

Ukraine War and the Recalibration of India-Russia Relations

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Abstract:

The Russia–Ukraine conflict has reshaped the global strategic environment, compelling India to reconsider the nature and scope of its long-standing partnership with Russia. This paper examines how the war has influenced India’s foreign policy decisions, particularly in balancing historical defense, political, and economic ties with Moscow against evolving strategic engagements with Western powers, regional partners, and international institutions. India’s response reflects a pragmatic approach rooted in national interest rather than ideological alignment. The study highlights how concerns related to energy security; defense procurement, trade diversification, and geopolitical stability have guided India’s cautious and calculated diplomatic posture. It also explores India’s efforts to maintain strategic autonomy while navigating pressures from both sides of the global divide. The paper assesses the implications of India’s position for its broader foreign policy framework, multilateral diplomacy, and global leadership aspirations. The analysis suggests that India’s recalibration represents continuity with adaptation of preserving core partnerships to shape new strategic alignments in an increasingly uncertain world order.

Keywords:

India’s Foreign Policy; Russia–Ukraine War; Strategic Autonomy; Geopolitics; Energy Security; Defense Cooperation; Global Governance; International Relations; Multilateral Diplomacy.

INTRODUCTION:

India and Russia share a long-standing legacy of cooperation that began during the Cold War period, when Moscow emerged as New Delhi’s most dependable strategic partner. Over several decades, Russia has played a central role as India’s primary supplier of defense equipment and advanced military technology. Beyond defense, cooperation extended to nuclear energy, space technology, economic partnerships, and diplomatic support in multilateral forums. This deep-rooted engagement helped shape what came to be recognized as a “special and privileged strategic partnership,” aligning closely with India’s commitment to strategic autonomy and a multipolar world order. The Ukraine war, which began in February 2022, has disturbed this balance. The conflict has produced wide-ranging geopolitical and economic consequences that directly affect India’s strategic calculations. Western sanctions imposed on Russia have complicated financial systems, limited technological transfers, and created obstacles in defense procurement processes that India has historically relied upon. The increasing militarization and political control of global supply chains have heightened uncertainty, pushing India to diversify sources of defense imports, technology partnerships, and energy supplies.

Another important dimension is Russia’s closer alignment with China. As China continues to pursue assertive policies in Asia and strengthens its strategic influence globally, its growing partnership with Moscow poses new challenges for India. This situation raises critical

questions regarding the future reliability of Russia as a supportive partner in regional security matters, especially when India faces ongoing strategic concerns with China.

In response to these developments, India has adopted a carefully balanced and pragmatic diplomatic strategy. On one hand, it continues engagement with Russia to safeguard essential national interests such as defense cooperation, energy security, and strategic leverage. India has benefited from discounted Russian oil imports during the conflict, which has helped stabilize domestic energy requirements. On the other hand, India has deepened strategic partnerships with the United States, European nations, and key Indo Pacific actors to broaden its geopolitical options and reduce vulnerability arising from dependency on any single state. The Ukraine conflict has compelled India to reassess the contours of its bilateral relationship with Russia. Instead of abandoning the partnership, India is restructuring it to suit changing global realities. The future direction of India Russia relations is likely to be defined by cautious pragmatism, diversification of strategic engagements, and a continued emphasis on maintaining balanced relationships in an increasingly polarized and uncertain international order.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To examine how the Ukraine war has reshaped the strategic, political, and economic dimensions of India Russia relations.
2. To analyze India's policy responses in terms of defense diversification, energy security, and diplomatic positioning.
3. To assess the impact of Western sanctions and geopolitical pressure on India's foreign policy choices.
4. To evaluate how India's emphasis on strategic autonomy influences its engagement with both Russia and Western partners.
5. To explore the broader implications of India's recalibrated approach for regional stability, multilateral diplomacy, and global leadership.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

India's recalibration of relations with Russia after the Ukraine war has been widely discussed in academic and policy literature. Scholars emphasize the Cold War legacy of defense and diplomatic cooperation, noting that Russia supplied over sixty percent of India's defense hardware for decades (Kapur 112). This dependence created institutional trust and vulnerabilities when sanctions disrupted supply chains.

A second strand of literature situates India's response within its doctrine of strategic autonomy. Scholars argue that India's refusal to condemn Russia outright reflects continuity with its non-aligned tradition, while simultaneously deepening ties with the United States and Europe (Mukherjee 45). Analysts highlight that autonomy now functions as a pragmatic hedging strategy rather than a purely ideological stance.

Energy studies show India's opportunistic uptake of discounted Russian crude, which cushioned inflationary pressures while diversifying imports from the Middle East (Joshi 78). This dual approach reflects India's prioritization of national interest over bloc politics.

Defense policy research underscores the risks of overdependence on Russia, particularly delays in spare parts and maintenance (Raghavan 203). Scholars recommend diversification toward France, Israel, and the U.S., alongside indigenization under "Make in India."

Geopolitical analyses warn that Russia's growing alignment with China complicates India's calculus, potentially diluting Moscow's utility as a balancing partner (Singh 59). At the same time, India's neutral stance has been interpreted by some European states as positioning it for a mediator role in global diplomacy (Sharma 134).

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY:

This study adopts a qualitative, analytical, and descriptive research design to examine the impact of the Ukraine war on India Russia relations and India's evolving foreign policy posture. The methodology is structured as follows:

1. **Research Design:**

The study is based on an exploratory and analytical framework. It seeks to understand policy shifts, strategic decisions, and geopolitical implications through systematic interpretation of available data and scholarly perspectives.

2. **Data Sources:**

The research relies primarily on **secondary data**, including:

- Academic journals and peer-reviewed articles on international relations and security studies
- Official government documents, statements, and press releases from India and Russia
- Reports from international organizations such as the United Nations, BRICS, and global think tanks
- Credible news agencies, policy briefs, and expert commentaries
- Books and research papers related to India's foreign policy and Russia's geopolitical role

3. **Data Collection Method:**

Relevant literature was identified using databases such as JSTOR, Google Scholar, government portals, and reputed policy research institutions. Sources were selected based on credibility, relevance, and recency to ensure accuracy and scholarly reliability.

4. **Data Analysis:**

A thematic analysis approach was employed. Key themes such as defense cooperation, energy security, geopolitical pressure, strategic autonomy, and diplomatic balancing were identified, categorized, and interpreted to assess patterns and policy implications.

5. **Comparative Framework:**

The study compares pre-war and post-war dynamics of India Russia relations to trace shifts in strategy, priorities, and alignment.

6. **Scope and Limitations:**

The study focuses on developments primarily from 2022 onwards. As it is based on secondary data, it may be limited by availability, evolving geopolitical events, and interpretive constraints.

India-Russia Relations:

India Russia relations have traditionally rested on strong pillars of strategic cooperation, particularly in the defense sector. For several decades, Russia has been the primary supplier of India's military equipment, accounting for more than sixty percent of India's defense hardware. This includes aircraft, naval systems, missiles, submarines, and advanced technology transfers. Such long-term military collaboration has built institutional trust, interoperability, and strategic reliability, making Russia a cornerstone of India's defense preparedness.

Energy cooperation forms another important dimension of the partnership. Russia plays a key role in supporting India's energy security through the supply of crude oil, natural gas, and nuclear technology. India has benefited from stable energy imports and long-term fuel

arrangements, especially during periods of global oil fluctuations and geopolitical crises. Collaboration in nuclear energy, including the development of nuclear reactors in India, highlights Russia's importance in India's efforts toward energy diversification and sustainable development.

Diplomatically, India and Russia have often demonstrated alignment on major global and regional issues. Both countries have worked closely in multilateral institutions such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and the United Nations Security Council. They have frequently supported each other's strategic interests, promoted multipolarity, and resisted external pressures that challenge their autonomy in foreign policy decisions.

This long-standing foundation created considerable strength and resilience in the India Russia partnership. However, the Ukraine war has placed this relationship under pressure and tested its ability to adapt to a rapidly changing geopolitical environment. India now faces the challenge of balancing historical ties with Russia while responding to new global realities, sanctions, shifting alliances, and emerging strategic priorities.

Impact of the Ukraine War:

1. Energy Realignment:

Western sanctions on Russia restricted its access to many traditional oil markets, compelling Moscow to redirect energy exports to willing partners. India used this opportunity to secure heavily discounted crude oil, which helped cushion the impact of global price instability and rising inflation. This move strengthened India's energy security, ensured stable domestic fuel prices, and supported economic stability during a period of global uncertainty. At the same time, it reinforced India's pragmatic approach to foreign policy, prioritizing national interest over geopolitical pressure.

2. Defense Procurement Challenges:

India has historically depended on Russia for a large share of its defense equipment, spare parts, and technological support. The war created major disruptions due to sanctions on Russian defense industries, banking restrictions, logistical delays, and production strains. These challenges led to uncertainties in timely delivery of military hardware and maintenance supplies. As a result, India faced operational concerns and strategic risks stemming from overdependence on a single supplier. This situation has encouraged India to diversify defense partnerships, invest in indigenous production, and seek greater self-reliance in critical military systems.

3. Geopolitical Pressure:

The Ukraine conflict has intensified global political divisions, placing India under considerable diplomatic scrutiny. The United States and European Union have repeatedly urged India to condemn Russia more strongly and align with the Western position. At the same time, certain smaller European countries, such as Estonia, have expressed the belief that India could serve as a neutral and credible mediator due to its balanced stance and global reputation. This dual expectation reflects both India's rising international influence and the complex diplomatic terrain it must navigate.

4. Strategic Autonomy:

Throughout the conflict, India has adhered firmly to its long-standing principle of strategic autonomy. Instead of taking sides, India has emphasized the importance of dialogue, negotiation, and peaceful resolution of the crisis. It has resisted external pressure to shift its position, maintaining a balanced diplomatic approach consistent with its historical non-aligned

orientation. This stance reflects India’s broader foreign policy vision: safeguarding national interests, avoiding rigid bloc politics, and promoting a multipolar, consultative global order.

India’s Recalibration Strategy:

• **Diversification of Defense Sources:**

In response to uncertainties created by the Ukraine conflict, India has actively diversified its defense procurement strategy. Traditionally dependent on Russia for a majority of its military platforms, India is now expanding purchases from countries such as France, Israel, and the United States. This includes advanced fighter aircraft, missile systems, drones, surveillance technology, and naval assets. Diversification reduces strategic vulnerability, ensures continuity of supply, and enhances access to cutting-edge technology. It also supports India’s broader objective of strengthening indigenous defense production under initiatives like “Make in India,” by encouraging technology transfer and joint manufacturing.

• **Energy Pragmatism:**

India has adopted a pragmatic energy strategy to secure stable and affordable fuel supplies. While continuing to import Russian oil—often at discounted rates—India is simultaneously investing in renewable energy, LNG infrastructure, and long-term partnerships with Middle Eastern suppliers such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar. This balanced approach helps India manage global price volatility, meet its rising domestic energy demand, and gradually transition toward cleaner energy sources. It reflects a policy grounded in national interest, economic stability, and sustainable development priorities.

• **Diplomatic Balancing:**

India has pursued a carefully calibrated diplomatic approach throughout the conflict. Instead of condemning Russia outright, India has consistently emphasized dialogue, de-escalation, humanitarian assistance, and peaceful resolution. This stance allows India to maintain constructive engagement with both Russia and Western partners, preserving strategic flexibility. By avoiding rigid alignment, India reinforces its long-standing policy of strategic autonomy and positions itself as a responsible global actor capable of engaging with multiple power centers.

• **Technology and Space Cooperation:**

India continues to explore emerging areas of cooperation with Russia beyond traditional military ties. Collaboration extends to nuclear energy projects, including ongoing reactor development, as well as prospective engagement in Arctic research, natural resource exploration, and polar scientific missions. In the space domain, Russia remains an important partner in training, technology exchange, and advanced space missions. These initiatives diversify the partnership, sustain high-level strategic trust, and open new avenues of scientific and technological advancement.

India’s approach reflects pragmatism, balance, and long-term strategic thinking—preserving old partnerships while adapting to new global realities.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis-India’s Balancing Act:

Dimension	Traditional India-Russia Ties	Post-Ukraine War Recalibration
Defense	Heavy reliance on Russian arms	Diversification to Western suppliers
Energy	Oil, gas, nuclear imports	Discounted Russian oil + Middle East diversification

Diplomacy	Strategic alignment in UN/BRICS	Neutral stance, mediator role
Technology	Limited cooperation	Expanding into nuclear, space, Arctic
Global Positioning	Cold War legacy partnership	Pragmatic multi-alignment with U.S., EU, Russia

Table 1 presents a comparative overview of India’s evolving approach toward Russia before and after the Ukraine war. It highlights how India has shifted from traditional dependence—particularly in defense, energy, and diplomatic alignment—to a more diversified, pragmatic, and multi-aligned strategy. The table demonstrates India’s effort to maintain its historic partnership with Russia while simultaneously expanding engagements with Western powers and other global actors to safeguard national interests.

Findings of the Study

1. Enduring Partnership with Adjusted Priorities:

The study finds that the Ukraine war has weakened India Russia relations and transformed them from a primarily dependency-based partnership to a more interest-based and flexible engagement.

2. Energy Security Strengthened through Pragmatism:

India effectively utilized discounted Russian oil to stabilize domestic fuel prices and ensure economic resilience, demonstrating a pragmatic and interest-driven approach to energy policy.

3. Defense Dependence Exposed and Reassessed:

Sanctions and supply disruptions revealed India’s vulnerability due to heavy reliance on Russian defense systems, prompting diversification toward Western suppliers and increased emphasis on indigenous production.

4. Diplomatic Neutrality Enhanced Strategic Autonomy:

India’s balanced stance supporting peace and dialogue without condemning Russia—helped maintain relations with both Russia and the West, reinforcing its long-standing principle of strategic autonomy.

5. Expanding Cooperation Beyond Defense:

The study indicates that India and Russia are gradually expanding their engagement into new domains such as nuclear energy, space collaboration, and Arctic exploration, keeping the partnership relevant in changing global contexts.

Suggestions:

1. Strengthen Defense Self-Reliance:

India should intensify efforts under “Make in India” and promote technology transfer, joint ventures, and indigenous defense manufacturing to reduce external dependency.

2. Sustain Balanced Energy Diversification:

While continuing beneficial Russian oil imports, India should enhance renewable energy investments and long-term partnerships with Middle Eastern and global suppliers to ensure sustainable energy security.

3. Maintain Diplomatic Equilibrium:

India must continue its policy of strategic neutrality, engaging constructively with both Russia and Western powers to protect national interests and enhance global credibility.

4. Deepen Strategic Dialogue with Russia:

Regular high-level consultations and policy coordination are essential to manage differences, address uncertainties, and explore new avenues of cooperation.

5. Leverage Global Leadership Role:

India should utilize its balanced position to act as a bridge between conflicting blocs, contribute to peace diplomacy, and strengthen its leadership role in the Global South and multilateral platforms.

Challenges:

- **Sanctions Risk:** Secondary sanctions could complicate India's trade with Russia.
- **China Factor:** Russia's growing dependence on China may dilute India's leverage.
- **Credibility in Global South:** India must balance solidarity with developing nations while avoiding isolation from Western democracies.

CONCLUSION:

The Ukraine war has severed India Russia relations as well as it has compelled a thoughtful and strategic recalibration of the partnership. Rather than distancing itself completely from Moscow, India has chosen to adapt its relationship to the changing geopolitical environment. This adaptation is neither reactionary nor ideological but rooted in practical considerations of national interest. One of the most visible aspects of this approach has been India's decision to capitalize on discounted Russian oil, which has helped stabilize domestic energy prices and support economic resilience during global uncertainty.

At the same time, India recognizes the risks of overdependence on any single defense partner. Sanctions, disrupted supply chains, and delays in equipment delivery have highlighted structural vulnerabilities, prompting India to diversify defense procurement toward partners such as France, Israel, and the United States, while simultaneously strengthening indigenous defense manufacturing. Diplomatically, India has avoided taking an extreme position. It has refrained from openly condemning Russia and consistently emphasized the importance of dialogue, de-escalation, and peaceful resolution. This has allowed India to preserve its long-standing strategic partnership with Russia while maintaining constructive engagement with Western powers. This recalibration reflects India's enduring commitment to strategic autonomy.

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