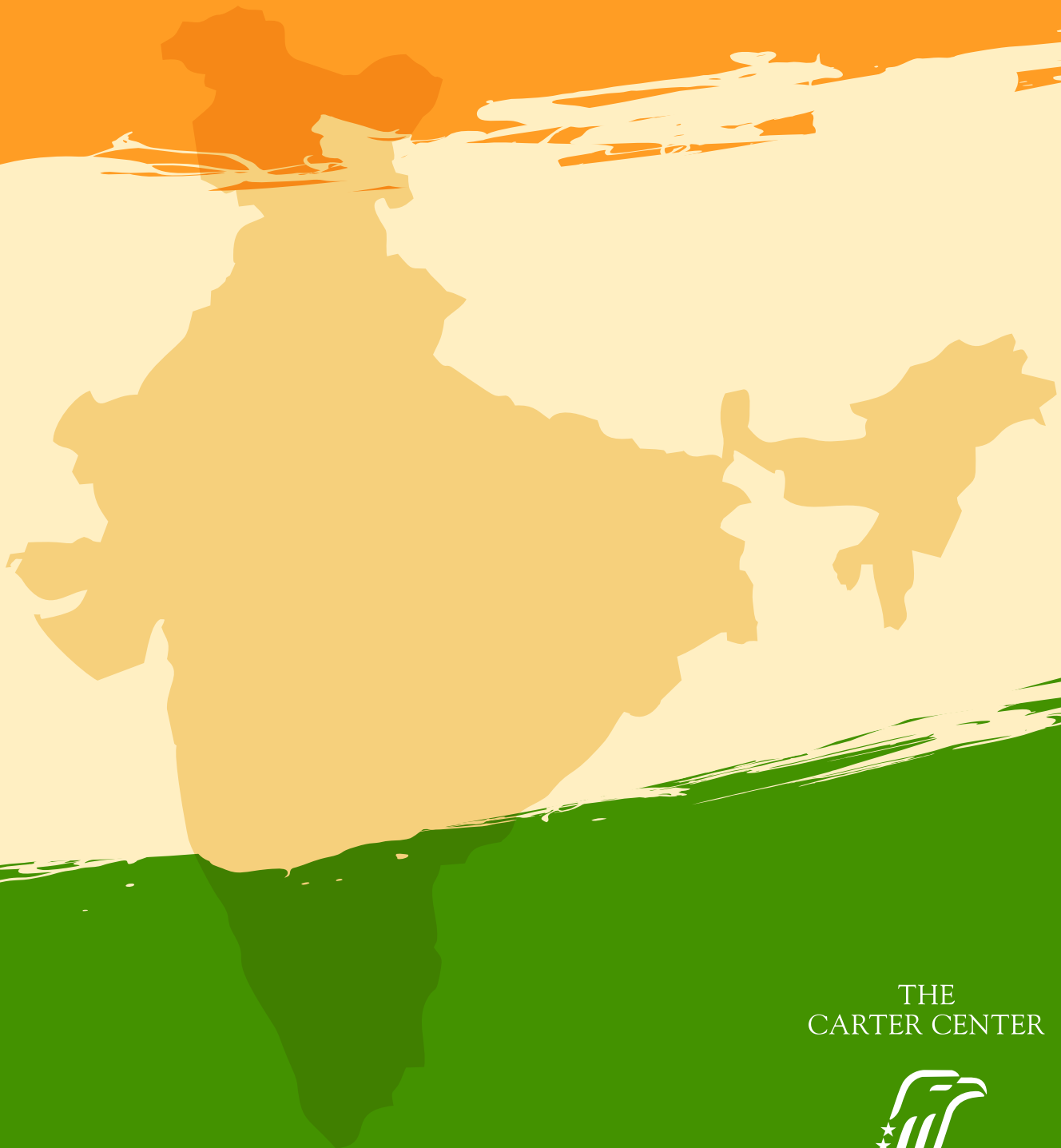


INDIA POLICY  
COMMENTARY

# The Strategic Context of the Enduring India-Russia Friendship

*By David Engerman and Sandeep Bhardwaj*  
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Indo-Russian relations have long been defined not just by the two countries' attitudes toward each other but also by their respective relationships with the West and China. The decades of Indo-Soviet collaboration during the Cold War used the language of friendship but its ups and downs followed from their strategic assessments of global politics.

The relations began in earnest after the 1953 death of Stalin. Despite their fundamentally different political systems, New Delhi and Moscow quickly developed a close and stable relationship, blurring the clear ideological lines of the Cold War. American and British attempts to convince democratic India of the fundamental threat that Soviet communism posed proved futile, to the frustration of many Western diplomats. Indo-Soviet economic relations intensified in the next dozen years, beginning with Soviet support for the Bhilai steel plant in 1955 and continuing through support for a second plant at Bokaro in the early 1960s. Enthusiasts for the Indo-Soviet friendship also cited the role of economic planning, notwithstanding the tremendous differences between their economic systems.

Aside from these economic connections, Indo-Soviet military cooperation also expanded dramatically, starting with the Chinese rout of the Indian Army in 1962. Both the U.S. and USSR leapt to India's aid, but the USSR won out after the abrupt cutoff of American aid to the region during the Indo-Pakistan War of 1965. It held onto that leading position thanks to favorable economic terms, a willingness to license aircraft for Indian production – not to mention the Indian desire to reduce reliance on the West. Not even the demise of the Soviet Union broke this six-decade streak of Moscow's position as the leading supplier to the Indian armed services. Russia still holds the first spot today, but without the domination of earlier decades as the Indian military has consciously tried to diversify its supply.

While the two sides may have toasted friendship and cooperation, it's worth noting that in all of these cases, Indo-Soviet ties expanded as a result of failed Indian initiatives with the West: with West Germany for Bhilai, the United States for Bokaro, and the United Kingdom and (from 1962 to 1965) the United States for military supply. In other words, closer Indo-Soviet ties were the outcome of the triangular relations between the West, the Soviet Union, and India.

The same logic animated the high point of the Indo-Soviet relationship – the 1971 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi finally succumbed to two years of Soviet badgering, not out of any allegiance to the Soviet cause; her new openness to the treaty came about only because American diplomats quietly announced that they were reducing security commitments to India as they sought to normalize their relations with China.

Indian and Soviet diplomats found many reasons for continued economic cooperation after the 1970s, including growing trade relations as well as support for the Indian oil sector and heavy industry. But what they celebrated as shared ideological commitment usually had more to do with mutual benefit – not just in economic terms but also in the ability to maintain a degree of independence from global capitalist forces centered in the United States. These tendencies left a legacy after the demise of the USSR ended Indo-Soviet ties for good.

In the early 1990s, the relationship reached its nadir as both Moscow and New Delhi turned toward the West. It took almost a decade for the relationship to be reinvented, once again propelled by the context of the triangular relationship. The famous 1998 Primakov Doctrine of

balancing U.S. hegemony by creating a Russia-India-China alliance was its first indication. The idea of countering American dominance in the international system by promoting some kind of multipolarity was attractive to Moscow. It also appealed to the New Delhi establishment's deep-seated wariness toward the U.S. as a reliable partner.

Russian President Vladimir Putin laid the foundation for the new relationship in October 2000 by proposing the India-Russia Strategic Partnership agreement, expressly stating that its purpose was to create a "multipolar world." The renewed relationship offered several diplomatic dividends to India, including Russian support for its nuclear weapons program and its campaign to gain a permanent United Nations Security Council seat.

Even as the political partnership flourished, economic gains proved underwhelming. Despite repeated efforts, the Cold War-era intense public-sector economic partnership between the two nations has not translated into a private-sector-led trade relationship in the 21st century. The two countries have tried to paper over these deficits by promoting several high-profile government-to-government projects in defense research and manufacturing, space exploration, nuclear energy, oil and gas production, and Indian investment in the Russian Far East.

Worldviews of the two countries appear to be converging in recent years. Indian leaders have lent support to the idea of a multipolar world and a critique of U.S.-led order in their joint statements with Russia. India has also gained greater significance in Russian thinking recently, not just as a partner for its project to push back against U.S. leadership but also as a counterweight against growing Russian dependence on China. A 2021 Russian national security strategy document drew an equivalence between China and India as Russia's partners. Tellingly, the isolated and germophobic Putin traveled abroad only three times between the onset of the pandemic and the beginning of the Ukraine war: to meet U.S. President Joe Biden, Chinese President Xi Jinping, and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The strength of the Indo-Russian relationship was proven after the 2022 Ukraine war began. Not only has India remained neutral in the conflict, but it has taken advantage of the sanctions to boost its purchase of Russian energy exports at low costs despite enormous pressure from the West. It has also gone ahead with its controversial purchase of the Russian S-400 air defense system. Indian diplomats have refused to criticize Russian policy even in subtle diplomatic terms

India's refusal to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine has also allowed Moscow to use India's democratic credentials to rebut some criticism. Meanwhile, the Western nations leading the economic blockade against Russia see India's refusal to join as another sign of India's democratic backsliding. Yet neither of these views takes into account the long history of national interests, not ideological abstractions, that lies at the core of Indo-Russian relations. In the last few months, Washington has sought to frame the current geopolitical landscape as a clash between the world's democracies and authoritarian Russia and China. Such an argument is unlikely to be persuasive in New Delhi. It is also important to note that even as India's democratic foundations have weakened considerably in recent years, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party has exerted great effort to prop up its image as a healthy democracy. It would thus reject any rhetorical framing that lumps it with authoritarian regimes.

Invariably, the same factors – triangulation vis-à-vis the U.S. and China – will continue to shape the relationship in the near future. The relationship faces many challenges as China's rise and U.S. policies in the Indo-Pacific pull India and Russia in opposite directions. However, these forces can also conceivably strengthen Indo-Russia ties as the U.S. and China seek to

counterbalance each other. After all, as the Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar recently noted, “At the core of the [India-Russia] relationship is the embrace of multipolarity, both as a reality and as an aspiration.”

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