

India's Balancing Act: Relation with Russia Amidst Western Sanctions and Quad Cooperation

Subhomoy Barman,

State Aided College Teacher, Department of Political Science, Chittaranjan College,
Kolkata, West Bengal.

Abstract

This research paper examines India's evolving foreign policy strategy as it navigates complex geopolitical tensions between its traditional partner Russia and its growing alignment with Western powers through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the subsequent Western sanctions against Moscow have placed India in a diplomatically delicate position. India has maintained strong ties with Russia in defense, energy, and strategic cooperation while simultaneously deepening its partnerships with the United States, Japan, and Australia to counterbalance China's rise in the Indo-Pacific. This paper explores how India balances these competing interests by adhering to its long-standing principle of strategic autonomy. It analyzes India's defense dependence on Russia, its rising energy trade amidst sanctions, its growing Quad commitments, and the broader implications for regional security and global order. The research finds that India's foreign policy is neither passive non-alignment nor opportunistic balancing, but a deliberate strategy to safeguard its national interests amid shifting global power dynamics. Through pragmatic engagement and issue-based alliances, India aims to assert its role as a sovereign, multipolar power while avoiding entanglement in great power conflicts. The paper concludes that India's approach offers a model for middle powers seeking autonomy in a polarized world.

Keywords:

India–Russia Relations, Quad, Strategic Autonomy, Western Sanctions, Ukraine Conflict, Indo-Pacific, Foreign Policy, Energy Security, Defense Cooperation, Multipolarity, China, Geopolitics, Non-Alignment, International Relations, Middle Power Strategy.

1. Introduction

India's contemporary foreign policy is undergoing one of its most diplomatically challenging phases, caught in the crosscurrents of global strategic realignments. At the heart of this complexity lies the triangular relationship involving India, Russia, and the Western alliance led by the United States. Russia, India's time-tested partner since the Cold War, finds itself increasingly isolated following its 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Meanwhile, India's collaboration with Western powers—particularly through the Quad—is strengthening, driven by the Indo-Pacific's evolving security architecture and China's growing assertiveness. India's policy responses reflect its commitment to strategic autonomy, shaped by national interests rather than ideological binaries. This balancing act demands maintaining legacy ties with Moscow while leveraging Western cooperation to enhance its strategic clout. This research paper explores how India navigates this diplomatic terrain, analyzing historical foundations, defense and energy cooperation, economic imperatives, and the impact of Western sanctions, all within the context of an increasingly polarized global order. Through a detailed examination of primary and secondary sources, the paper presents India's strategy not as passive balancing but as an active recalibration of partnerships to safeguard its sovereignty, economic growth, and geopolitical stature in a changing world.

2. Historical Context of Indo-Russian Relations

India's strategic relationship with Russia dates back to the Cold War, when the Soviet Union became New Delhi's principal geopolitical partner. Unlike Western countries that tilted toward Pakistan, the USSR provided India with political, military, and economic support. The 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation symbolized this bond, coinciding with India's decisive victory in the Bangladesh Liberation War. Moscow supplied advanced weaponry, helped establish public sector industries, and backed India's positions at international forums. Even after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Russia continued to support India with discounted arms deals, nuclear energy cooperation, and technological transfers. During periods of Western sanctions on India (especially post-1998 nuclear tests), Russia remained a steadfast partner. The relationship matured into one of 'special and privileged strategic partnership' in the 21st century. This deep-seated bilateralism continues to shape Indian foreign policy, even as the global balance of power shifts. While India diversified its relationships in the post-Cold War era, its reliance on Russian defense technology, including critical platforms such as fighter jets, submarines, and missile systems, remains substantial. This legacy creates a structural interdependence that cannot be easily unwound, even amid changing geopolitical dynamics and rising Western pressures.

3. The Russia-Ukraine Conflict and Strategic Implications

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a watershed moment in international politics. Western nations swiftly imposed sweeping sanctions targeting Russian banks, oligarchs, energy exports, and defense industries. This drastically altered global supply chains, energy markets, and military alliances. For India, the war posed a complex dilemma: how to uphold its strategic ties with Russia without alienating the West. India abstained from United Nations resolutions condemning Russia and refused to join sanctions. Instead, it maintained a neutral stance, calling for dialogue and diplomacy. At the same time, India ramped up purchases of discounted Russian oil, saving billions on energy imports. However, such decisions invited criticism from Western media and governments, who viewed India's position as ambivalent. New Delhi, however, emphasized its national interest and strategic autonomy, arguing that its foreign policy should not be dictated by bloc politics. India's nuanced approach highlights its broader strategy—engagement with all powers while avoiding entanglement in their rivalries. The Ukraine conflict underscored the fragility of global institutions, the return of hard power politics, and the urgent need for India to recalibrate its alliances in a world increasingly defined by multipolarity and strategic competition.

4. The Significance of the Quad in Indian Strategy

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), comprising India, the United States, Japan, and Australia, has become central to India's Indo-Pacific policy. Originally conceived in 2007 and revived in 2017, the Quad seeks to ensure a free, open, inclusive, and rules-based Indo-Pacific. It is not a military alliance but a platform for maritime cooperation, vaccine diplomacy, infrastructure building, and emerging technologies. For India, the Quad offers a valuable counterbalance to China's strategic assertiveness, especially in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The 2020 Galwan clash with Chinese troops in Ladakh further reinforced India's pivot toward Quad partners. Despite its strong ties with Russia, India recognizes that Moscow's growing dependence on Beijing limits its ability to support Indian interests in Asia. Thus, the Quad provides India with strategic depth and diversified partnerships. The U.S. has emerged as a key defense supplier, while Japan and Australia offer economic and maritime collaboration. However, India's participation in the Quad does not imply alignment with Western bloc politics. Instead, it reflects a pragmatic approach to multipolar engagement—using various

platforms to enhance strategic leverage while retaining autonomy over its foreign policy decisions and defense procurements.

5. Defense Cooperation: Dependence and Diversification

India's defense relationship with Russia remains one of the most robust pillars of bilateral cooperation. Over 60% of India's military hardware originates from Russia, including advanced systems such as the Sukhoi Su-30MKI fighter aircraft, T-90 tanks, MiG series, nuclear submarines, and the S-400 air defense system. Russia has also co-developed platforms like the BrahMos missile with India. However, the Russia-Ukraine war and resultant sanctions have raised concerns about future reliability and spares supply chains. The disruption in Russian arms manufacturing due to war demands and sanctions affects India's procurement timelines and maintenance capabilities. In response, India has accelerated diversification by procuring from the U.S., France, Israel, and indigenous manufacturers. The U.S.-India defense cooperation has grown significantly, encompassing the COMCASA and BECA agreements, joint military exercises, and drone and jet engine technologies. France supplies Rafale fighter jets and submarine platforms, while Israel offers advanced UAVs and radar systems. Nevertheless, India cannot abruptly abandon Russian systems without compromising its operational readiness. Hence, it seeks to manage this transition gradually, using 'Make in India' and defense indigenization policies to reduce long-term dependencies, while retaining its historical defense ties with Moscow.

6. Energy Ties: Oil, Gas, and Nuclear Cooperation

Energy cooperation is another critical component of the India-Russia relationship. India is the world's third-largest energy consumer, and its demand for oil and gas is expected to rise sharply. Russia, with vast reserves and willingness to offer deep discounts, has become a significant supplier. Since the onset of Western sanctions in 2022, India ramped up its imports of Russian crude, which at times accounted for over 40% of its oil purchases. This shift allowed India to diversify away from Middle Eastern sources and reduce import costs, cushioning the impact of global inflation. Furthermore, India and Russia are collaborating on long-term energy infrastructure, including investments in the Russian Far East and the Arctic. In the nuclear energy domain, Russia has been instrumental in building reactors at Kudankulam in Tamil Nadu. Plans for additional units and cooperation in nuclear fuel supply continue despite geopolitical disruptions. India's energy security calculus is pragmatic—ensuring affordable and uninterrupted supply chains while avoiding over-dependence on any single partner. As Western sanctions limit Russian exports to Europe, India finds itself in a favorable negotiating position, able to secure concessional deals while maintaining diplomatic non-alignment on the conflict. These energy dynamics reveal a transactional, interest-based dimension of Indo-Russian relations.

7. Economic Relations Beyond Energy and Defense

Beyond energy and defense, India-Russia economic ties remain relatively underdeveloped compared to their strategic cooperation. Bilateral trade has hovered around \$12–15 billion annually, a figure far below potential given the size of their economies. Key exports from India include pharmaceuticals, chemicals, iron and steel, tea, and electrical machinery, while Russia exports crude oil, fertilizers, and defense equipment. After 2022, trade volumes surged due to energy deals, but imbalances widened significantly in favor of Russia. Efforts to settle transactions in national currencies—such as the rupee-ruble mechanism—faced operational difficulties and banking hesitations under global sanctions regimes. Western pressure and the dominance of the U.S. dollar in international finance complicate these alternatives. Connectivity projects such as the International North-

South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and Chennai-Vladivostok Maritime Corridor are aimed at boosting trade logistics. However, implementation delays, bureaucratic hurdles, and insufficient private sector interest remain challenges. Unlike India's dynamic commercial relations with the U.S. and EU, trade with Russia lacks diversity and innovation. Going forward, India seeks to expand cooperation in critical minerals, space technology, cybersecurity, and fintech to modernize the economic relationship. Yet, the geopolitical context and uncertainty around Russia's global integration limit the pace and scope of such transformations.

8. Navigating Western Sanctions and Diplomatic Pressures

India's decision to maintain and even deepen ties with Russia amid Western sanctions has drawn significant global attention. The United States and European Union have repeatedly urged India to reconsider energy imports and military cooperation with Moscow. However, New Delhi has remained firm, citing its national interest, economic needs, and historical ties. Unlike NATO members, India is not a treaty-bound ally of any major power and reserves the right to an independent foreign policy. At forums such as the G20 and BRICS, Indian leaders have reiterated the need for diplomacy over coercion and rejected unilateral sanctions not backed by the United Nations. India has also subtly conveyed that moralistic pressure from the West, especially when it ignores India's own security concerns regarding China and Pakistan, is not persuasive. By refusing to buckle under pressure while keeping diplomatic channels open with all sides, India has earned a reputation for strategic maturity and *realpolitik*. That said, the situation remains delicate. Secondary sanctions, banking restrictions, and the evolving global financial architecture could create future risks. To mitigate these, India is expanding bilateral payments in local currencies and strengthening multilateral mechanisms like BRICS to foster an alternative economic order.

9. China as the Underlying Factor in Indian Strategy

A central but sometimes understated factor in India's balancing act is China's rising influence and assertiveness. The India-China rivalry has intensified over the past decade, climaxing with the 2020 Galwan Valley clashes. China's growing footprint in South Asia, the Indian Ocean, and through Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects has further alarmed Indian policymakers. In this context, Russia's increasing tilt toward China—symbolized by their “no limits” partnership—is a cause for concern in New Delhi. While Russia officially maintains neutrality in India-China disputes, its dependence on Beijing for economic survival post-Ukraine war raises doubts about its long-term ability to support India strategically. At the same time, India's engagement with the Quad is partly aimed at counterbalancing China's influence, especially in maritime domains. By enhancing interoperability with the U.S. Navy, conducting joint drills like Malabar, and boosting island connectivity, India is strengthening deterrence against Chinese aggression. However, it is wary of being perceived as part of a Western containment strategy. Hence, India emphasizes issue-based coalitions, strategic partnerships, and multipolar diplomacy, rather than formal alliances. This approach allows it to deal with the China challenge pragmatically while avoiding rigid bloc affiliations that could constrain its freedom of action.

10. Strategic Autonomy: India's Foundational Principle

India's foreign policy has long been guided by the principle of strategic autonomy, a legacy of its Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) roots. While the global environment has changed since the Cold War, the core idea of preserving sovereign decision-making remains intact. Strategic autonomy does not imply equidistance or neutrality but the freedom to choose partners and policies based on national interest. India's current approach

to Russia and the West is a textbook example of this doctrine in action. By buying discounted Russian oil, acquiring Western defense technologies, participating in BRICS, and joining Quad initiatives—all simultaneously—India showcases a sophisticated multivector strategy. Critics argue this could lead to overextension or diplomatic inconsistency, but supporters contend that it reflects India's emergence as a confident middle power. As global polarization intensifies, strategic autonomy allows India to navigate turbulence without compromising core interests. It also helps India amplify its voice on global issues such as climate change, food security, and digital governance. In the future, India's challenge will be to institutionalize this autonomy through resilient institutions, diversified partnerships, and credible deterrence, so that it can remain agile and sovereign in a world increasingly marked by great power rivalry and systemic fragmentation.

Conclusion

India's diplomatic posture in the current geopolitical climate reveals a carefully calculated balancing act between historical loyalty and emerging strategic imperatives. The country's longstanding partnership with Russia, forged through decades of military, energy, and political cooperation, remains deeply embedded in its defense infrastructure and strategic outlook. However, India's growing alignment with the West—particularly through platforms like the Quad—reflects a pragmatic recognition of shifting power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. Rather than choosing sides in a new Cold War, India is pursuing a flexible, multi-aligned foreign policy centered on strategic autonomy and national interest. This approach allows India to benefit from Russian energy and technology, while simultaneously building partnerships with the U.S., Japan, Australia, and Europe in areas ranging from defense to climate resilience and digital governance. As global polarization deepens due to the Ukraine war and U.S.-China rivalry, India's challenge will be to maintain this delicate equilibrium. Its future success depends on institutional agility, diversified economic ties, technological self-reliance, and diplomatic credibility. In an era of uncertainty and flux, India's strategy exemplifies the behavior of a rising power navigating great power politics without becoming a pawn in them—assertive yet non-aligned, independent yet globally engaged.

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