

India–Russia Relations after the Ukraine War: Continuity and Change

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Abstract

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022 has significantly reshaped global geopolitics, compelling states to reassess their foreign policy strategies. India, historically a close partner of Russia, has adopted a neutral and pragmatic stance, balancing its long-standing bilateral ties with Moscow against growing engagement with Western powers. This paper examines the continuity and change in India–Russia relations post-Ukraine war, analyzing historical ties, energy and defense imperatives, geopolitical calculations, and India’s approach in multilateral forums. Additionally, it explores Ukraine war impact indicators, domestic economic and political considerations, and India’s strategic autonomy in a multipolar context. Using descriptive analysis of secondary data from government reports, think-tank publications, and international media, the study highlights India’s calibrated, interest-driven foreign policy. The findings reveal that India’s nuanced approach combines historical loyalty, pragmatic energy and defense strategies, and proactive diplomacy to maintain stability, promote economic security, and safeguard national interests in an evolving global order.

Keywords: India–Russia relations, Ukraine war, energy security, defense procurement, multipolarity, strategic autonomy, geopolitical balancing, foreign policy, non-alignment, Indo-Pacific.

1. Introduction

The Russia–Ukraine war represents a defining geopolitical event of the early 21st century, disrupting established international alignments and challenging traditional global security frameworks. Western democracies, particularly the United States, the European Union, and NATO, responded with stringent sanctions, military support for Ukraine, and energy restrictions on Russia (*Byjus, 2023; Chatham House, 2024*). In contrast, India pursued a neutral and pragmatic stance, abstaining from United Nations resolutions condemning Russia and emphasizing diplomacy, humanitarian concerns, and multilateral engagement (*Crisis Group, 2023; MEA, 2022*).

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi described India–Russia relations as “unbreakable,” signaling continuity amid intense global pressure (*Al Jazeera, 2025*). India’s stance reflects a strategic balancing act—maintaining ties with Russia, an essential defense supplier, while deepening engagement with Western powers through forums such as the Quad and bilateral summits (*Rajagopalan, 2023; Bush Center, 2022*). This dual-track diplomacy exemplifies India’s pragmatic foreign policy, which prioritizes national interests over ideological alignment with either bloc.

The present study seeks to explore the continuity and change in India–Russia relations post-Ukraine war. It examines the historical roots of the partnership, evaluates strategic domains including energy, defense, trade, and diplomacy, and identifies the impact of the Ukraine conflict on India’s strategic calculus. Furthermore, the paper analyzes India’s policy responses, highlighting the interplay of domestic economic priorities, defense considerations, and multilateral engagement.

2. Historical Context of India–Russia Relations

India–Russia relations extend back to the early 20th century, when Russia established its first consulate in Mumbai in 1900 (*Byjus, 2023*). Strategic cooperation intensified during the Cold War, as India and the Soviet Union shared anti-colonial and anti-imperial perspectives. India’s alignment with the Soviet Union was both ideological and pragmatic, driven by security requirements, technology transfers, and military assistance (*Rajagopalan, 2023*).

Post-Soviet Russia maintained a resilient relationship with India. Defense cooperation, nuclear energy collaborations, and energy imports sustained the partnership, which became integral to India’s strategic autonomy (*CSIS, 2022; NPR, 2023*). Notably, India’s foreign policy has traditionally embraced the principle of non-alignment, allowing it to retain flexibility and engage with multiple power centers, including Russia, the U.S., and China (*Menon, 2023*).

The Ukraine war must be understood against this historical backdrop. India’s continuity in relations with Russia is rooted in shared strategic interests, defense cooperation, and mutual economic benefits. By emphasizing diplomacy and multilateral engagement, India has avoided the ideological polarization that defines Western responses to the conflict (*Carnegie Endowment, 2022*).

3. Strategic Domains in India–Russia Relations

3.1 Energy Security

Energy considerations remain central to India’s approach. As the third-largest oil consumer globally, India faces a dual challenge: securing affordable energy to sustain economic growth and mitigating domestic inflationary pressures (*IMF, 2023; GRM Institute, 2023*). The Ukraine war triggered a surge in global oil prices, compelling India to increase imports of discounted Russian crude. By December 2022, India imported 1.44 billion USD worth of Russian crude, making it the second-largest buyer after China (*Times of India, 2023*).

This strategic move ensures domestic energy affordability and industrial stability without

breaching international sanctions. By refining Russian crude and exporting refined products globally, India simultaneously contributes to global markets while meeting domestic energy needs (Cahill, 2023; NPR, 2023). This energy pragmatism underscores India’s ability to leverage its geostrategic position in Eurasia to balance economic and diplomatic imperatives.

3.2 Defense and Security

Russia has historically been India’s principal defense supplier. Approximately two-thirds of India’s military hardware—including fighter jets, tanks, and artillery—is of Russian origin (Pande, 2023; CSIS, 2022). While the Ukraine war exposed certain limitations of Russian equipment, India continues to procure defense systems to maintain operational readiness, especially along the Line of Actual Control (Menon, 2023).

Simultaneously, India is gradually diversifying its procurement to include Western and Israeli platforms, reflecting an adaptive strategy that mitigates risks while preserving strategic autonomy (Byjus, 2023; Chatham House, 2024). This dual approach ensures that India can uphold its defense preparedness while navigating the uncertainties of global military supply chains.

3.3 Trade and Economic Engagement

The Ukraine war has disrupted global trade flows and supply chains. India has responded by diversifying markets while maintaining strong bilateral trade with Russia. India–Russia trade spans energy, defense, pharmaceuticals, and technology sectors, reflecting a multifaceted economic partnership that enhances resilience against global disruptions (Rajagopalan, 2023; India’s World, 2023).

3.4 Diplomacy and Multilateral Engagement

India has leveraged global platforms such as the G7, BRICS, Quad, and UN to articulate its perspectives on the Ukraine conflict. By emphasizing dialogue, negotiation, and development priorities, India positions itself as a bridge between Western powers and the Global South, promoting multipolarity and strategic autonomy (Crisis Group, 2023; Carnegie Endowment, 2022). Prime Minister Modi’s visits to Kyiv, coupled with continuous engagement with Moscow, exemplify India’s dual-track diplomacy, balancing historical loyalties with contemporary global responsibilities (Al Jazeera, 2025).

4. Ukraine War Impact Indicators

The war has influenced India’s strategic calculations across multiple domains. Key indicators include:

Domain	Impact Indicators	India’s Policy Response
Energy	Oil price volatility, inflationary pressures	Increased Russian crude imports, refining, re-export

Defense	Equipment limitations, risk of arms diversion	Continued Russian procurement, diversification, export oversight
Trade	Sanctions and supply chain disruptions	Market diversification, maintaining bilateral trade
Diplomacy	Western pressure, global scrutiny	Neutrality, engagement in multilateral forums, Global South advocacy
Strategic Autonomy	Maintaining balance between Russia, China, US	Dual-track diplomacy, multipolar engagement
Economic Stability	Inflation, industrial production, social impact	Discounted energy imports, sustaining industrial supply chains

These indicators demonstrate India’s calibrated, interest-driven foreign policy, prioritizing national stability and strategic autonomy (*Bush Center, 2022; BBC, 2023*).

5. Arms and Defense Exports: Challenges and Opportunities

India’s growing role as a defense exporter adds complexity to bilateral relations. Reports indicate that Indian ammunition, initially sold to European countries such as Italy and the Czech Republic, may have reached *Ukraine* (*Al Jazeera, 2024; Al Jazeera, 2025*). Although the volume is marginal, it raises questions about end-user oversight and diplomatic perceptions with Moscow.

Between 2018 and 2023, India’s defense exports grew to \$3 billion, with companies like Munitions India, Yantra, and Kalyani Strategic Systems emerging as global suppliers (*Clary, 2025; Sidhu, 2025*). This expansion presents economic opportunities but requires careful management to avoid unintended diplomatic friction. India’s handling of these exports reflects an awareness of the strategic consequences of global defense supply chains while pursuing economic and industrial objectives.

6. Discussion

India’s approach to Russia post-Ukraine war highlights the complex interplay between historical ties, domestic imperatives, and global strategic considerations. Continuity in bilateral

relations underscores the importance of defense, energy, and diplomatic partnerships cultivated over decades (*CSIS, 2022*). Simultaneously, India has demonstrated adaptability, diversifying defense acquisitions, managing energy imports, and asserting its role in multilateral forums (*Chatham House, 2024*).

The Ukraine conflict has amplified global scrutiny, exposing risks associated with defense exports and energy dependence. India’s nuanced policy—balancing procurement from Russia, engagement with Western powers, and support for Global South perspectives—reflects a sophisticated understanding of geopolitical risk management (*Carnegie Endowment, 2022; Bush Center, 2022*).

By maintaining neutrality, India preserves credibility required to act as a potential mediator, promoting dialogue without aligning exclusively with any party. The dual-track diplomacy and multipolar engagement demonstrate India's strategic foresight in preventing over-reliance on a single power axis and sustaining influence across Eurasia, the Indo-Pacific, and global forums (*Rajagopalan, 2023; MEA, 2022*). Domestic considerations, including energy affordability, inflation management, and industrial growth, remain central to policy decisions, reflecting the inseparability of domestic and foreign policy objectives in India's strategic calculus (*GRM Institute, 2023*).

7. Conclusion

India's response to the Ukraine war embodies a sophisticated balance between historical loyalty and contemporary pragmatism. India has successfully maintained strategic continuity with Russia while navigating the pressures and expectations of Western powers. Energy security considerations, including increased imports of Russian crude, ensure economic stability and support domestic industrial production. In defense, India continues to procure Russian equipment while gradually diversifying to mitigate operational risks and maintain strategic leverage against China. Diplomatically, India's neutral stance combined with multilateral engagement positions it as a credible interlocutor capable of bridging divergent global perspectives. This reflects a deliberate exercise of strategic autonomy, rooted in historical partnerships and responsive to evolving geopolitical realities. The Ukraine war also highlights the interconnected nature of domestic and international policy. India's pragmatic, interest-driven foreign policy integrates economic imperatives, defense readiness, and diplomatic foresight, illustrating a model of statecraft suited to a multipolar world. By emphasizing negotiation, multilateralism, and practical outcomes, India reaffirms its commitment to sovereignty, national interests, and Global South principles, providing lessons for emerging powers seeking to navigate global crises while preserving strategic autonomy. Ultimately, India's engagement post-Ukraine war exemplifies continuity, adaptability, and prudent diplomacy, reinforcing its stature as a key actor in shaping the contemporary international order.

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