

# India – Russia relations – Then and Now

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IFS (Retd)





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## Prologue

In 1466, a Russian merchant from Tver, Afanasy Nikitin began his journey to India. He travelled through Persia and the Ottoman Empire and stayed in India 1469-1472. The documentation of his experiences during this journey is compiled in the book *The Journey Beyond Three Seas*. (Nikitin's journey was portrayed by actors Oleg Strizhenov and Nargis Dutt in the 1950s film of the same name.)

The Russian city Astrakhan became a trading centre for Indian merchants who also visited Moscow and St. Petersburg. Russia was used as a transit trade hub for commerce between Western Europe and India.

The first Russian translation of the Bhagavad Gita was published in 1788 on the orders of Catherine the Great. Russian pioneers who travelled to India and studied Indian culture include Gerasim Lebedev who studied ancient Indian languages in the 1780s and later Nicholas Roerich who studied Indian philosophy. Roerich was influenced by the philosophy of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore and the Bhagavad Gita.

In 1801, Tsar Paul ordered plans for the invasion of British India by infantry and Cossacks in an alliance with France. Following assassination of the tsar, his successor Alexander I immediately cancelled the plans.

### **...and to 1947**

The USSR was under Stalin and India had Nehru when India became independent. Diplomatic relations commenced. Even though Nehru expressed appreciation for the USSR's swift economic development, India was still viewed as a "tool of Anglo-American imperialism". After the death of Stalin in 1953, the Soviet Union started showing interest in India and voiced its optimism for "friendly cooperation".

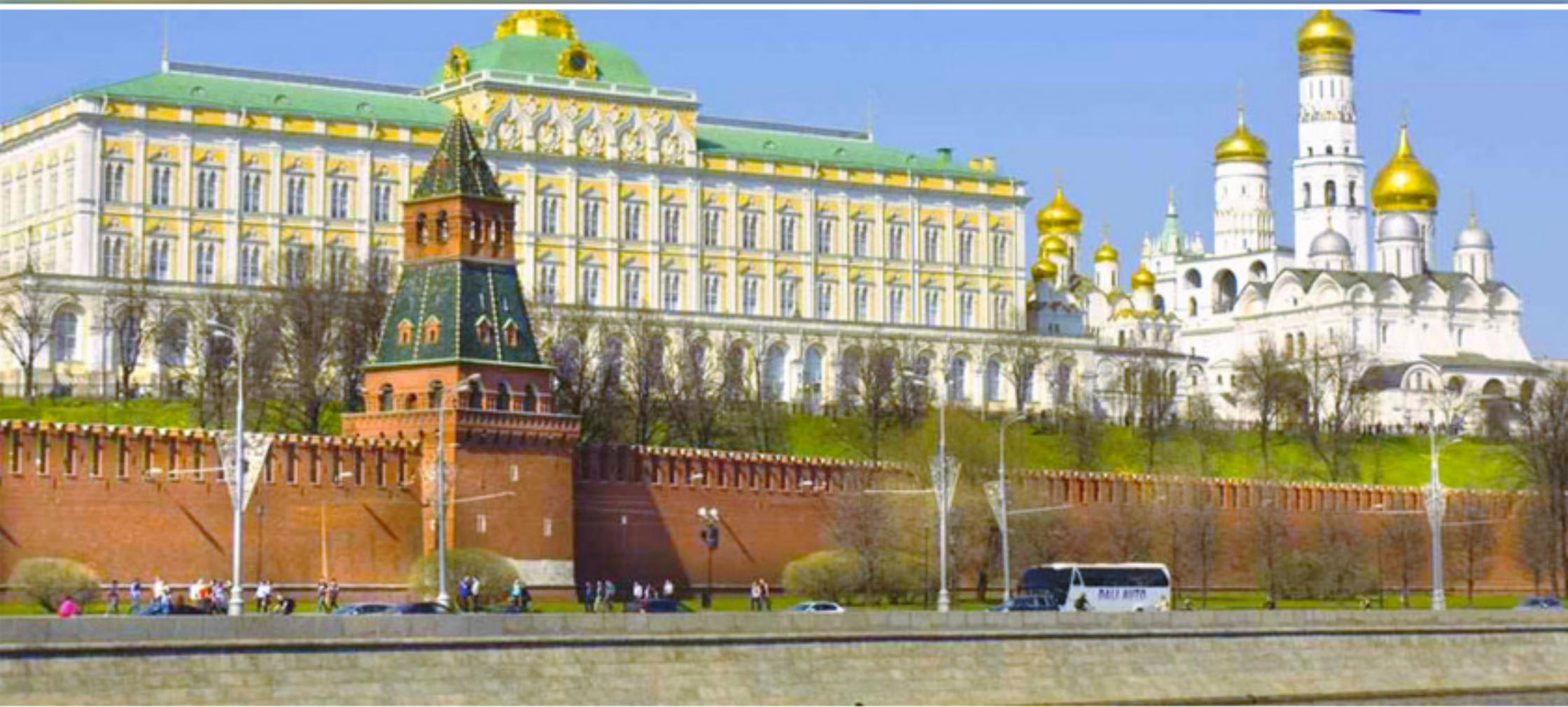
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<sup>1</sup> Ambassador Divyabh Manchanda was in the Indian Foreign Service from 1978 to 2014. He has a five year connection with Russia: as the Deputy Chief of Mission in Moscow and then as Head of the Eurasia Territorial Division of the MEA. From the Russian leaders mentioned in the article he has met Gorbachev, Lavrov, Medvedev and Putin.



### The World's Ten Largest Countries (square km)

- |                            |                         |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| • Russia. 17,098,246       | • Australia. 7,692,024  |
| • Canada. 9,984,670        | • India. 3,287,263      |
| • United States. 9,833,517 | • Argentina. 2,780,400  |
| • China. 9,596,961         | • Kazakhstan. 2,724,900 |
| • Brazil. 8,515,767        | • Algeria. 2,381,741    |



## Introduction

After Nehru visited the USSR in June 1955 and First Secretary of the Communist Party Khrushchev visited India later the same year, things started to happen. The USSR commenced aiding India in all aspects of development. The Soviet Union's rapidly growing strong relations with India had a negative impact upon both Soviet relations with the People's Republic of China and Indian relations with the PRC, during the Khrushchev period.



The Soviet Union gave India substantial economic and military assistance during the Khrushchev period, and by 1960 India had received more Soviet assistance than China had. This disparity became another point of contention in Sino-Soviet relations. The Soviet Union declared its neutrality during the Sino-Indian war of October 1962, although the Chinese strongly objected. The Soviet Union agreed to transfer technology to co-produce the MiG-21 jet fighter in India, which it had earlier denied to China. In 1965 the Soviet Union served successfully as peace broker between India and Pakistan after an Indian-Pakistani border war. (The Tashkent Agreement).

## Turning Point: 1971

In her recent book "Fateful Triangle", Tanvi Madan shows that conventional wisdom can sometimes be facile. During the period that her narrative (mainly) covers viz. 1949-79, the United States and India were not

always estranged; India's relationship with the Soviet Union was not always a given fact, nor always trouble-free; that it was not just commonality of democratic values, but real politik that brought them closer during the good periods and conversely, during the bad days, this commonality did not count for much.

In 1971 the former East Pakistan region initiated an effort to secede from its political union with West Pakistan. India supported the secession and, as a guarantee against possible Chinese entrance into the conflict on the side of West Pakistan, it signed with the Soviet Union the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in August 1971. In December, India entered the conflict and ensured the victory of the secessionists and the establishment of the new State of Bangladesh.



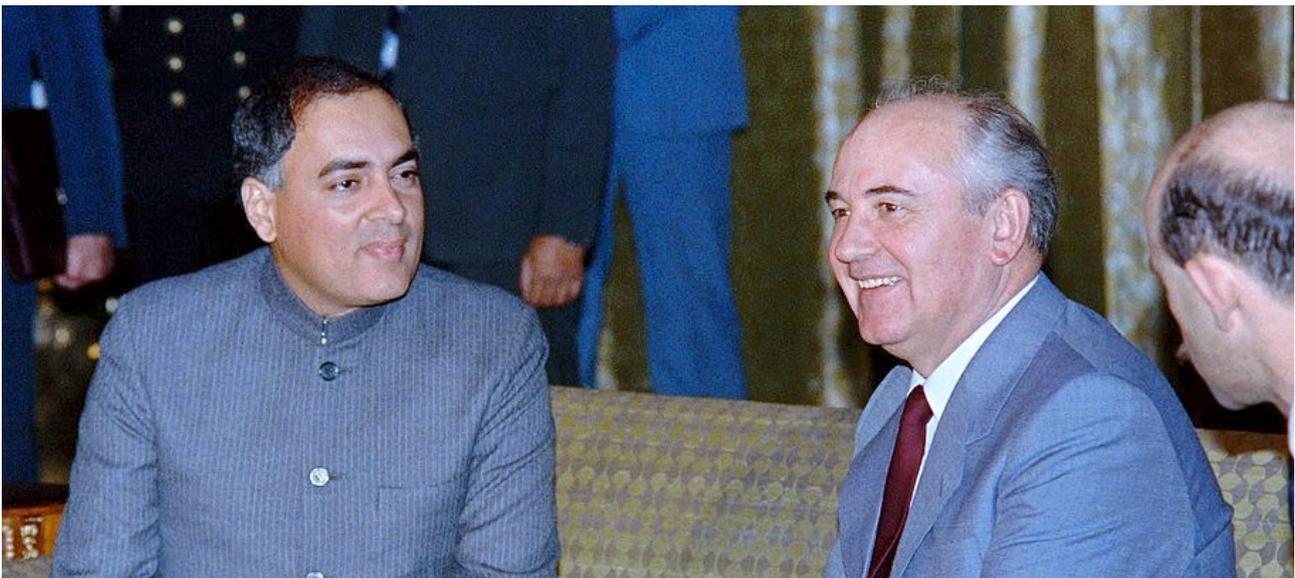
For the United States the math was simple: they were on the verge of a historic breakthrough with China; Pakistan was the facilitator; and India, with its Bangladesh crisis, the spoiler. Besides, if US-China relations were improving, the importance of India for the US was less. For India, the American support against China was gone, but the China-Pakistan problem loomed large; support from the Soviet Union, which was based on signing the Treaty, was the only “insurance policy” available.

## 1972-1990

Relations between the Soviet Union and India did not suffer much during the Janata Party's coalition government in the late 1970s, although India did move to establish better economic and military relations with Western countries. To counter these efforts by India to diversify its relations, the Soviet Union proffered additional weaponry and economic assistance.

During the 1980s, despite the 1984 assassination by Sikh separatists of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the mainstay of cordial Indian-Soviet relations, India maintained a close relationship with the Soviet Union.

Indicating the high priority of relations with the Soviet Union, the new Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, visited the Soviet Union on his first State visit abroad in May 1985 and signed two long-term economic agreements with the Soviet Union. During this visit, Rajiv Gandhi developed a personal rapport with Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev.



In turn, Gorbachev's first visit to a developing world State was his meeting with Rajiv Gandhi in New Delhi in late 1986 (which, as Deputy Chief of Protocol, I had the great experience of helping co-ordinate). With the improvement of Sino-Soviet relations in the late 1980s, containing China had less of a priority, but close relations with India remained important as an example of Gorbachev's new Third World policy.

## 1990-2000

The year 1991 saw numerous changes in the erstwhile Soviet Union: communism collapsed and democratic governments were installed one after the other in most of the east European countries. Besides, due to greater emphasis on relations with the industrialized countries of the West, Russian relations with India got low priority. With the emergence of independent Central Asian Republics, Russia's borders fell further apart. The stand taken by India during the August 1991 coup did not particularly endear new Russian leaders.

As an example, see a statement by opposition politician Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia and the leader of the LDP group in the State Duma, (when he was Presidential candidate 1993): “If I am elected President, Russian soldiers will wash their boots in the warm waters of the Indian Ocean.” Zhirinovskiy, 74, was fiercely nationalist and has been described as a “showman of Russian politics, blending populist and nationalist rhetoric... a brash, confrontational style”. His views have been described as fascist.

Initial Russian experiment of “intense engagement with the West” failed, and Russian leaders redirected the foreign policy eastwards. In the new scheme China and India gained importance. This transformation in Russian foreign policy was the result of “NATO's post-cold war expansion in Europe, its military involvement in the Balkans; and the growing political instability in Afghanistan and in the Asian region thereafter”.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union had altered the power equations in international politics. Though Russia remained a military power, it lost its erstwhile dominance in matters of economy and politics. It was no longer a super power.

## 2000 – Current

Russian President Vladimir Putin visited India in October 2000, and this visit gave a great boost to bilateral relations. Indo-Russian strategic partnership has been built on five major components: politics, defence, civil nuclear energy, anti-terrorism co-operation and space. In recent years, a sixth, economic component has grown in importance, with both countries setting a target of reaching US\$30 billion in bilateral trade by 2025, from about US\$9.4 billion in the year 2017.

Both countries are members of many international bodies where they collaborate closely on matters of shared national interest. Important examples include the UN, RIC, BRICS, G20 and SCO. India is the second largest market for the Russian defence industry. In 2017, approximately 68% of the Indian Military's hardware import came from Russia, making Russia the chief supplier of defence equipment.

The first major political initiative, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, between India and Russia began with the Strategic Partnership signed between the two countries in 2000. President Vladimir Putin stated in an article written by him in *The Hindu*, "The Declaration on Strategic Partnership between India and Russia signed in October 2000 became a truly historic step".

Russia currently is one of only two countries in the world (the other being Japan) that has a mechanism for annual ministerial-level defence reviews with India. The Indo-Russian Inter-Governmental Commission (IRIGC) is one of the largest and most comprehensive governmental mechanisms that India has had with any country internationally. Almost every department from the Government of India attends it.

In the military field, co-operation is now not limited to a buyer-seller relationship but includes joint research and development, training, service to service contacts, including joint exercises.

In October 2018, India inked the historic agreement worth US\$5.43 billion with Russia to procure five S-400 Triumf surface-to-air missile defence system, the most powerful missile defence system in the world ignoring America's CAATSA act. The United States threatened India with sanctions over India's decision to buy the S-400 missile defense system from Russia.

## *The Indo-Russian Inter-Governmental Commission (IRIGC)*

The IRIGC is the main body that conducts affairs at the governmental level between both countries. Some have described it as the steering committee of Indo-Russia relations. It is divided into two parts, the first covering Trade, Economic, Scientific, Technological and Cultural Co-operation. This is normally co-chaired by the Russian Deputy Prime Minister and the Indian External Affairs Minister. The second part of the Commission covers Military Technical Co-operation this is co-chaired by the two countries respective Defence Ministers. Both parts of IRIGC meet annually.



The President of Russia and the Prime Minister of India have met every year since 2000. The Commission supervises implementation of the “10-year umbrella Inter-Governmental Agreements on Military and Technical Cooperation”. The first agreement covered the 2001-2010 periods. In 2009, when Prime-minister Manmohan Singh visited Russia, second one was signed to cover the period of from 2011 to 2020.

## Analysis

Currently, Indian-Russian relationship is currently primarily based on

- \*Their **history** of co-operation through a variety of eras.
- \*India's need for enhanced **security**.
- \*India's need for **military spare parts for existing** assets and continued (though diversifying) need for military hardware for which Russia has to compete.
- \*Co-operation in the **nuclear field**. Russia has agreed to build more than 20 nuclear reactors over the next twenty years with installed capacity of 1000 MW each. A 1000 MW reactor currently costs around \$2.5 billion.
- \***Energy needs** of India. Indian oil companies have invested in the Russia's oil sector. An example is ONGC-Videsh which has invested over \$8 billion with major stakes in oil fields such Sakhalin-1. "It is expected that Indian companies will strongly participate in projects related to new oil and gas fields in the territory of the Russian Federation. The sides will study the possibilities of building a hydrocarbon pipeline system, connecting the Russian Federation with India."
- \***Increasing Bilateral Trade**: Russian-Indian trade is around US\$ 20 billion and the target is US 30 billion by 2025. (Russian-Chinese trade, as well as Indian-Chinese trade, is in the neighbourhood of US\$100 billion.)

Russia has stated it will co-operate with India on its "Make in India" initiative by engagement in the development of "Smart Cities", the Delhi-Mumbai-Industrial-Corridor Project, the aerospace sector, the commercial nuclear sector and enhancement in manufacturing of Russian military products through co-development and co-production. India is currently the world's largest cutting & polishing centre for diamonds. Both countries have agreed to streamline their bilateral trade in diamonds through reductions in regulations and tariffs. Both the countries set the **investment target** of \$30 billion by 2025. Since they met the target by 2018, India and Russia expect to enhance the figure to \$50 billion. India also proposed to set up a special economic zone for Russian companies.

- \***Space Co-operation**: Historically, there has been a long history of cooperation between the Soviet Union and India in space. Examples include Aryabhata India's first satellite. The only Indian to visit space, Rakesh Sharma, was also launched by the Soviet Union.

## Conclusions

Russia has a lot at stake with China: the gas deal is crucial given the current state of the Russian economy. Bilateral trade (2018) is at \$107 billion. Russia is the major source of China's energy and defence acquisitions (amid trade tariffs being imposed by US and EU). Politically, they are aligned on a number of international issues e.g. Afghanistan. However, the fear for losing Russian land to illegal migration by Chinese, particularly in the East, haunts the Russians for the last two decades.

Also, Russia will not be happy if BRI threatens their preeminent position in the region. Though Ukraine and Belarus continue to be Russian neighborhood priorities, Chinese moves in the Central Asian Republics as well as in Eastern Europe have sounded caveats.

Nevertheless, in recent months, no matter how hard the two countries tried to hush them up, disagreements have begun to appear in relations, including historical disagreements over Vladivostok (The present-day territory of Primorsky Krai, of which Vladivostok is the administrative capital, was part of the Manchu territory of the Qing dynasty before it was annexed by the Russian Empire in 1860 after the defeat of China by Great Britain and France in the Second Opium War), of the sale of Russian weapons to India, and the delay in deliveries of Russian missiles to Beijing.

Currently, the confrontation with China at various sites, including Ladakh, obviously occupies international attention.

“LAC confrontation has reminded the Russians of Chinese salami slicing in Far East, including the former Chinese territory Vladivostok. They see a threat to their global strategic construct RIC.”

India is using, with Russian help, the platforms available (IRIGC, RIC, and SCO) to have more opportunities for dialogue with the Chinese. However, India opted out of the Russian KavKaz 2020 strategic command post exercise (15-26 Sept) being held under the aegis of the SCO since the Chinese PLA was participating.

It remains to be seen how successful the efforts were. Some cynical Russia inhabitants feel that “the relationship is mostly based on inertia, and is not receiving any significant fresh impulses, despite many declarations and earnest efforts.” But isn't that typical Indian behavior, I would ask.

Act only when you have to.

*“The longer-term direction is unpredictable, mostly because of this new Cold War situation between the US, Russia and China.... if push comes to shove, Russia will throw in with China. I am sure most Indians already have figured this out, and this conditions their own -- sharply deteriorating, it appears -- attitude toward Russia. If the next US president continues the economic offensive against China that Trump has started, China will turn more toward Russia to try and exploit the obvious economic synergies that are present. Not just oil and gas, raw materials, but also vast tracts of unused agricultural land, a land transport corridor to avoid the US-Navy dominated sea approaches to China, and a nuclear-armed political and potential military ally. If the US continues brainlessly alienating Russia, well, then, this seems a likely outcome.”*

There is hope for the positive: The recent (August) media reports that Russia could be invited to join the Indo-Pacific moves, is a potential path breaker.

Where will India stand? *“Of course the US isn’t much of an ally to anyone under Trump, and things probably won’t improve [maybe the rhetoric will be nicer] if Biden wins..... But, in any case, the equation with Russia is going to shift down, and probably up with the US. How rapid and drastic those shifts occur depend on how bad things get in this current geopolitical competition. I personally expect it to get worse.”*

I, personally, do not think so.

*“Anyhow, there are too many variables to make any serious predictions (today). If the Americans would drop -- or dial back -- this neo-Cold War offensive, Russia would be less inclined to slide into China’s embrace and more inclined to balance China with ongoing good relations with India. Likewise China would seek to diversify its relations more to Europe, Africa, Latin America, etc. (through say) the Belt and Road Initiative. Russia and China are not natural allies, or even friends, but they are being driven together by a bigger force.”*

That, I think, just about sums it up.

## Acknowledgements

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