

SPECIFICS OF INDIA’S RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA AND CHINA IN THE CONTEXT OF THE RUSSIAN AGGRESSION AGAINST UKRAINE

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Since the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, relations between India and the Russian Federation and China have not undergone substantial changes. India continues to maintain a fairly active level of interaction with Moscow, guided by pragmatism and national interests. India-China relations remain steady and cold, characterized by noticeable distrust. In general, India, following the concept of “strategic autonomy,” has managed to build a balance and keep maneuvering between the main poles, while pursuing an autonomous foreign policy course.

Relations between India and the Russian Federation

The development of India-Russia relations has always been a product of rational calculation on the part of New Delhi, and with the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, India’s foreign policy pragmatism was exercised in the most obvious way. To this day, relations between New Delhi and Moscow remain stable, and the level of communication is many times higher than with the Ukrainian side.

Part of the Indian government’s political position on the war between Russia and Ukraine is shaped by the established perception of Russia as an “old friend” in the mass consciousness of Indians, with nostalgic and positive references to Indo-Soviet friendship and partnership (hindi rusi bhai bhai—हिंदी रूसी भाई भाई, “Indians and Russians are brothers”). However, nostalgia is not a decisive factor in building a policy toward Russia.

There is an economic and geopolitical interest on the part of India towards Russia, which helps to maintain smooth and stable bilateral relations between the countries after the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Economically, the Russian Federation attracts India's interest in the areas of the military-industrial complex, energy, and diamond industry.

India, which has been suffering from energy hunger for years, is the world's second largest coal consumer and importer, the third largest oil consumer and importer, and the fourth largest LNG importer. The country's dependence on energy imports reaches 80%. Partnership of India and Russia in the energy sector spans many years and is quite successful. For instance, Rosneft, together with a consortium of Indian state-owned energy companies, is involved in the development of the Vankor oil and gas field (Vankorneft), the construction of LNG infrastructure on Sakhalin Island (Sakhalin-1), and the development of oil and gas deposits in the western part of Yakutia (Taas-Yuryakh Neftegazdobycha). The Indian state-owned oil company ONGC owns 20% of the Sakhalin-1 project, 26% of the Vankorneft project and 100% of the subsidiary Imperial Energy, which produces oil in the Tomsk region.

In addition, imports of Russian energy carriers (primarily coal) are determined by the energy crisis that several Indian states have been suffering for more than six months. India has few electricity reserves, and since October 2021, the country has been experiencing frequent blackouts due to a sharp increase in electricity demand (up to almost 200 gigawatts). Last year, Indian media reported that several states faced power outages, including Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Andhra Pradesh, affecting more than 240 million people. And according to Maharashtra State Minister Nitin Raut, 12 states in India are facing power shortages due to high prices and coal shortages.

All of this is taking place against the backdrop of rising global energy prices. As a result, state-owned monopolies in India have announced a 10% increase in fuel prices. Indian Oil and Gas Minister Hardeep Singh Puri expressed hope that OPEC+ countries will increase oil production and exports from Iran and Venezuela will resume, as high energy prices hit India's budget, which depends on oil, gas and coal supplies. The Indian government has also allocated an additional \$1.94 billion to increase imports of mineral fertilizers from Russia and Belarus due to rising world prices, while raising fertilizer subsidies by 20-30%.

India will continue to import Russian energy because of enticing discounts of \$30-\$60, the energy crisis at home, and the desire to prevent China from monopolizing its own market. It is unlikely that India will reduce its imports from Russia or give up Russian oil and coal in the near future. Not until India finds alternative suppliers, or increases its own production, or increases supplies from the Middle East and the United States (if they offer discounts, which is unlikely). The key reason is not dependence on supplies from Russia (which is a small share), but the challenging domestic situation in the energy sector and discounts.

Relations in the field of military-technical cooperation are gradually weakening, which is an objective process caused by Russia's inability to offer India the technologies and equipment it needs at the moment and the growing lag of the Russian military-industrial complex in a number of areas. However, as of February 2022, 60-70% of India's military equipment was of Soviet/Russian origin. Thus, there is a dependence on Russia for equipment and spare parts that cannot be ignored, although this dependence is not critical (yet it is significant). The attractiveness of Russian weapons lies mainly in their price, which is much lower than that of the U.S., for example. However, with the visible degradation of the Russian military-industrial complex, India is facing the issue of diversifying its suppliers, and Israel and France are emerging as potential partners.

Cooperation remains consistent in the field of imports of Russian diamonds. India is the third largest importer of Russian diamonds. In 2020, New Delhi purchased 4.1 million carats worth \$638 million. 95% of the world's diamonds are cut in India, the third largest diamond exporter in the world. Therefore, supporting sanctions that would mean a rejection of Russian diamonds would also hit the cutting industry in India, given the current shortage of raw materials in the world. At the same time, the import ban was imposed on rough diamonds and brilliants from Russia. If a Russian diamond has been cut in India, one can import it.

The largest company, which produces 93% of the total volume of diamond production in the Russian Federation in physical terms, is the Alrosa Group. Despite the sanctions restrictions imposed on the company in April last year, the supply of precious stones from Russia to the Indian city of Surat, the world's diamond cutting center, is ongoing. Last spring, Alrosa sent a delegation to India to discuss with local customers and traders the possibility of supplying diamonds to the country bypassing the sanctions, including the prospect of selling Russian diamonds for rubles or rupees.

Finally, Indian companies can benefit from opportunities to expand their sales market in Russia due to the withdrawal of Western companies. In particular, this applies to food exports through the South Caucasus, as well as pharmaceutical companies, which currently have a 2% share of the drug market in Russia and can now expand.

New Delhi does not want to sever trade, economic, and energy ties with Russia, as well as military-technical cooperation, considering it part of its own sovereign foreign policy, which is based on the principle of preventing a monopoly of one global player and maximizing India's presence in the world. In other words, the desire to take a separate, self-sufficient position in international affairs and the unwillingness to follow the U.S. lead as a "junior partner" that is being drawn into a global confrontation is a major geopolitical driver

for maintaining stable relations with Russia.

It is essential for India to adhere to this policy, which forms the basis of their vision of the world order and the place of India in it. The core of “strategic autonomy” is not neutrality or diversification as such, but rather the prevention of monopolization of global political and economic influence by one player, including in multilateral institutions. This policy is key for India both in the regional context (preventing China’s excessive rise, shaping a multipolar Asia, balancing the centers of power) and in the global context (creating a multipolar world order with a “more just” and equal distribution of influence among participants). It is in this environment that official New Delhi sees opportunities for stable and consistent development, including deterring China through partnership with the West.

Moreover, India does not benefit from the downgrade of Russia to the status of a “raw material asset” or a “junior partner” of China. This is not in line with New Delhi’s geostrategic calculations, as it changes the already asymmetrical balance of power in the region in favor of China. For India, it is crucial to keep Russia in the focus of its political attention and to ensure that new threats to national security do not arise from Russia, especially given the unstable situation in neighboring Pakistan and Afghanistan. India is trying its best to prevent the formation of something like the Moscow-Beijing-Islamabad axis that was discussed after the withdrawal of the U.S. troops from Afghanistan. Against the backdrop of improved relations between Pakistan and Russia in recent years, even in the military sphere, India will further maintain stable and pragmatic relations with Russia.

Relations between India and China

Relations between China and India have not changed significantly since the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion and remain consistently cold, despite China’s attempt to change the status quo in March last year when Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited the Indian capital.

India and China remain competitors for the geopolitical status of a regional, and in the long run, global leader. As in the U.S.-China confrontation, these are two space, nuclear, economically developed, demographically strong, and politically ambitious superpowers with modern armed forces. Furthermore, these states share a common border and a dramatic history of cross-border conflicts.

The perception of China as a treacherous neighbor, always ready to stab you in the back, is ingrained in Indian domestic political discourse. Over the past sixty years since the 1962 war, Indians and Chinese have not been able to resolve the border issue and get rid of the feeling of mutual distrust. The border issue is one of the most sensitive topics in India-China

relations. Both sides suspect each other of intending to seize the entire disputed territory. Any reinforcement of troops on the border, construction of infrastructure, and movement of forces is interpreted as a possible preparation for aggression. The situation is complicated by the fact that, due to the lack of a fundamental agreement, the border between the states is not delimited or demarcated, and as a result, India and China's perceptions of where it lies sometimes differ, leading to clashes between border patrols.

However, New Delhi realizes that its neighbor across the Himalayas is not going to disappear, and it must learn to coexist. India's main goal is not to defeat China or even to regain the territories lost after the 1962 war, but to get Beijing to recognize New Delhi as another center of power in Asia and the world. This, in turn, means accepting that India has a sphere of interests in the Indian Ocean and South and Southeast Asia that should not be challenged and within which India's opinion should not be neglected. It is not only about the land, the Himalayas and neighboring small countries such as Nepal, but also about the Indian Ocean, the main battlefield of the two regional giants in the twenty-first century.

The Indian Ocean accounts for up to 50% of the world's container transportation and 70% of oil product transportation. More than 85% of oil and oil products are supplied to China from the Persian Gulf and Africa via the Indian Ocean through the narrow Strait of Malacca, which is also closely monitored by the United States, which has access to Singapore's Changi Naval Base. In addition, Indian territories, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, are located nearby. Former Chinese leader Hu Jintao called China's dependence on supplies through the strait the "Malacca dilemma".

China seeks to secure its energy supply routes, which forces it to expand its presence not only on land, in countries with access to the Indian Ocean (Myanmar, Thailand, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Maldives), but also in ocean waters—the so-called String of Pearls strategy. In response to this Chinese strategy, India has launched a number of counter-initiatives, including Mausam, Spice Road, and Sagar Mala, aimed at strengthening India's cooperation with the Indian Ocean states.

India, like China, is interested in the security of the Indian Ocean arteries, nine nodal points that play a vital role for India in terms of maritime trade. The India-China rivalry in the Indian Ocean also has a security dimension, as China is actively developing dual-use infrastructure. The 2015 White Paper on Military Strategy explicitly identifies "defense of foreign interests" as an important priority of China's military construction. China is building a powerful oceanic surface fleet, strategic military transport aviation, and creating a Marine Corps, which is expected to number up to 100,000 people. The asymmetry of military potential in favor of China is forcing India to seek support from other states interested in

containing the “rise” of the Heavenly Empire.

The undeniable competition between China and India is both a unifying and divisive factor. The essence of Sino-Indian competition is the struggle for influence and status, and this is naturally divisive. However, the factors that drive this struggle are common and unifying to both regional giants.

China and India are the oldest civilizations in Eurasia, and their cultures have influenced many countries on the continent. In addition, of most ancient civilizations, Indian and Chinese continue thriving to this day, while other ancient cultures (Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Mesoamerican) have perished. This factor leads political elites to conclude that the world order is unfair, in which the two fundamental civilizations are given secondary importance.

Both in China under the leadership of Xi Jinping and in India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, nationalism has intensified and concepts designed to strengthen national consciousness have been introduced. In India, the concept of “Hindutva” has gained a new meaning, which is an expression of Hindu nationalism and involves the political consolidation of the nation around the traditions and norms of Hinduism. The main goal of Hindutva is to build a “Hindu rashtra”—a Hindu nation or state of Hindus on the Indian subcontinent (which includes the regions south of the Himalayas, as well as the Hindu Kush, or “Akhand Bharat” (“one indivisible India”). In fact, this concept, or rather political project, includes three main principles: one country, one nation, and one culture. Hindutva, therefore, is the idea of self-actualization and self-determination of Hindus.

Similarly, “Chinese nationalism” (中国民族主义, Zhōngguó mínzúzhǔyì), the nationalism of the “Chinese nation” (中华民族, Zhōnghuá mínzú), is developing in China. The “Great Revival of the Chinese Nation” is one of the main tasks of Xi Jinping’s political strategy, who in 2012 introduced the concept of the “Chinese Dream” (中国梦, Zhōngguó mèng).

Another common feature is that nationalist concepts are used to shift the focus of the population’s attention so that multiple internal problems are not perceived as acute. These problems are attributed to the difficult past (the responsibility for which is placed on the “diabolical imperialists”), but at the same time, promises of reviving the former power are voiced. Thus, nationalism in India and China is closely linked to the factor of civilizational separateness.

India’s foreign development priorities are organized in accordance with the Rajamandala theory into three concentric circles: “immediate neighborhood” (South Asia), “extended neighborhood” (most of the Indo-Pacific region), and the rest of the world.

India views South Asia as a special sphere of influence that forms the living space of the Indian state. India's goal in the near future is to establish itself as a key power in the region, covering the entire Indian Ocean and part of the Pacific Ocean, reaching the limits of the spread of ancient Indian civilization.

While Hindutva encompasses the Akhand Bharat, the “Chinese dream” is the territories of the Qing Empire, which also included modern Mongolia, Taiwan, parts of Afghanistan, Bhutan, Russia, and Central Asia. Mao Zedong's policy was aimed at returning the former Qing lands to the control of the communist government, which resulted in, for example, the incorporation of Tibet into the PRC.

The origins of nationalism go back to the nineteenth century. Back then, Indian (or rather Hindu) and Chinese (or rather Han) nationalism was anti-imperialist—directed against the British Empire, the Eight-Power Alliance, the Manchus, etc. From Beijing's point of view, the period of the country's history that lasted from the First Opium War of 1840–1842 until the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 was the “century of humiliation” (百年国耻, *bǎinián guóchǐ*). Likewise, India, especially the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (Union of Voluntary Servants of the Motherland, RSS), which Narendra Modi belongs to, advocates strengthening the power of the Hindu nation, returning to strict adherence to traditional norms and establishing varnashrama (i.e., the Hindu way of life). In their political rhetoric, Hindutva supporters often oppose Muslims and Hindus: Muslims are seen as antagonists, barbarians who stopped India's historical development after the Islamic conquest. The same applies to Western Europeans.

The consequences of exploitative colonialism in history generate a sense of injustice and lead to a desire to revive the former greatness destroyed by the white man. Colonialism serves as a common denominator for India and China, which, in their quest to become one of the great powers, are trying to extend their influence to countries in the Global South that once also experienced colonial subjugation.

These factors bring India and China closer together in their common desire to limit U.S. influence in order to create a more equitable polycentric world order. Nevertheless, in general, the climate of India-China relations remains cool, due to both unresolved territorial disputes and geopolitical competition for leadership. The already high level of distrust is exacerbated by the build-up of defense capabilities by both countries, as well as by New Delhi's partnership with Washington and participation in such associations as QUAD or IPEF (Indo-Pacific Economic Forum), which are aimed at partially reducing China's influence in the region.

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