

EXPERT VIEW

India-Russia relations without illusions



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As Russian President Vladimir Putin visits India in December, we need an unvarnished view of the India-Russia relationship even as the red carpet is rolled out for him. Russia has been a strategic partner in varying degrees. Having said that, India must avoid romanticising the bilateral relationship. Russia looks at India with cold calculating eyes, and we need to return the gaze in equal measure.

Russia is not sentimental about India, nor should India be about Russia. Over nearly 80 years, it and its predecessor, the Soviet Union, has never been as constant a strategic partner as we in India imagine, and several of its self-regarding actions have hurt us. This is clear enough from the three phases of the relationship: the early Cold War (1947-63), the second half of the Cold War when India's relations with Moscow were at their apogee (1963-85), and in the three decades after the Cold War (1989-the present).

From 1947 to 1963, the Soviet Union looked at India with hostility, scepticism, and ambivalence. Its initial view of India was hostile. The predominant official view was that India was a camp follower of the Anglo-American powers. Moscow regarded Indian non-alignment with as much scepticism as the United States (US) did. Soviet support of the Communist Party of India, which amounted to interference in India's internal politics, also clouded the relationship.

It was only with the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953 and the elevation of Nikita Khrushchev to the leadership of the Communist Party that Soviet views changed. Scepticism about Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's political leanings, India's democracy, and non-alignment abated. Nehru's visit to the Soviet Union and Khrushchev's return visit in 1955 signalled a further warming. Moscow now supported India's view on Goa's liberation and Kashmir, built the Bhilai steel plant (when the Americans refused), and agreed to sell frontline weaponry (when the US hesitated).

On the other hand, as relations between India and China worsened in 1957, the Soviets troublingly flip-flopped. Between 1959 and 1962 leading up to the China-India war, Moscow seemed to tilt towards India. It urged China to compromise and declared Soviet neutrality in the border conflict. Privately, in a meeting with Chairman Mao Zedong in October 1959, Khrushchev defended Nehru, blamed China for the flight of the Dalai Lama, and criticised the Chinese attack on Indian troops at Longju. More publicly, in August 1962, the Soviets signed their first MiG-21 deal with India, signalling a material tilt.

But when war broke out between India and China, Moscow abruptly sided with the latter, at least for the duration of war (probably in the interest of communist solidarity during the

PHOTO: RUSSIAN EMBASSY IN INDIA

Cuban missile crisis). After the war, it turned critical of China again. This flip-flopping is important to recall when Moscow once again has a close relationship with both China and India: who will it back in a conflict between the two and for how long?

From 1963 to the winding down of the Cold War in 1985, the golden period of the India-Soviet partnership, the relationship had its challenging moments. For all the talk of India's aversion to foreign powers intruding between India and Pakistan, it tolerated at least two major Soviet interventions in the region's affairs. During and after the 1965 India-Pakistan war, it was Moscow that brokered the ceasefire of September 1965 and then hosted the Tashkent summit of January 1966 between Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri and Pakistani President Mohammed Ayub Khan (during which Shastri died in mysterious circumstances).

In August 1971, at the height of the crisis in East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh), India reached out to the Soviets to sign a 20-year "Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation". Worried that the US and China would side with Pakistan if the East Pakistan crisis led to hostilities between India and Pakistan, India sought a quasi-alliance with the Soviet Union. Moscow obliged and supplied weapons and military spare parts as well as diplomatic support during the crisis and subsequent war.

But it also used its influence on India during those difficult months. Most importantly, it leaned on Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to limit the war in the western sector. The US might think that sending its aircraft carrier to the Bay of Bengal was pivotal in constraining Indian actions in the western sector, but far more important was Soviet pressure on India. In short, in both 1965 and 1971, the Soviets — not just the Americans — intervened diplomatically in India's handling of Pakistan.

In 1972, Pakistan's role in the rapprochement between China and the US had presaged the formation of a US-China-Pakistan coalition. The coalition never quite developed, until the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan seven years later cemented a strategic partnership between the three. While the triple entente was not directed against India, the Soviet invasion and the solidifying of the coalition brought the Cold War to our doorstep as never before.

Most importantly for India, US and Chinese aid to Pakistan in the wake of the Soviet intervention strengthened Pakistan's military capabilities. It also gave rise to Islamic militancy in

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Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev (left) speaking in New Delhi in November 1973. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi is seated alongside

South Asia and beyond. Pakistan learned how to manage militants and turn them against India — the effects of which are being felt to this day in the form of terrorism in Kashmir and elsewhere. It bears saying that while India excoriated the US for its role in Vietnam, far more negative for India was the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan.

By 1985, with Mikhail Gorbachev at the helm of the Communist Party, the Soviet Union was reevaluating its grand strategy. Sino-Soviet relations had begun improving in 1982,

and as Gorbachev went down the road of glasnost and perestroika, he further mended fences with China. Moscow informed India that the Soviets would no longer be a strategic backstop against China. The Soviets were settling their border problems with China, and attracted by the latter's economic dynamism, were boosting bilateral economic relations as well. They also resumed arms sales to China. By the late 1980s, the Soviet Union needed China more than it needed India — much as now.

This strategic shift in Soviet policy occurred almost precisely during India's military standoff with China in Sumdorong Chu in 1986-87. The waning of Soviet support to India, its thickening ties with China, and the Sino-Indian confrontation at Sumdorong Chu led then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to overturn India's China policy. Up to Rajiv's visit to Beijing in 1988, India had insisted that normalisation with China depended on the latter returning territories it had taken in the 1962 war. In 1988, India finally accepted that border

negotiations and normalisation would go hand in hand, as China had always insisted.

With the end of the Cold War, Soviet interest in India dramatically reduced. The future of Russia, Russia's relations with the various Soviet republics, and more importantly, its relations with the West took centre stage. Moscow's only real interest in India was to continue to sell arms and to use the relationship to remind China not to take Russia for granted.

The arms relationship has been the true backbone of India-Russia ties since 1991. Yet, buying from the Soviets and then Russia has never been easy. After the Cold War, India found the going even tougher. Russia has bargained hard, violated agreements on price and quality, and frequently delayed deliveries. Given its dependence on Russian arms, there was little India could do. Diversification of foreign suppliers — French, Israeli, American — and reliance on its own arms producers might have been the answer to dependence and would have strengthened India's bargaining hand with Russia. Unfortunately, alternative suppliers have never quite been the answer, and Indian leverage with Russia has been modest at best.

Russia poses other problems for India. Above all, its strategic partnership with China is awkward for India. This is partly psychological. Given our comfort with Russia as a strategic backstop against China, their growing post-1989 enmeshment has been discomfiting — just as US President Donald Trump's recent evocation of a G-2 with China has shaken Indian assumptions about the US. It bears saying, as an aside, that having championed strategic autonomy, India must now confront the possibility that its independent-minded posture has left it with no big-power friends.

India's strategic problem with Russia is not only psychological. It is also material. Russia has supplied China with advanced weapons that Chinese forces could use against India, just as India's Russian armaments will be used against China. From 1990 to 2005, Russia sold about 300 Su-27 and Su-30 fighters. After the 1995-96 Taiwan Strait crisis with the US, it provided Kilo-class diesel submarines and Sovremenny-class destroyers to China. In that 15-year period, missiles were also a large part of the bilateral defence trade, and over 80 per cent of Chinese arms imports were from Russia. China's defence imports have declined by half since 2005, but access to Russian arms and technology, legally and illegally, have massively boosted its indigenous capabilities. Today, China's most crucial military import is Russian aircraft engines.

The Ukraine war has accentuated Russia's drift into a junior partnership with China. The Sino-Russian economic and diplomatic relationship has deepened over the past two decades, but the 2022 war against Ukraine has tied Russia even more to China — to a "no-limits friendship". Bilateral trade has ballooned to \$245 billion in 2024, doubling since 2020. Close to

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40 per cent of Russia's trade is conducted in yuan. Oil sales (in value terms) have increased by 50 per cent. While China has offered proposals for an end to the war, it has never condemned the Russian invasion, placing the latter in its debt diplomatically. Since 2012, Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping have met more than 40 times as part of the lips-and-teeth diplomatic relationship.

Russia's China policy is not the only worrisome factor. Its Pakistan policy too irks and itches in India. While its relations with China are well known, less so is the extent of the relationship with Pakistan.

A September 2025 report of the New Delhi-based think-tank Observer Research Foundation details the extent of Russia-Pakistan ties. At the heart of the relationship is Russia's desire to cooperate with Pakistan on security in Central Asia and Afghanistan (over Islamic militancy, terrorism, and drug trafficking). There is also growing economic engagement, involving collaboration in transportation and energy. More worryingly, Russia has built defence ties with Pakistan: it has sold military helicopters, anti-tank guided missiles, and jet engines for Pakistan's Chinese-built JF-17 fighter aircraft. The two sides have held military exercises including naval exercises, and they convene a regular Joint Military Consultative Committee.

Reminiscent of its interventions in 1965 and 1971, Russia has once again sought to play a mediating role between India and Pakistan — for instance, after the Pulwama terrorist attack in 2019. More recently, in the wake of the Pahalgam terrorist attack, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, in conversation with his Pakistani counterpart, reportedly offered to mediate in the South Asian conflict. Russia has not taken Pakistan's side against India in these disputes or over the larger issue of Kashmir, but its actions and statements are disquieting for India, which is allergic to any third-party involvement in its bilateral disputes with its neighbours.

As Putin comes calling, Indians should be under no illusions about the nature of the relationship with Russia, which has always been transactional. Today, India is dependent on Russia for weapons — and for oil. The oil dependency is relatively easy to reduce, and reports suggest Indian imports are already in decline under the threat of US penalties. Dependency on Russian arms, by contrast, will remain. A quantum of imports from Russia is in any case necessary in the interest of diversity of suppliers.

In summary, relations with Russia will remain important for India in the years ahead. Understanding and accepting the challenges and limitations of the relationship, though, is vital. Putin, the former KGB (the Soviet Union's intelligence and security agency) man, will play the geopolitical game without flinching. So must Narendra Modi. ■