

Indo- Russia Defence Cooperation (After 2004)

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Abstract

This article provides a detailed look at the India-Russia defence cooperation, which continues to remain strong from the Prime Minister Nehru to present day. Cooperation in defence has been an important part of the two countries relationship. India gets most of its defence equipment from Russia or the Soviet Union. They have been cooperating on defence since 1962, and it is based on trust and faithfulness. The primary aim of this study is to examine India's defence policy and its influence on the India–Russia relationship and collaboration. The Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation, which was signed in August 1971, established the stage for close strategic ties. In 1993, it was renewed, and in 1994, the Military Technical Cooperation Agreement was signed, which made defence cooperation even more powerful. During critical times, like the 1971 Indo-Pak War and the Kargil conflict, Russian weapons have helped them. Now presently, India's defence purchases from Russia have continuously decreased due to several of reasons such as late deliveries, rising prices, poor technical assistance, and incomplete technology transfer. Russia is still a good partner, but India is looking for alternative means to buy arms from different countries so that it remains strategically balanced and independent in the future. It's always remembered that no country shares its most important technology to other nations. And there are no permanent friends or rivals in world politics only permanent interests. In the Soviet Times, arms sales were done as a favour, with "friendship prices." Now, they take place as business. A report from the Indian Parliament in 2001 instructed the country to look for proposals from all over the world for defence contracts. Despite this, Russia is India's most significant defence partner.

Key Words: defence, cooperation, partnership, significant, relations, ties, weapons.

1. Introduction

Russia has played a significant role in India's national and security interests, particularly during the Soviet period. Just after Stalin's death in 1953, the Soviet Union expressed an interest in India and talked about developing "friendly cooperation." Khrushchev gave India a lot of military and economic help, even more than China by 1960. It also made things worse between China and the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union stated that it would stay neutral in the 1962 China-Indian war, even if China didn't like it. It also agreed to transfer technology with India to help develop the MiG-21 fighter jet, which it had refused to share with China before. During the Tashkent Agreement in 1965, the Soviet Union was a significant mediator between India and Pakistan.¹

India's defence purchase plan had changed significantly by the 1970s, and it was mainly depended on the Soviet Union for military hardware. According to figures, the USSR supplied around 85% of India's defence purchases during this time. The Soviet Union gave India a lot of political support during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, which is a major example. This help made the two countries defence relations stronger. The Soviet Union gave India modern defence weapons even though India was not a member of the Warsaw Pact. These weapons were not only of good quality, but they were also affordable, which made their defence cooperation even stronger.

The "Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation," which was signed in August 1971, strengthened the two countries defence relationship. A significant clause in the treaty allowed Moscow to supply military support in case that any external power attacked India since it would be recognized as an attack on the Soviet Union.²

During the Indo-Pak War in 1971, this strategic partnership was important to India's victory and its final establishment of Bangladesh. India also thought it was best to work with the USSR without becoming involved in Chinese affairs. This treaty (1971) helped India and Russia build diplomatic and strategic ties. It also aimed at slowing down the growing partnership between the US, Pakistan, and China.³

During the Soviet era, India and Russia had close relations at the highest levels. However, when the Soviet Union disintegrated, the newly established Russian Federation suffered instability and tried to restructure its foreign policy, which had an impact on its relations with India. Despite these problems, both countries tried to restart their partnership. They signed the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in 1993, afterwards by the Military-Technical Cooperation Agreement in 1994. At the same time, Russia's Boris Yeltsin adopted a pro-Western foreign policy, while India began transforming its economy and looking for the West for investment and commerce.⁴

Unlike many other countries, Russia never imposed arms sanctions on India. In fact, during critical times like the Kargil conflict, Russia supplied India directly from its own military reserves. So, defence has always been an essential aspect of the India-Russia relationship.⁵

India's relationship with the Soviet Union experienced three significant stages, during the Cold War. Strong leaders were defined by each stage: Jawaharlal Nehru with Nikita Khrushchev, Indira Gandhi with Leonid Brezhnev, and Rajiv Gandhi with Mikhail Gorbachev. India's Nehru-Gandhi dynasty had a political path that was quite similar to the Soviet Union's. It started with hope and then went through tremendous changes, such as the war with China, Indira Gandhi's death, and finally the fall of the Soviet Union.

Both India and Russia started to rebuild their global identities after the Cold War. India and Russia earned new confidence as their economies growth quickly, whereas many developed nations economies were stagnant. Both countries want to create a multipolar world, where power is divided between many big countries instead of being controlled by just one or two.

India appreciates Russia's regular support on important political and diplomatic matters and is happy to see Russia regain its strength in world affairs. Even while they're working effectively together on defence, nuclear energy, space, and terrorism prevention, their trade and business relations are still the weakest part

of their partnership. Both of them have made it clear that they want to increase trade and enhance their long-standing partnership.⁶

Putin visit to India – A significant boost

Russian President Vladimir V. Putin's visit to India in October 2000 gave a significant boost to the developing Indo-Russian partnership after the Soviet Union fell apart. The Strategic Partnership Agreement was signed by both countries. They pledged not to join military or political groups or sign treaties that would harm the other's security.⁷

President Vladimir Putin said it "a truly historic step," whereas PM Manmohan Singh declared him "a valued friend of India and the original architect of the India–Russia strategic partnership."⁸ Russia saw India as a trustworthy defence partner and worked to enhance this relationship.

IRIGC (The Indo-Russian Inter-Governmental Commission)

The Indo-Russian Inter-Governmental Commission (IRIGC) is in the role of managing the relationship between the two countries. Russia and Japan are the only two nations that come together with India every year for a defence review at the ministerial level. The Indo-Russian Inter-Governmental Commission (IRIGC) serves as the partnership's guiding committee and has responsibility for managing bilateral relations between the two countries. It is one of India's most complete international frameworks, with practically every government department taking part.

The IRIGC has two parts: 1. Trade, Economic, Scientific, Technological, and Cultural Cooperation, which is co-chaired by the Indian External Affairs Minister and the Russian Deputy Prime Minister.

2. Military-Technical Cooperation is co-chaired by the Defence Ministers of both nations.

The President of Russia and the Prime Minister of India have met annually, since 2000. The IRIGC also handles long-term defence agreements, including as the 10-year umbrella Inter-Governmental Agreements on Military and Technical Cooperation, which were initially signed for the period 2001–2010 and were renewed during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's 2009 visit to cover the period 2011–2020.⁹

The visit of Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh to Moscow on May 9–10, 2005, gave this partnership even more energy. The visit was held at the same time as the 60th Victory Day celebrations, which marked the end of Fascism and Nazism in Europe. The meeting between Dr. Singh and President Putin was warm and beneficial, indicating how close the two countries are. President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam also went to Russia at Putin's request after that month, from May 22 to 25, 2005. The two leaders talked deeply regarding topics that affect both countries and the world. They agreed that their strategic relationship was beneficial to the long-term interests of their countries, increased cooperation in many areas, and helped maintain the peace and security in their own regions and around the world. Most of the time, their opinions on global issues were the same or quite close.¹⁰

In the same year, the annual India-Russia Joint Commission conference was held in Moscow in November 2005, and Indian Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee was in charge. The Commission examined at how the partnership was progressing, spoke about problems, and made plans for 2006. In October 2005, India

and Russia participated in their biggest joint military exercises ever, which showed how deep their strategic and defence interests are in each other.¹¹

However, issues such as delays, price hikes, incomplete technology transfers, and poor assistance for products have often stressed cooperation. Despite this, Russia is India's most significant defence partner, though its impact may diminish in the future as India diversifies its military imports. As an example, Russia was concerned when India signed a strategic cooperation with the United States in 2006, particularly during the complicated 2008-10 discussions over the Admiral Gorshkov aircraft carrier. Despite this, Russia continues to play a significant influence in India's foreign policy.

After Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Moscow in December 2009, the two countries signed a defence structure deal worth around 20 billion USD. This agreement would allow those work together on military issues for the next ten years (2011-2020). It included 31 new projects, such as making a fifth-generation fighter, a multi-role transport aircraft, and a new chopper, as well as projects that were already going on, such as making the Su-30MKI fighter and the T-90 tank.¹²

Maritime cooperation has been very important. India has purchased Talwar-class frigates, Kilo-class submarines, and leased an Akula-2 nuclear submarine. In 2012, India has leased nuclear-capable submarines from Russia, like the INS Chakra, to improve its naval presence in the Indo-Pacific.¹³

Alongwith, the purchase of the aircraft carrier Admiral Gorshkov and 16 MiG-29 fighter fighters was one of the most important deals between the two nations. But when Russia demanded for more money than was initially agreed upon, the deal did not go through, creating problems in relations between both countries for several years. The matter comes up regularly during high-level discussions, and both President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin personally engaged to solve it. Ultimately, during Putin's visit to India in March 2010, the two parties reached an agreement on the final cost of 2.34 billion USD. The delayed Gorshkov carrier is now due to arrive in late 2012. Russia chose India as a collaborator for the fifth-generation fighter project over France and China, both of which were strong contenders. This shows how much trust Moscow has in New Delhi. The purpose of this change is to go from a buyer-seller model to one where both parties organize, construct, and produce things together.

India and Russia have established a powerful, long-term security alliance. India has bought 230 Sukhoi-30 MKI multi-role fighter planes. The transfer of technology will make it possible for India to complete manufacturing them by 2017. It is also making 1,000 T-90 tanks under a Russian license and has an order for 347 more tanks. India has gone forward with three Project 1135.6 frigates in the naval sector while 3 more are under construction. India has received the nuclear-powered submarine Nerga.¹⁴

When Narendra Modi became Prime Minister, he quickly worked to improve India's relationship with Russia. Russian President Vladimir Putin visited New Delhi on December 15, 2014, and both parties signed important military and strategic deals. Modi and Putin committed to each other that they would keep working together closely, just like they historically have.¹⁵

But the economic ties between the two nations remained weak, and there was a major issue with defence cooperation. The US became India's top arms supplier in 2014, beating out Russia for the first time. That year, India was the largest foreign consumer of American weapons. This change was a sign of a decline because defence ties formed the basis of India-Russia relations for a long time.

Between 2014 and 2018, Russia remained India's major defence supplier, providing 58% of the country's arms imports. However, this was a decrease from 70% in 2010–2014, and overall deliveries decreased by 42% compared to the previous five years. The US and Israel ranked next, with 15% and 12% shares, each.¹⁶

After that, the circumstances improved. At the annual India–Russia summit in 2016, both countries decided to collaborate on manufacturing Kamov Ka-226T helicopters, showing their continuous relationship. Russia remains India's major arms supplier, offering advanced technologies such as Sukhoi Su-30MKI fighter jets, T-90 tanks, and the S-400 Triumf missile defence system, which began deliveries in 2021.¹⁷

In 2017, partnership developed beyond just trade in defence. The army, navy, and air force participated in the first-ever Tri-Services exercise under the INDRA model. India is become a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). That year, though, no new big defence agreements were signed. India also canceled the multi-role transport aircraft project and backed out of the fifth-generation fighter program it had begun working on with Russia. The two nations had been disagreements by cost-sharing and technological differences for more than ten years.¹⁸

But, one of the most notable defence agreements under Prime Minister Modi's tenure is the \$5.43 billion deal for five S-400 systems, finalized in 2018. Ignoring U.S. pressure and the possibility of implementation of sanctions under CAATSA (Countering America's Adversaries Through penalties Act), India continued with the agreement, showing the ongoing significance of its defence relationship with Russia.¹⁹

India-Russia Defence Deals (2018-19)

Year	Deal	Amount
2018	S-400 missile defence system	\$5.2 billion
2018	Project 11356 class frigates (2)	\$950 million
2019	Akula class nuclear-powered submarine	\$3 billion
2019	T-90 tanks	\$2 billion
2019	Igla-S Very Short-Range Air Defence Systems	\$1.47 billion
2019	JV to manufacture of AK-203/103 rifles	\$ 1 billion

Source: Kapoor, N. (Oct, 2019). “India-Russia Ties in a Changing World Order: In Pursuit of a ‘Special Strategic Partnership’”. *Observer Research Foundation (ORF)*. Occasional Paper No. 218.(MainSource: Business Standard, Indian Defence Industries)

According to SIPRI data, from 2018 to 2022, India was a major buyer of Russian defence exports, accounting for 31% of overall arms delivery. This was higher than China (23%), and Egypt (9.3%). However, Russia's defence exports to India have decreased by 37% in the recent decade. Recent trends indicate that India is gradually reducing its reliance on Russian weapons. In the last 2-3 years, there have been no important new defence accords between the two countries. Some previous agreements have also

fallen through—for example, in May 2022, India officially declined to purchase Russian Ka-31 helicopters. Although some significant deals are still getting forward, they are facing delays. For example, the Russian United Shipbuilding Corporation (OSK) is building two Project 11356-class frigates for India. Despite hurdles, including the loss of gas turbine engines previously manufactured in Ukraine, OSK managed to find an alternate engine source to keep the project running.²⁰

Russia continues to be India's most important defence partner today, contributing significant contributions joint development and manufacturing initiatives. The BrahMos supersonic cruise missile, a joint venture that has emerged as a hallmark product in India's defence export portfolio, is among the most noteworthy for example. The Indian Air Force continues to depend on Russian-made weapons such as the Sukhoi Su-30 and Su-30MKI. A technology transfer agreement for manufacturing the Su-57 stealth fighter jet in India is also being discussed; this could accelerate India's goal to develop sixth-generation fighter aircraft.²¹

The Present Status of Arms Relations between Russia and India

India's defence relations with Russia is still strong and well-connected across every division of its military. Russian systems are still the backbone of India's modern defence forces, not only the traces of the Cold War. India is getting four stealth frigates from Russia for the Navy. Two of them are being built in Russia, and the other two are being built at Goa Shipyard Limited with the assistance of Russia. The first frigate received its commissioning in December 2024, the second in 2025, and the last two are scheduled for 2026–2027. India also plans to lease a Russian nuclear-powered attack submarine (INS Chakra III) by 2028. Furthermore, India's domestic ballistic missile submarines, which are a critical component of its nuclear deterrent, were developed using important Russian technological assistance.

India's Air Force purchased three Russian S-400 air defence squadrons in 2023, and the remaining two scheduled by 2025. Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) was contracted to manufacture twelve additional aircraft in 2024, and the Air Force is also using 259 Su-30 MKI fighter jets. On land, India's core tank force includes of an estimated 2,400 Russian-made T-72 tanks. New Delhi and Moscow signed a \$248 million deal in 2025 for new 1,000-horsepower engines to improve their mobility and strength. The AK-203 assault weapon, which is being manufactured in India through a joint Indo-Russian enterprise, is also being utilized by Indian forces. The Indian Army had received approximately 35,000 assault rifles by July 2024.²²

Major issues and Problems in relations

1. The Indian Armed Forces normally have trouble getting spare parts and maintaining Russian weapons in good condition. A major issue is that previous negotiations on military and foreign policy didn't take seriously the whole life cycle of these weapons. India can't stop working with Russia on weapons or various other things immediately, but it must begin to reduce its significant dependency on them.²³
2. The Soviet Union was strong in many fields of science and technology, but it was behind the West in microelectronics, miniaturization, and software that works with these technologies. Their military gear was durable and produced in huge quantities, but it was usually massive and heavy.

3. Russia's defence industry has challenges like old equipment, an aging workforce, insufficient research and development budget, a dependency on exports, and a lack of openness. India shouldn't depend on Russia only for defence supplies because of these weaknesses. This indicates how important it is to diversify. One big problem is getting spare components. Weapons were cheap, but spares parts were expensive and often taken a long time to arrive.
4. Problems with delays continued to exist. Deliveries of Su-30 MKIs and MiG-21 upgrades were late, and a lot of the planes came without important systems like electronic warfare and surveillance equipment.²⁴
5. The most significant issue is that defence relations are still stronger than economic ones. The USSR tried to help India expand its industry, but now trade between the two countries is not as good. Defence, oil and gas, and nuclear energy are all areas where the two countries work together. Indian businesses see opportunities in IT, pharmaceuticals, telecommunications, power, processing food, textiles, and diamond processing. But things like bad information flow, problems with visas, and problems with logistics slow down progress.²⁵
6. India has often expressed dissatisfaction with Russia's after-sale servicing, maintenance, and delivery delays. One such example is the aircraft carrier Admiral Gorshkov (later renamed INS Vikramaditya), whose delivery was postponed by five years and cost increased from \$974 million to \$2.35 billion. India has also had issues with high-cost, low-quality spare parts, as well as delivery delays.²⁶

Possibilities in Indo-Russia relations

1. India should identifying other ways of producing and maintaining modern weapons, as well as establishing strong security mechanisms at home. India should also work on developing its relationship with Russia stronger in other sectors. Russia has good relations with Iran, so India might approach Moscow for help to develop the Chabahar Port, which would make it easier for India to access Afghanistan and Central Asia. Although India wants to be more independent in defence technologies, political leaders in both nations should try to improve their relations.²⁷
2. Some plans, like the Eurasian North–South trade route, aim to make connections better, but the lack of trade has delayed their progress. Both countries could make major economic advantages from their strategic relationship if they had more political will.
3. Russia has been forced to be more responsive because there is more competition in India's arms industry. Rosoboron Service, a joint venture in India, was established to assure the timely supply of spares and repair, beginning with the Navy and then moving to the Air Force. Russia has also relaxed Rosoboron export's monopoly by allowing big defence companies to sign contracts directly.²⁸

Conclusion

No doubt, Defence cooperation is the backbone of India-Russia relations. By the 1970s, India heavily depended on the Soviet Union for military equipment, with around 85% of its defence imports coming from the USSR. And these weapons have proven helpful in conflicts. The 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty, which promised mutual military support, played a key role in India's success during the Indo-Pak war and the creation of Bangladesh. The signing of the Strategic Partnership in 2000 was the first big milestone in India–Russia relations after the Soviet Union fell apart. Russia has regularly provided to India most powerful military equipment, including aircraft, tanks, submarines, missiles, and frigates. However, India Russia relations may change in the future if India buys weapons from a number of nations. For instance, Russia was worried when India signed a strategic cooperation with the US in 2006, particularly during the difficult negotiations about the Admiral Gorshkov aircraft carrier from 2008 to 2010. India is now purchasing arms and technology from other countries instead of depending on just one source, but Russia is still showed to be India's important defence partner for a long time. Presently, Russia and India have worked together on several important defence ventures, including the creation of a fifth-generation fighter, BrahMos missile and a multi-role transport aircraft. India is presently the largest purchaser of Russian defence equipment. Russia also knows that the Indian defence industry is become more competitive, so it needs to keep up with emerging demands.

However, there are numerous new potential in the defence relationship, but there are also problems that the two sides need to solve. For example, India has often expressed dissatisfaction with Russia's after-sale servicing, maintenance; delivery delays, price hikes, incomplete technology transfers and poor assistance for products have often stressed cooperation. Alongwith, weapons were cheap, but spare parts were expensive and hard to get in time. Both sides are to blame each other for the situation. Despite this, Russia is India's most significant defence partner, though its impact may diminish in the future as India diversifies its military imports. According to the SIPRI data, India was Russia's top defence buyer from 2018 to 2022, however its arms purchase from Russia fell 37% during last decade. Recent trends indicate that India is gradually reducing its reliance on Russian weapons. But, it's necessary to remember that no country shares its most important technology to other nations. And there are no permanent friends or rivals in world politics only permanent interests. In this situation, India needs to continue implementing its "strategic hedging" policy, which means maintaining its ties with foreign powers but protecting its own interests. Lastly, When the two countries work together in defence, it indicates that they trust each other and understand on how to deal with problems throughout the world.

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