



Russia and India in the Evolving World Order. Introduction to the special issue

Nandan Unnikrishnan¹, Nivedita Kapoor²

¹ Observer Research Foundation (ORF), India

² National Research University Higher School of Economics, Russia

Abstract: The introductory article delves into the evolving dynamics of the India-Russia relationship in the post-Soviet era, characterized by carefully forged cooperation, managed differences, and adaptation to the ever-changing international landscape. The authors emphasize that amidst the current state of global disorder, India and Russia can mutually assist each other within certain constraints. The article highlights how bilateral ties enable Moscow and New Delhi to pursue their national interests, with a commitment to safeguarding their respective sovereignty. The authors propose a nuanced understanding of the relationship, wherein India and Russia continue to engage in ways that uphold their own interests and prevent any infringement upon each other. The article sets the stage for further exploration of the numerous facets of the India-Russia relationship, examining areas such as strategic cooperation, economic ties, multilateral engagement, and addressing global challenges like climate change. Ultimately, it aims to provide insights into the complex and evolving nature of this bilateral partnership.

Keywords: India-Russia relationship, post-Soviet era, strategic cooperation, multilateral engagement, sovereignty, bilateral partnership

The idea of a comprehensive publication on the multifaceted relations between India and Russia has been discussed for several years, but no individual or institution has successfully realized this project.

In this context, the proposal last year for an issue of MGIMO's prestigious *Vestnik* publication focusing on various aspects of the current relations between India and Russia seemed timely, especially considering the changes in the international landscape since February 24th, 2022.

The conflict in Ukraine and the severe sanctions imposed on Russia by the West have caused significant turbulence in global politics and economics. What was initially perceived as a "small European brawl" has now become a challenge to all nations due to the unprecedented nature of the sanctions against Russia.

But as with all matters, there is a history...

The competition between the United States and the Soviet Union, as the victors of the Second World War, played a significant role in shaping the Cold War world order. The collapse of the Soviet Union marked the beginning of a unipolar world, with the United States wielding unprecedented and seemingly limitless power. However, within a few decades, this power began to decline, albeit relatively, leaving the international system in a state of disorder rather than order. Despite this, states, including India and Russia, continue to present their own visions of a future international system, favoring multipolarity.

India and Russia have expressed their aspirations for a multipolar world through joint statements, multilateral declarations, and policy speeches. However, they face challenges in achieving this goal in a global system that remains in flux. This situation underscores both the strengths and weaknesses of these two powers in shaping the structure of polarity. They possess significant power in their own right, but not enough to tip the balance of power in their favor. They hold central positions in their respective regions, but face challenges from other regional actors. They are resilient in the face of international pressure, yet not powerful enough to prevent such pressure from emerging.

In essence, India and Russia are not superpowers and must contend with the limitations that come with that status. Furthermore, as internal shifts occur within both countries, their engagement with the outside world is undergoing significant transformation, which will inevitably impact their relationship with each other.

The future of the India-Russia strategic partnership has sparked intense debates, with diverging interpretations of every event based on individual beliefs. The cancellation of the 2022 bilateral summit was seen by some as a sign of the relationship's decline, while India's abstention from UN votes on the Ukraine conflict was viewed as a symbol of a strong and enduring partnership. When Prime Minister Modi told President Putin that this was not a time for military conflict, it was perceived as a sign of India's opposition to Russia, but at the same time the very fact of their meeting was interpreted as a reassuring signal. The Russia-China partnership is seen as a threat to India, yet Russia's National Security Strategy places India and China on equal footing, which is seen as indicating its intentions toward both Asian giants. The multitude of opinions and passionate positions on the future of the Indo-Russia ties is extensive.

However, acknowledging the merits and good faith behind these arguments, it becomes evident that the ongoing developments in the bilateral partnership are critical and complex. The issues that India and Russia must navigate within their strategic relationship have grown more intricate over the years and require careful attention. This necessitates an unbiased analysis of the various factors – bilateral, regional, and global – that exert unique pressures on the Indo-Russian partnership, leading to effective policy recommendations. In line with this objective, this special edition

of the *MGIMO Review of International Relations* brings together experts from India and Russia to delve into the most significant aspects of the bilateral relationship in the 21st century.

The conversations in the following pages reveal much about how the two sides perceive each other, where their views converge and where they diverge. The authors offer a sober analysis, avoiding extremes and hubris, and instead tracing patterns to determine the trajectory of a relationship that has been officially declared to be a "special and privileged strategic partnership". While a book project documenting the full spectrum of contemporary India-Russia ties remains a gap to be filled, this special edition seeks to cover maximum ground amidst once-in-a-lifetime changes in domestic and foreign policies of both countries.

On the one hand are internal developments, which will in the long term have a fundamental bearing on the balance of capabilities they bring to the table. These processes are ongoing and the results are as yet undetermined. On the other hand are external factors that form a common theme, running through the articles in this edition, either directly or indirectly. These include the pressures exerted by the evolving world order, the US-China rivalry, the nature of China's rise, the conflict in Ukraine as well as Russia's ties with the West. At a time when the international order remains unstable and neither India nor Russia can claim to have fully resolved the issue of their positioning in the international system, these factors together are set to exert their own repercussions for the bilateral relationship.

A pragmatic partnership

While different experts have offered their own separate interpretations of the issues facing Indo-Russian ties, the pragmatic nature of the bilateral engagement emerges as a cornerstone in these pages, which has helped the two sides navigate the steadily rising number of challenges in the world around them. As the authors trace the developments of the relationship in the 21st century, they find a pattern of behaviour that can only be described as realist and steadfast in pursuit of national interests, not hesitating in diverging from a strategic partner if a better option emerges.

Ivan Safranchuk and Alexandre Knyazev reveal how in the case of Central Asia and Afghanistan, India was entirely on board with the Western geoeconomic plan for the region that came with the US presence in Afghanistan, even though this would come at the cost of Russian interests. But instead of this driving a wedge, Russia focused on building on its own outreach in Afghanistan after 2010, and both sides remained focused on their common interests in this volatile region. When US withdrawal from Afghanistan created new conditions on the ground, the two sides could expect their respective common interests to create space for cooperation. This ability to continue working on convergences even as divergences keep piling up is once again a reflection of these states pursuing rational policies towards attainment of national goals.

And it is this ruthless pursuit of national interests that is also responsible for new challenges in India-Russia ties. As Nivedita Kapoor explains, the change in balance of threat perception regarding China has altered the trajectory of Indian foreign policy. As New Delhi pursues relations with the US as the sole power capable of balancing China, it has paid little attention to Russian protests about the Indo-Pacific or Quad. Russia too has transformed its partnership with China given its own breakdown of relations with the West, evoking much concern in India. Even amidst the multi-alignment policy of India or multi-vector foreign policy of Russia, the hierarchy of emerging relations is discernible. This heralds an ushering in of a period where according to Kapoor, bilateral goodwill might not always translate into cooperation at regional or global level. Or in other cases, as Safranchuk and Knyazev point out, there might be times when India and Russia converge on global issues but diverge on regional Eurasian agenda. The experts take a realistic view of the prevailing situation, which is evident in Alexey Kupriyanov's argument that builds on a study of elites of the two countries. Especially in the case of Indian elites, as they execute their strategic plan, the author argues it is unclear if they will choose Russia if it does not fit with their broader goals for the nation. The experts are clear-eyed about the leeway available to each other even in an old partnership amidst the uncertainties of the current international system.

This is also an acknowledgement of their own limitations, and a recognition that the US-China axis will be key towards determining the future international order, wherein their respective relations with these two players will be consequential. Already, the US has played an indirect role in Indo-Russian interaction in Eurasia. India's wariness of China aside, as Srikanth Kondapalli points out, China does not want to lose a major political supporter like Russia in the international system. At the same time, as the author notes, there are limits wherein the rising power is loath to fritter away benefits of globalisation that have accrued to it. Sergey Lukonin agrees, contrasting the radical breakdown narrative of Russia with that of China still looking to preserve its advantages in a system that has facilitated its spectacular growth. The push and pull exerted by machinations of great power politics, and the role of the US and China in the foreign policy choices of New Delhi and Moscow thus remain a recurrent theme.

Despite the complex challenges they face, India and Russia are able to identify and establish areas of cooperation in pursuit of their shared objectives. The authors illustrate that these areas encompass a wide range of domains, including connectivity, defense partnership, energy, trade, and multilateral engagement. It is important to note that these cooperative endeavors are not without their difficulties, yet there remains a consistent underlying thread of pragmatism guiding the decision-making process in these areas.

Is the "special and privileged strategic partnership" more of a "normal relationship"?

Aleksei Zakharov's comprehensive examination of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) sheds light on the significance of infrastructure development and connectivity in fostering bilateral cooperation in emerging regions. This aligns with Athar Zafar's perspective, who also identifies connectivity as a key area for Indo-Russia engagement in Central Asia, which can contribute to the fulfillment of national objectives in terms of regional presence. These endeavors to achieve national goals extend to the broader economic relationship between the two countries as well.

A notable example of this is India's decision to import discounted oil from Russia in order to mitigate domestic inflationary pressures. While India has not joined the Western sanctions on Russia, which were imposed in response to the conflict in Ukraine, it has also not displayed a proactive approach in violating these sanctions or significantly altering its economic ties with Moscow beyond energy imports. Thus, India's economic engagement with Russia has primarily centered around energy imports, with limited visible shifts in response to the Western sanctions.

The existing economic relationship between India and Russia has persisted, as highlighted by Abhijit Mukhopadhyay, who identifies priority sectors for bilateral trade based on historical import and export patterns. Lydia Kulik also explores emerging areas that have the potential to boost economic ties, fueled by Russia's increased interest in the Indian market. However, Mukhopadhyay expresses scepticism regarding the expansion of trade, contending that progress hinges on the resolution of the ongoing conflagration, as it directly impacts various challenges faced by the trade relationship, such as sluggish economic growth, logistical hurdles, and payment settlements.

Both authors emphasize the need to address structural issues that have long characterized the trade ties between the two countries, which have often been overshadowed by the more notable aspects of the "special and privileged strategic partnership". They highlight the importance of tackling these issues to strengthen and diversify the economic relationship.

The moniker of a "special and privileged strategic partnership" has traditionally been more applicable to the defence aspect of the India-Russia relationship, but Rajorshi Roy suggests that this dynamic may be gradually changing. While defence ties between the two countries continue to be mutually beneficial, the exclusivity of the relationship has been diluted, particularly due to the closer military cooperation between Russia and China. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine poses additional challenges, including potential disruptions to supplies from Russia to India and reputational risks for Russia.

However, despite this dilution of exclusivity, both sides exhibit pragmatism and a willingness to adapt to new conditions. Roy and Vasily Kashin both identify joint production and technology transfer as key avenues to sustain the defence relationship. Kashin delves into the lessons that Indian defence planners can learn from the ongoing

conflict and how these developments shape the Russian military-industrial complex, influencing their future post-conflict actions. He advises Russia to support India's domestic defence manufacturing goals to achieve self-sufficiency, a goal that aligns with India's objectives. This move would help Russia maintain its position in the Indian defence sector, albeit with some changes, and contribute to bilateral gains as India diversifies its sources of arms imports.

The articles presented in this special edition paint a picture that diverges from the notion of an exceptionally special relationship between India and Russia, despite the official designation of a "special and privileged strategic partnership" in 2010. Instead, the engagements between the two countries reflect a pragmatic and balanced relationship, devoid of grand narratives or binding alliance commitments. This pragmatic approach enables the two sides to build upon areas of convergence while managing divergences without jeopardizing the entire partnership.

The authors delve into the various challenges that the India-Russia relationship faces, which are expected to multiply in the current context of an evolving world order. This recognition of the limitations and complexities helps shape the contours of bilateral cooperation. The works of Raj Kumar Sharma and Geetanjali Atri, Rashmi Doraiswamy, and Uma Purushothaman and Reinhart Philip featured in this special edition of the journal highlight the importance of addressing these challenges and finding avenues for collaboration within the existing framework.

Sharma and Atri's research focuses on the importance of cooperation in multilateral fora for India and Russia. They highlight India's desire for Russian neutrality as it navigates its relationship with China while managing concerns from Western countries. Their findings emphasize the role of multilateral organizations such as BRICS and SCO in shaping a favorable balance of power in Eurasia.

Doraiswamy's analysis acknowledges the evolving use of soft power by India and Russia over the years. The author observes a renewed effort from Moscow to cultivate deeper cultural ties with India, an aspect that had been overlooked in the post-Soviet period.

Purushothaman and Philip delve into the pressing issue of climate change and find that both Russia and India have not adequately addressed the crisis, despite its significant implications for their respective futures. Their work emphasizes the need for both countries to explore cooperation in areas such as green technology, liquefied natural gas (LNG), and nuclear energy to collectively work towards achieving climate goals and benefit the world at large.

Who are India and Russia to each other?

The post-Soviet trajectory of India-Russia relations has been one of carefully forged cooperation, managed differences and methodical adaptation to the continuously shifting international circumstances. In the current moment, there is a frank acknowledgement of the momentous nature of ongoing shifts - both within India and

Russia and in the world around them. The authors do not underestimate either the extent of the changes that this entails or the challenges these shifts introduce in their wake. However, they do surmise that in the current state of world disorder, India and Russia can help each other in specific ways, even if their plans remain circumscribed. They do not deny the differences but rather highlight ways in which both Moscow and New Delhi through their bilateral ties can continue a pursuit of their national interests, with the understanding the former shall not be allowed to infringe on the latter under any circumstances.

So, considering all the factors together, where does this special edition take us in understanding the India-Russia relationship? Unsurprisingly, given the focus of both partners on China, the clue to this can be found in the article on Russia-China relations by Sergey Lukonin, in which he asks a very pertinent question:

"Who is China for Russia in the current conditions: a friend, an ally, a partner, a neutral business partner, a tough negotiator, an implicit opponent? The answer can be – depending on the situation and interests at the given moment – China is all of these for Russia at the same time."

One could ask the same question about India and Russia – who are they to each other – and the answer based on these following articles would not be very different – "depends on the situation and interests at the given moment".

About the authors:

Nandan Unnikrishnan – Distinguished Fellow, heading Eurasian Studies at Observer Research Foundation (ORF). 20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area, New Delhi, India, 110 002. E-mail: nandan@orfonline.org.

Nivedita Kapoor – PhD, Research Fellow, International Laboratory on World Order Studies and the New Regionalism, Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs, National Research University Higher School of Economics. 20 Myasnitskaya Ulitsa, Moscow, Russia, 101000. E-mail: kapoor.nivedita@gmail.com.

Conflict of interest:

The authors declare the absence of conflict of interests.

Россия и Индия в меняющемся мировом порядке. Предисловие к тематическому номеру

Нандан Унникришнан¹, Ниведита Капур²
[DOI 10.24833/2071-8160-2023-2-89-7-14](https://doi.org/10.24833/2071-8160-2023-2-89-7-14)

¹ Исследовательский фонд Observer (ORF), Индия

² Национальный исследовательский университет «Высшая школа экономики», Россия

В предисловии к тематическому номеру авторы кратко характеризуют динамику индийско-российских отношений в постсоветскую эпоху, делая акцент на их выверенности и высокой адаптивности к постоянно меняющемуся международному ландшафту. Авторы подчёркивают, что в настоящий момент, в условиях глобального беспорядка, Индия и Россия способны поддерживать друг друга, несмотря на известные ограничения. Двусторонние отношения дают возможность Москве и Нью-Дели эффективнее отстаивать свои национальные интересы, защищать свой суверенитет. При этом страны стараются не ущемлять интересы друг друга. Введение кратко представляет статьи номера, в которых рассматриваются различные аспекты индийско-российских отношений, включая стратегическое сотрудничество, экономические связи и решение глобальных проблем, таких как изменение климата.

Ключевые слова: индийско-российские отношения, постсоветская эпоха, стратегическое сотрудничество, многостороннее взаимодействие, суверенитет, двустороннее партнёрство.

Об авторах:

Нандан Унникришнан – почётный научный сотрудник исследовательского фонда Observer (ORF). 20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area, Нью-Дели, Индия, 110 002.
E-mail: nandan@orfonline.org.

Ниведита Капур – PhD, научный сотрудник Международной лаборатории исследований мирового порядка и нового регионализма факультета мировой экономики и мировой политики НИУ ВШЭ. 101000, Москва, ул. Мясницкая, д. 20.
E-mail: kapoor.nivedita@gmail.com.

Конфликт интересов:

Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.