



Since its independence in 1947, New Delhi has had excellent relations with Moscow, first with the Soviet Union until it disintegrated in 1991, then with the successor state, Russia, writes Joseph E Fallon.

In the July 2021 edition of Russia's National Security Strategy, Moscow officially describes its relationship with India as a "special privileged strategic partnership." According to India's top diplomat, former Foreign Secretary and former High Commissioner to the UK, Ranjan Mathai, "*The Indo-Russian strategic partnership has five major components— (i) political (with sustained, regular dialogue at the highest level), (ii) counter terrorism cooperation, (iii) defence, (iv) civil nuclear energy and (v) space. The nature of the Indo-Russian pentagon is such one never knows which of the five angles will be active on what time and sometimes all five angles come into play simultaneously.*"

Such a relationship reflects, and reinforces, popular perceptions. "Ordinary Russians see India as a reliably friendly country with which their own nation has a virtually problem-free relationship. For their part, most Indians regard Russia as a proven friend that in the course of India's seventy-five years of independence has never caused their country strategic harm."

However, there is concern in New Delhi this strategic partnership may be undermined as a result of Moscow's decision in 2014 to redirect, or "pivot", Russia's foreign policy focus from Europe to China, India's political rival.

Russia's pivot will neither undermine the special relationship between New Delhi and Moscow, nor threaten India's security. Infusions of Chinese capital will not induce Moscow to acquiesce in Beijing's policies to strategically isolate India.

Russia pivoted to China because Moscow needed to counter the impact of Western sanctions on the Russian economy. The decision was an example of realpolitik, a "relentless, though realistic, pursuit of the national interest."

The implication is when China, like Europe, becomes a threat to Russian interests, Moscow will pivot again this time to India. India is the only country in Asia, which rivals China in territory and population; can challenge China militarily, and has potential to challenge China economically as well. Russia is best served by bolstering India as the military and economic counter weight to China. Demonstrating this is the opportunity the pivot provides New Delhi.

As Elizabeth Buchanan wrote June 26, 2020 in "There's no (new) China-Russia alliance", The Strategist, Australian Strategic Policy Institute: "For Beijing, providing capital injections to take the edge off the sanctions was a shrewd act exploiting Russian vulnerability. This is not lost on the Kremlin and further feeds the notion that Beijing is merely a partner of opportunity...China and Russia have built a working relationship based on realpolitik and a convergence of interests. They will continue along that path—until their interests no longer align."

The Russia-China relationship, like the previous Soviet-China relationship, is fraught with mutual suspicions, increasingly divergent interests, and cooperation constrained by competition. While Russia supports China on Hong Kong and "is backing Beijing in its disputes with third countries, including a maritime sovereignty flap in Southeast Asia" China refuses to support Russia on Crimea, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. "And China's interests and influence can extend beyond its borders, to the detriment of Russian firms: in August 2020, Beijing's demands forced Rosneft to cancel a contract to drill in waters off the coast of Vietnam."

Then there is China's growing influence in the five Central Asian states of the former Soviet Union -- Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan -- Russia's soft underbelly. Beijing is seeking to use its financial resources to gradually replace Moscow as dominant power in the region.

This poses a long-term threat to Russia necessitating a strong and growing relationship with New Delhi. So if need be, an energy hungry China can be locked in a geopolitical vise – Russia to the north, India to the south. Moscow in position to cut Beijing's energy imports by land. India in position to cut Beijing's energy imports by sea.

Central Asia is key to the success of Beijing's Belt Road Initiative whereby China seeks to connect, integrate, and direct the economies of Eurasia. And as a consequence isolate India politically, undermine India strategically, and weaken India economically. A weak India would adversely impact Russia's national interests and undermine Russia's national security. Preventing such a scenario is another reason the relationship between New Delhi and Moscow will not only remain strong but will grow in importance – strategically and economically.

For Beijing, a vast amount of territory in Central Asia historically belong to China. Such claims increase distrust of China among the peoples of Central Asia undermining Beijing's four strategic goals: (1) expel Russian influence from Central Asia, (2) transform Central Asian republics into client states of China, (3) reclaim "lost" territories, and (4) prevent India from establishing a strategic presence in Central Asia.

China's irredentism also extends to Russia. Beijing claims Russia's Far East, "Primorsky Krai, southern Khabarovsk Krai, the Jewish Autonomous Oblast, the Amur Oblast and the island of Sakhalin" as historically a part of China called "Outer Manchuria".

Russian mistrust of China is similarly increasing particularly among Russian Sinologists. On December 17, 2021, in the article, "It's complicated: Russia's tricky relationship with China", publication of the European Council on Foreign Relations, Kadri Liik wrote: "In a recent article, two prominent Russian Sinologists note that China has become more assertive as its power has grown – and Russia, its nominal ally, is feeling the heat. They set out a list of grievances about the asymmetric arrangements in the relationship: the Russian media cannot work in China the same way the Chinese media work in Russia; and China sometimes even tries to censor Russian media outlets in Russia; academic cooperation is hampered by ideology; China is far quicker to remove Soviet war monuments than any country in central Europe; and, occasionally, Russia finds itself on the receiving end of China's 'wolf warrior' diplomacy. Accordingly, the authors of the article call on Russia to start quietly hedging against China".

This is what Russia is doing. "Moscow is not going all-in with Beijing. It is pushing to develop a 'privileged' strategic partnership with India and is continuing its efforts to engage and arm other Asian partners to diversify its relationships and offset its 'comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination' with China."

In a candid assessment, Cheng Yijun, specialist in China-Russia relations at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, stated "Despite the enthusiasm for greater cooperation between Russia and China...It is not beneficial to China to ally with Russia from a historical point of view," he said, referring to the failure of the China-Soviet Union alliance ...Russia's values and political system were now aligned more with the West [and by extension India] than with China...In difficult times the two countries can hold together for warmth, but we should not forget that China's rise is also a threat to Russia."

For New Delhi, the most important aspect of the pivot is not Russian growing suspicions of China, but its continued commitment to India. "Russia...ruled out any military alliance with China and assured that Moscow will continue to supply military equipment to India besides reiterating that Moscow will continue to back New Delhi's position on Kashmir and Pakistan related issues...making it clear that will neither join CPEC [China Pakistan Economic Corridor] or supply defence equipment to Islamabad."

Since the 1950s, New Delhi's relationship with Moscow has been shaped by geopolitical strategies pursued in South Asia by China, Pakistan, and the U.S.

After independence, India adopted a policy of non-alignment. But in 1971, New Delhi reoriented its foreign policy and entered into an "alliance" with the Soviet Union because of three geopolitical threats.

First was the civil war in East Pakistan over the results of the 1971 general elections, which resulted in 8 to 10 million refugees fleeing into India.

Second was the growing Sino-Pakistan cooperation which confronted India with the prospect of a future, coordinated multi-front war, in the west, north, and east, with both Pakistan and China.

Third was the coupling of Sino-Pakistan cooperation with the rapprochement between Beijing and Washington.

India was faced with encirclement by Pakistan to the west and east, by China to the north, and

to the south, by Sri Lanka, which supported Pakistan and had entered into maritime agreements in 1963 and 1971 with China, and by the U.S., which had established a naval presence on the atoll of Diego Garcia in the British Indian Ocean Territory in January 1971.

New Delhi overcame this strategic vulnerability by signing the 1971 Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation between the Government of India and the government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Article IX read: "In the event of either Party being subjected to and attack or a threat thereof, the High Contracting Parties shall immediately enter into mutual consultations in order to remove such threat and to take appropriate effective measures to ensure peace and the security of their countries."

India now had the tool by which to neutralize encirclement, and intervene in Pakistan's civil war to create the independent state of Bangladesh from East Pakistan, ending the threat of a two front war from a united Pakistan.

When India's military invaded East Pakistan, Soviet military deployments prevented the U.S., the U.K, and China from intervening to assist Pakistan; "...when the Americans and British sent their navies into the Bay of Bengal (task force 74 and task force Eagle respectively) the Soviet navy confronted them...In place of the usual deployment of 3-4 divisions, the Soviets deployed 44 motorised divisions on the Sino-Soviet border, creating a land threat to China."

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the special relationship New Delhi had with Moscow continued because the same threat to India of encirclement remained. While Washington became a de facto ally, China has become a more powerful and a more menacing adversary posing three security threats to India.

First is Beijing's provocative military movements along their disputed Himalayan border. Such provocation includes China's territorial claim to India's northeast province of Arunachal Pradesh, which Beijing calls "Southern Tibet".

Second is China's support for Pakistan's position on Kashmir, and Beijing's growing military presence in the Chinese occupied sector of Kashmir.

Preoccupied with Kashmir, India's attention is diverted from China's activities along the rest of the Himalaya border. Undermining New Delhi's militarily preparedness for a two front war - in Kashmir and the Himalayas.

Third is China's encirclement of India by sea and land with its "string of pearls", civilian/military dual use bases, in the Indian Ocean and its Belt Road Initiative projects in Pakistan, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Maldives, and Sri Lanka.

The naval component of China's encirclement can be countered by New Delhi's "fish hook". Relying on strategic engagement with the West -- the U.S., the U.K., Australia, and France -- this strategy seeks to enable India to encircle China's "string of pearls" from the east and the west, so as to be in position to cut the "string" and scatter the "pearls".

Neutralizing the naval component still leaves India facing the possibility of a two front land war with Pakistan on the west and China on the north and possibly on the east with a flanking maneuver through Myanmar, Beijing's strategic ally. If so, the military objectives would be for Pakistan to annex India-administered Kashmir and China to annex the northeast Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh.

Currently, New Delhi is in a better military position in the Himalayas than Beijing. "China has boldly projected an image of considerable strength in Central and South Asia to mask serious frailty." While "India is in a stronger conventional position vis-à-vis China than much of the analysis on this topic concludes."

Moscow's pivot to China, however, allows Russia to employ its diplomatic skills with Beijing to prevent such a conflict from occurring as it did in May 2020. "Moscow's discreet diplomacy may have helped de-escalate the most violent China–India clash since the 1960s."

If Russian diplomacy fails and India is confronted with a two front war with Pakistan and China, or war with just one of these two adversaries, Moscow has to recognize the importance to Russia's strategic interests that India not be defeated. A China paramount in South Asia and Central Asia would pose an unprecedented threat to Russia. Beijing would have a sphere of influence from Kazakhstan to Sri Lanka restricting Russian influence in Asia to the taiga and tundra of Siberia.

According to the Rimland Theory of Geopolitics by Nicholas Spykman, whoever can control the rimland of Eurasia, rules Eurasia. China is expanding the geographic scope of Spykman's Rimland with a proposed BRI Arctic Maritime Route whereby Beijing seeks to control the northern, as well as southern, coast of the Eurasian Rimland, and in doing so completely encircle Russia.

The only way to prevent Russia's future economic subordination to China is for Moscow to insure India is a political, military, and economic counter weight to China. To do this, Moscow needs to dramatically increase trade with India, which requires a fundamental change in how business is conducted between Russia and India.

"In geoeconomic terms...the obvious weakness of the Indo-Russian relationship is its small and stagnant trade volumes. With America and China—despite the bad political relationship with the latter—India, a fast-rising economy, trades to the tune of \$100 billion each, while commerce with Russia still languishes around a mere \$10 billion. The reason is again plain to see: while 85 percent of India's economy is now in private hands, Indo-Russian economic ties still rest on government-to-government agreements. After the old model of Soviet-Indian economic relations collapsed in 1991, trade volumes plummeted. The USSR used to be among India's top three economic partners; the Russian Federation's current rank is in the twentieth to twenty-fifth range."

An important means to increase business and trade relations between Russia and India and among Russia, India, Central Asia, and Europe, in the process weakening Beijing's ability to dominate the economies of Eurasia, is the realization of three Eurasian transportation corridors.

The first is the International North South Transport Corridor stretching from Mumbai to Moscow. "The multimodal International North–South Transport Corridor connects the northwestern part of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Nordic countries with the countries of Central Asia (CA), the Persian Gulf, and the Indian Ocean...to deliver goods from the countries in the southern part of the corridor to Central, Western, and Northern Europe (and back)...The unique INSTC route makes it possible to connect it to other global and regional east-west latitudinal transport corridors. The INSTC is an important component of a network of latitudinal and meridional trade routes...which, in turn, underpins expansion of trade and investment partnerships within Eurasia,

The second is the Vladivostok-Chennai Maritime Corridor, which "has the potential to not only reset the trade route for India and Russia through Northeast Asia, but also aggravate China's security concerns in the South China Sea and its grander aspirations with the Maritime Silk Route."

The third is Russia's Northern Sea Route (NSR). Here the interests of Moscow and New Delhi complement each other allowing an opportunity for Russia to pivot from China to India. According to Elizabeth Buchanan, lecturer in Strategic Studies at Deakin University Australia, a pivot to India would allow Russia *"to offset enhanced Chinese interest in the Arctic... [and] reduce its own economic reliance on Beijing in the Arctic with regards to the development of the NSR & energy ventures"* For New Delhi, a pivot by Russia to India brings anticipated long-term benefits.

"India is looking past the pinnacle of China to a point 25+ years when India itself has not only overtaken China in terms of economic power, but also the demographic and diplomatic variants of national power. The linking of the INSTC to Russia's Arctic region is a clear strategic priority, as is grasping the impact of a shifting maritime corridor which sees global trade divert from the Suez Canal to the NSR for East-West shipping".◻

Increasing Russian business and trade with India and participating with New Delhi on developing the International North South Transport Corridor, the Vladivostok-Chennai Maritime Corridor, and the Northern Sea Route are long-term investments. But investments, which will dramatically enhance the economic and political power of Russia and India and improve their strategic positions in Eurasia. Making Moscow and New Delhi rising global powers while the power of China wanes.

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