

Connectivity initiatives include the Chennai-Vladivostok maritime corridor and the International North-South Transport Corridor. There are regular interactions between the leaders of the two countries. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Vladimir Putin have met 17 times in the last decade and have held annual summits since 2000, with a few exceptions — and a notable gap following Russia’s attack on Ukraine. There is also a push to try and negotiate bilateral visa-free access for Indians to increase people-to-people and tourism exchanges between the two countries.

There is also an ideological component to the relationship, which is often overlooked. One aspect is that India has a long-standing commitment to strategic autonomy in its foreign policy, which means engaging all major poles of influence in the international system — including Russia. There is also the aforementioned historical affinity due to Soviet support for India during the Cold War. But the relationship is undergoing a managed decline. It does not have the same level of strategic importance as it did during the Cold War.

Although India still depends on Russia for a large proportion of its military hardware, since the 1990s, there has been a push to diversify. As part of the “Make in India” campaign, there is an attempt to strengthen domestic defence production as well as diversify to other countries. Between 2009 and 2013, 76 per cent of India’s arms imports were from Russia, but this has dropped to 36 per cent between 2019 and 2023, according to SIPRI.

While this trend predates the war in Ukraine, it has been accelerated by the war. There has been a delay in the delivery of several defence platforms, most notably the S-400 missile defence system, as well as spare parts for fighter jets. The prolonged war of attrition in Ukraine has also undermined Indian confidence in some Russian military hardware.

There is decline on the ideological side too. India is trying to project a worldview that is non-Western but not explicitly anti-Western. This puts it out of sync with Russia’s worldview, and that of countries like China and Iran.

India is increasingly aloof or estranged from forums where Russia plays a prominent role, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Modi did not attend the July 2024 SCO summit. When India held the presidency of the SCO in 2023, it was a low-profile presidency, and there was a virtual summit. In contrast, India’s high-profile G20 presidency in 2023 was framed as the country’s “coming out party”.

While Modi and Putin met in July 2024, it was the first time that



The illustration shows Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (l) and Russian President Vladimir Putin.
● ANTHONY GERACE/THE ECONOMIST

they had met since September 2022, a significant gap. What is more, their economic interactions are highly skewed. There is roughly \$68 billion in trade between the two countries, but \$60 billion of that is oil imports. India’s large share of Russian crude imports also means that Russia holds a surplus of Indian rupees, which has caused some friction in terms of rouble-rupee trade.

On the Indian side, there have also been concerns about a number of Indian nationals who have been “duped into fighting” for Russia in the Ukraine conflict. But although the relationship is not what it once was, Russia will remain a key strategic partner for India for the foreseeable future.

Does India support Russia’s war on Ukraine?

India has neither condoned nor condemned Russia’s actions. The Indian government has been vocal in expressing its displeasure with the war, and Modi has said that now is “not an era of war”. He has also expressed sorrow for the bombing of a children’s hospital, hit by Russian air strikes in July 2024. During his August 2024 visit to Ukraine, Modi said that India’s position is not neutral, but that it stands on the side of peace.

But there is a gap between rhetoric and reality. India, in fact, maintains quite a neutral position. It has abstained in UN General Assembly resolutions condemning Russia’s actions. It did not endorse the joint communique produced at a peace conference in Switzerland in June 2024, which Modi also did not attend. And the G20 leaders’ declaration that was concluded under India’s G20 presidency had no mention of Russian actions in Ukraine.

India has also emerged as the second-biggest supplier of restricted critical technologies to Russia (behind China), helping to fuel Russia’s war machine. This reflects India’s practical or pragmatic considerations, including its dependence on Russian military hardware and access to discounted Russian crude. But there is also a degree of sympathy in New Delhi for the Russian narrative of the war, that Moscow’s actions were sparked by NATO expansion into Russia’s self-perceived sphere of influence.

In theory, India is well-positioned to play the role of a potential mediator. It maintains close ties with both Moscow and Washington, unlike other countries that have close relations with Russia, such as China, Iran, and North Korea. The West has been understanding of India’s strategic constraints in terms of its dependence on Russian military hardware and its energy needs. But so far, India’s actions have been largely driven by self-interest. Despite its statements, it has not made any peace proposals like those of Turkey or China.

Indian symbolism over substance was also clear in Modi’s summer 2024 meetings with Putin and Zelenskyy. Modi visited Putin in July 2024 — a visit that coincided with Russian air strikes in Ukraine. Zelenskyy called the meeting a devastating blow to peace efforts. And the optics of Modi hugging Putin while a Ukrainian children’s hospital was bombed prompted a degree of damage control by New Delhi, leading to Modi’s visit to Ukraine in August 2024.

His visit to Ukraine was an attempt to reaffirm India’s position of neutrality on the war and its long-standing position of strategic

autonomy. It was also an attempt at a course correction in India’s relationship with Ukraine. Modi was the first Indian prime minister to visit Ukraine since the two countries established diplomatic relations in 1993.

How does China impact India-Russia relations?

China is an important consideration in terms of India’s strategic calculations towards Russia. One of the reasons New Delhi is eager to maintain engagement with Russia is the fear that Moscow is becoming increasingly beholden to Beijing following its attack on Ukraine. India wants to provide Russia with strategic options as it becomes increasingly isolated and wants to deter it from becoming a client state of China. In parts of the West, that is already seen as a foregone conclusion, but Russia is not yet seen as a lost cause in India.

The other point to keep in mind is that China and India largely see eye to eye on the Ukraine war. Neither sees their close relationship with Moscow as translating into overt support for Russian actions in Ukraine. Both countries believe they are playing a constructive role through their purchase of discounted Russian crude, which is helping to control global energy prices.

But a key watch point is what Russia’s position will be on possible future hostilities between China and India. Historically, Moscow has played a relatively neutral position and has occasionally offered to play a mediating role. It has even leaned in India’s favour on occasion and has provided it with more advanced military platforms than it has provided China.

The fear in New Delhi is that this could be shifting and that in the future, Moscow could side with

China in a potential conflict or tensions with India. That would be a game-changer for India and would prompt it to rethink its relationship with Russia.

Russia providing more advanced military platforms to China would also be a major concern for India — and there are already some early signs of this happening. There has been somewhat of a role reversal in the defence trade between Russia and China. The Russian arms industry is becoming increasingly dependent on dual-use components from China. Another concern for India, albeit not as prominent, is that of an emerging Russia-China-Pakistan axis. While China is a more pressing and long-term concern for India and a key factor in the India-Russia relationship, Russia’s relations with Pakistan have also been deepening.

For instance, Pakistan’s then-prime minister Imran Khan was in Moscow when the Russian attack on Ukraine began, and did not condemn Russia’s actions. The Pakistani army chief subsequently travelled to Washington to reassure the US and ensure continued support from the IMF and other donors amid the country’s ongoing economic challenges.

Following Modi’s visit to Ukraine, any further actions or statements made by India that are perceived as critical of Russia could prompt Moscow to express its displeasure by deepening relations with or increasing outreach to Pakistan. For example, Moscow has voiced its support for Pakistan’s inclusion in BRICS+. India will want to keep a close eye on how this relationship evolves.

The article first appeared on Chatham House.



Russia has been a preferred arms supplier for India for many years because it provides arms at reasonable prices without end-user constraints, and is often able to supply sensitive technologies, which other countries are not.

But the relationship is undergoing a managed decline. It does not have the same level of strategic importance as it did during the Cold War. Although India still depends on Russia for a large proportion of its military hardware, since the 1990s, there has been a push to diversify.



Then-secretary general of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Leonid Brezhnev (r) and then-prime minister of India Indira Gandhi exchange documents after signing the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation in 1971.
● HINDUSTAN TIMES



Visitors pass by the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile, jointly developed by India and Russia, at the International Maritime Defense show in St. Petersburg, Russia, in July 2019.
● AP