsistency but the grammar of strategic autonomy—what scholars describe as sending “ambiguous signals to competing powers about future alignment decisions” in order to build deterrence and preserve [decision-making flexibility](#). India’s engagement with the United States is pragmatic rather than idealistic: it values access to markets, capital, and technology, but resists political alignment that would narrow its [strategic horizon](#).

The operationalization of RELOS and its disclosure after months of official silence bear the character of a calibrated signal to this effect. It can be inferred from the manner of the agreement’s disclosure and its timing that it intended as part of a broader message to Washington at a moment when India had come under [sustained pressure regarding Russian oil imports](#) and the absence of major defense announcements during President Putin’s visit to New Delhi in December 2025. In this context, the December 2025 summit was notable for what was left unsaid—despite the war in Ukraine, India was not going to sever its relationship with its age-old partner, Russia. RELOS, disclosed shortly after, completed that message structurally. The silence was not diplomatic clumsiness. Rather, it served as a reminder that India’s national interests shape its strategic alignments.

The second vector of messaging ran from Moscow to Beijing. Russia’s economic isolation since 2022 has deepened its dependence on Chinese capital, technology, and export markets. Beijing has leveraged this to extract preferential access to Russian hydrocarbons, expand its footprint in Russian Arctic energy and shipping infrastructure, and incrementally position itself as the senior partner in the Sino-Russian alignment. The seemingly ‘no-limits’ partnership has had very visible limits—all running in [Beijing’s favor](#).

By giving India—the most consequential strategic competitor of China in Asia—operational access to Russian military facilities in the Arctic and the Pacific, Moscow demonstrates that it retains the capacity for independent alignment. Russia’s engagement with India is partly aimed at undercutting Chinese influence over Russia itself and preventing Russia from falling fully into the [Chinese embrace](#). Moscow, for its part, has had its own reasons to resist becoming a permanent junior partner to Beijing. RELOS is the most concrete expression of that resistance. Although the agreement is not directed against China in any formal sense—and Russia is unlikely to acknowledge such an intention publicly—it nevertheless introduces a structural ambiguity into the Sino-Russian relationship that [Beijing cannot ignore](#).

### **The Indian Ocean: From Asymmetry to Multipolarity**

Russia’s interest in the Indian Ocean is longstanding and well documented. Its [2015 Maritime Doctrine](#) identifies the region as one of six priority maritime areas, listing as objectives the strengthening of ties with India, the intensification of commercial maritime activities, and the enforcement of security through a forward naval presence. What had long been a doctrinal aspiration has now been operationally enabled. The RELOS agreement means that Russian naval vessels can refuel, refit, and resupply at Indian ports, extending their operational endurance in waters where they previously lacked [persistent reach](#).

This matters because the Indian Ocean, over the past decade, trended toward a bilateral contest between American and Chinese Maritime ambitions, with India as the resident power attempting to hold the line. China’s network of port infrastructure—from Gwadar in Pakistan to Hambantota in Sri Lanka to Kyaukpyu in Myanmar—has given Beijing logistical reach deep into India’s maritime neighborhood. Now, by introducing Russia through RELOS, India has complicated that binary, thereby denying China the uncontested expansion of its Indian Ocean posture. [India does not view](#) a Russian naval presence in its maritime neighborhood with the same concern that it would a Chinese naval presence in the region.

Rather, India likely sees Russian presence as having the potential to balance Chinese naval expansion in its maritime neighborhood. A Russian naval footprint makes the region multipolar, and that multipolarity [serves India’s interests](#) precisely because it is not of Indian making alone.

### **The Northern Arc: Arctic, Far East and Critical Minerals**

The reciprocal dimension of RELOS runs northward and eastward. Under the agreement, Indian naval vessels and aircraft can operate from Murmansk and Severomorsk, ports that astride the Northern Sea Route, which [cuts shipping time](#) between Asia and Europe by roughly half compared with passage through the Suez Canal. India is also keen to [avoid being marginalized](#) as China secures preferential access to discounted hydrocarbons and a dominant position in emerging Arctic trade and logistics networks through its Polar Silk Road Initiative.

The Chennai-Vladivostok Eastern Maritime Corridor amplifies this. Proposed in September 2019 when Prime Minister Modi attended the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok, the corridor connects India’s eastern seaboard directly to Russia’s Pacific coast, [reducing transit time](#) from approximately 40 days via traditional routes to 24. It has been gaining operational momentum since 2024, carrying coal, crude oil, liquefied natural gas, fertilizers and [metals](#).

When combined with RELOS, it creates a continuous maritime axis from Indian Ocean ports to the Russian Far East, and potentially, onward via Arctic routes—a genuinely pan-oceanic logistics network that would have been inconceivable a decade ago.

The Russian Far East is the deeper prize that binds all of this together. The India-Russia ‘Programme 2030,’ produced at the December 2025 Annual Summit, elevated critical minerals, alongside energy and nuclear cooperation, as [a priority domain](#). According to Russia’s Natural Resources Ministry, the country holds an estimated 28.5 million metric tons of rare earth metals across 15 classified minerals, alongside vast and largely underexplored reserves of lithium,

gold, and other strategic minerals, concentrated in Siberia, the Far East, and the Arctic.

India has designated 30 minerals as critical to its industrial and clean energy transition and has been searching urgently for supply chains not dominated by China, which controls more than 85 percent of global rare earth refining and processing capacity and leads processing across 19 out of 20 strategic [mineral supply chains](#).

Research partnerships between [CSIR-IMMT](#) and Russia's Giredmet—a Rosatom Institute, specializing in rare metal technologies—formalized in April 2025, and between IIT (ISM) Dhanbad's [TEXMiN Foundation and Giredmet](#) concluded in February 2026, are already underway on rare earth metallurgy, permanent magnet development, and critical mineral processing. The RELOS security architecture provides the strategic backbone for this economic engagement: deep investment in a partner's resource-rich territory is more sustainable when underpinned by a formalized defense logistics relationship.

### Conclusion

The debate over whether RELOS is a “game-changer” or a “routine agreement” asks the wrong question. The agreement is neither a revolution in bilateral military capacity nor an inert bureaucratic transaction. It is a piece of diplomatic grammar—a structured message sent by two states to two different audiences, timed with precision, and designed to preserve maximum optionality for both parties. India has used it to remind Washington that its partnership is conditional on American behavior and on the credibility of American commitments. Russia

has used it to remind Beijing that its alignment has costs and limits. Both have used it to introduce a third major naval actor into an Indian Ocean arena trending toward bipolarity. And both have embedded it within a larger architecture—the Chennai-Vladivostok corridor, the Northern Sea Route, and the emerging critical minerals framework—that gives the agreement a strategic depth that its text alone does not carry.

India's strategy is to mitigate the risks not simply of China's rise but also of a deepening China-Russia partnership—to keep Russia from falling wholly into Beijing's strategic orbit while preserving its own freedom of maneuver between Washington and Moscow. RELOS is the most concrete institutional expression of that strategy to date. Whether it succeeds will depend on execution, on the durability of political will on both sides, and on how the great powers it which it signals choose to respond. What is not in doubt is that it represents a deliberate attempt to reshape the maritime order of the Indo-Pacific—not by confronting its dominant actors, but by multiplying the number of players at the table. In broader terms, RELOS reinforces India's strategic autonomy by enabling defense logistics partnerships across rival geopolitical blocs. Through agreements like LEMOA with the U.S. and RELOS with Russia, India sustains the policy flexibility and independent decision-making that define its multi-alignment approach to foreign policy.

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