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India's Defence ties with Russia: Implications for it's stance on the Ukraine-Russia conflict

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Abstract

India's defence relationship with Russia has been a cornerstone of its strategic policy for decades. From the Cold War era to the present, India has relied heavily on Russian military technology, weapons systems, and strategic cooperation. However, the outbreak of the Ukraine-Russia conflict has raised critical questions about the sustainability of this dependence, given Western sanctions on Russia and the shifting geopolitical landscape.

This research paper examines the historical evolution of India-Russia defence ties, their implications for India's stance on the Ukraine-Russia conflict, and the strategic choices India faces in balancing its relationships with both Russia and Western allies. The study explores India's diplomatic neutrality, voting patterns at the UN, economic considerations, and the broader geopolitical consequences of its position. Additionally, it analyses the impact of Western sanctions on India's military procurement, the push for indigenisation through Atmanirbhar Bharat, and India's growing defence partnerships with nations like France, the US, and Israel.

The paper concludes by assessing the long-term viability of India's reliance on Russian military technology and proposes policy recommendations to enhance India's strategic autonomy. By focusing on diversification of arms imports, strengthening indigenous defence production, and diplomatic pragmatism, India can navigate the complexities of the evolving global order while safeguarding its national security interests.

Keywords

- India-Russia Defence Relations
- Ukraine-Russia Conflict
- Strategic Autonomy
- Military Procurement
- Western Sanctions on Russia
- Geopolitical Balancing

Introduction

India-Russia Defence Relations: An Overview

India's defence ties with Russia have been a cornerstone of its military and strategic policies for decades. The relationship, which dates back to the Cold War era, has evolved from a strong IndoSoviet

alliance to a modern-day Indo-Russian strategic partnership. Russia has been India's largest arms supplier, providing advanced military hardware, technology transfers, and joint defence production initiatives. However, India's stance on the Ukraine-Russia conflicts added a layer of complexity to this relationship, raising questions about its future trajectory.

In the wake of the ongoing war in Ukraine, India's foreign policy balancing act has drawn global attention. While India has refrained from outright condemnation of Russia, it has also sought to maintain strong ties with Western allies. This approach reflects India's strategic autonomy—prioritising national interests over aligning with any one geopolitical bloc. This research paper explores India's dependence on Russian defence equipment, its diplomatic stance on the Ukraine crisis, and the potential shifts in its future defence strategy.

Importance of Defence Ties in Shaping India's Strategic Policies

India's national security and military modernisation are deeply linked to its defence partnerships, particularly with Russia. Over the years, Russia has provided India with cutting-edge fighter jets (Su-30MKI, MiG-29), naval warships (INS Vikramaditya), missile systems (S-400, BrahMos), and armoured vehicles (T-90 tanks). The close defence cooperation has shaped India's strategic capabilities, allowing it to maintain regional military superiority while countering threats from China and Pakistan.

However, the Ukraine war has disrupted global military supply chains, leading to delays in Russian arms deliveries. Western sanctions on Russia have also affected India's procurement of spare parts and maintenance support. As a result, India is being forced to rethink its defence procurement strategy, including efforts to diversify its arms imports and strengthen indigenous military production under the Atmanirbhar Bharat (Self-Reliant India) initiative.

Research Objectives

This paper aims to answer several key questions related to India's defence relationship with Russia and the implications of the Ukraine war on its military policies:

1. To analyse India's historical and current defence dependence on Russia.
2. To examine how the Ukraine-Russia war has affected India's military procurement and strategic planning.
3. To evaluate India's diplomatic stance on the conflict and its voting patterns at the United Nations.
4. To explore the challenges India faces due to Western sanctions on Russia and the global shift in defence alliances.
5. To assess India's efforts in diversifying defence imports and promoting domestic arms manufacturing.

Scope and Structure of the Paper

This research will examine India's historical defence ties with Russia, current military collaborations, and future policy directions. It will also analyze the Ukraine-Russia conflict's impact on global

geopolitics and how India navigates this complex international scenario. The paper is divided into the following sections:

1. Historical Context – Tracing Indo-Russian defence relations since the Cold War.
2. India's Defence Dependence on Russia – Overview of military imports and key Russian equipment in Indian forces.
3. Impact of the Ukraine-Russia Conflict – Global and economic repercussions.
4. India's Diplomatic Stance – Voting patterns, strategic autonomy, and foreign policy challenges.
5. Future of India-Russia Relations – Possible defence diversification and self-reliance initiatives.

Historical Context of India-Russia Defence Relations

Introduction to India-Russia Defence Ties

India's defence relationship with Russia has deep historical roots, dating back to the early years of India's independence. The strategic bond between the two nations was solidified during the Cold War when the Soviet Union emerged as India's most reliable defence partner. This partnership was shaped by shared geopolitical interests, mutual distrust of Western dominance, and a need for military modernisation in India. Over the decades, Russia has played a crucial role in supplying India with advanced weaponry, military technology, and technical expertise.

From the 1950s to the early 2000s, India's defence imports were dominated by Soviet and later Russian equipment. The Soviet Union provided India with its first modern fighter jets, submarines, and missile systems, significantly enhancing its military capabilities. The relationship has evolved through various phases, adapting to changing geopolitical realities while remaining a key pillar of India's defence policy.

The Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace and Friendship (1971)

A defining moment in India-Russia relations came with the signing of the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace and Friendship in 1971. This treaty was a landmark agreement that established a strong strategic partnership between the two nations.

- The treaty was signed at a time when tensions were rising between India and Pakistan, leading up to the Bangladesh Liberation War.
- The agreement ensured Soviet political and military support to India in case of external aggression.
- The USSR provided India with advanced military hardware, including tanks, fighter jets, and submarines, strengthening India's defence posture.
- This treaty also allowed India to pursue an independent foreign policy while receiving strong backing from a global superpower.

The impact of the treaty was evident during the 1971 Indo-Pak war, where Soviet diplomatic and military support played a significant role in India's victory, leading to the creation of Bangladesh.

Cold War Alliances and Military Cooperation

During the Cold War, India followed a non-aligned foreign policy, but its defence relations with the Soviet Union were exceptionally close. The USSR emerged as India's largest arms supplier, providing fighter jets (MiG-21, MiG-23), tanks (T-72), submarines, and missile systems.

Key aspects of military cooperation during this period included:

1. **Defence Supplies:** India relied heavily on the USSR for military equipment, receiving over 70% of its arms imports from Moscow.
2. **Joint Military Training:** Indian defence personnel were trained in Soviet military academies, enhancing operational expertise.
3. **Nuclear and Space Cooperation:** Soviet support was crucial in the development of India's nuclear program and space technology.

The dissolution of the USSR in 1991 momentarily disrupted this partnership, but Russia continued as India's primary defence partner under new agreements.

Key Defence Deals and Arms Transfers (1950s-2000s)

India's military buildup in the latter half of the 20th century was largely dependent on Soviet/ Russian arms deals. Notable acquisitions included:

- **MiG-21 Fighter Jets (1960s):** India's first supersonic jet, which became the backbone of the Air Force.
- **T-72 Battle Tanks (1970s):** Strengthened India's armoured capabilities.
- **INS Vikramaditya (2004):** A refurbished Soviet aircraft carrier enhancing India's naval power.

Russia also provided India with licenses for domestic production, allowing India to manufacture Russian-designed equipment under local control.

Post-2000: Evolution into a Strategic Partnership

The India-Russia defence relationship transformed into a strategic partnership in the 21st century. Key developments included:

- **Joint Development Projects:** The BrahMos missile system and Sukhoi Su-30MKI fighter jets were developed through Indo-Russian collaboration.
- **Defence Agreements:** Several defence pacts, including the 2000 Indo-Russian Military Technical Cooperation Agreement, strengthened long-term collaboration.
- **Diversification Efforts:** While India started purchasing weapons from the US, France, and Israel, Russia remained its primary supplier.

Today, despite India's defence diversification, Russia continues to be a cornerstone of its military capabilities. However, the Ukraine war has posed new challenges for this longstanding relationship, forcing India to reassess its defence procurement strategies.

India's Defence Dependence on Russia

Introduction: The Scale of India's Defence Imports from Russia

For decades, India has relied heavily on Russia for military equipment, technology transfers, and defence collaborations. Even though India has diversified its defence imports in recent years, Russia remains its largest arms supplier, accounting for a significant portion of India's military arsenal.

According to SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute) data, Russia provided around 45-50% of India's total defence imports from 2017 to 2022, reinforcing its role as India's primary military supplier. India's dependence on Russian arms is based on multiple factors:

1. **Affordability** – Russian equipment is often cost-effective compared to Western alternatives.
2. **Long-Term Relationship** – India has decades of experience operating Russian systems.
3. **Technology Transfers** – Unlike some Western suppliers, Russia allows licensed production and technology sharing.
4. **Strategic Autonomy** – India avoids over-reliance on Western defence manufacturers by maintaining strong ties with Russia.

Major Russian Military Equipment in Indian Armed Forces

India's Army, Navy, and Air Force operate a large fleet of Russian-origin weapons and platforms, which remain essential for national security.

1. Fighter Jets (Sukhoi & MiG Series)

- The Sukhoi Su-30MKI is the backbone of the Indian Air Force (IAF), with over 260 aircraft in service. It was developed jointly by Russia and India, customised to meet IAF requirements.
- India continues to operate MiG-21, MiG-29, and MiG-29K fighter jets, despite their age. The MiG-29K serves as the primary carrier-based fighter jet for the Indian Navy.
- Russia has also supplied India with airborne early warning and control (AEW&C) systems, enhancing aerial surveillance.

2. Naval Assets (Aircraft Carriers & Submarines)

- INS Vikramaditya, India's aircraft carrier, was acquired from Russia and plays a crucial role in maritime security.
- India operates several Russian-designed submarines, including Kilo-class and Akula-class nuclear-powered submarines.
- The Krivak-class stealth frigates strengthen India's naval power in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

3. Missile Systems (BrahMos, S-400, and More)

- The BrahMos supersonic cruise missile, a joint Indo-Russian venture, is one of the fastest and most advanced missile systems in the world.

- India purchased S-400 air defence systems from Russia, significantly enhancing its ability to counter aerial threats, despite US objections under CAATSA (Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act).
- Russia has also supplied short- and long-range missile systems, including Igla MANPADS (Man-Portable Air Defence Systems).

4. Tanks & Artillery Systems (T-90, Akash, and More)

- India's T-90 and T-72 tanks form the backbone of its armoured forces. Over 1,000 T-90 tanks are currently in service.
- India operates Russian BM-30 Smerch multiple rocket launchers, improving long-range artillery capabilities.
- The Akash air defence system, based on Soviet technology, has been indigenised under India's defence modernisation efforts.

Defence Production Collaborations & Joint Ventures

India and Russia have engaged in numerous joint defence production initiatives, reducing reliance on direct imports and promoting indigenous manufacturing.

- BrahMos Aerospace Ltd. – A joint venture between India's DRDO and Russia's NPO Mashinostroyeniya to produce BrahMos missiles.
- T-90 Tank Production – India manufactures T-90 tanks under license at its own production facilities.
- Sukhoi Su-30MKI Assembly – Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) assembles Su-30MKI aircraft in India under Russian license.
- AK-203 Rifle Factory – A joint venture between India and Russia was set up to manufacture AK-203 assault rifles in Amethi, Uttar Pradesh.

Conclusion: Why India's Dependence on Russia Remains Strong

Despite efforts to diversify its defence imports, India's reliance on Russian military equipment remains significant due to the sheer volume of Russian-origin platforms in service. The Ukraine war, Western sanctions on Russia, and geopolitical shifts have raised concerns over supply chain disruptions. However, India continues to maintain its strategic autonomy by balancing Russian defence ties with new partnerships in the West.

The Ukraine-Russia Conflict and Its Global Impact

The Ukraine-Russia conflict, which began in February 2022, has significantly impacted global geopolitics, economics, and security dynamics. Rooted in Russia's opposition to NATO expansion and the annexation of Crimea (2014), the war escalated into a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The conflict has led to mass casualties, economic disruptions, and diplomatic shifts worldwide.

Global reactions varied—NATO and the EU imposed severe sanctions on Russia, while the US provided extensive military aid to Ukraine. Meanwhile, China maintained neutrality, continuing trade with Russia. India, balancing its ties with both Russia and the West, refrained from directly condemning Russia while advocating for peace.

The war triggered a global energy and food crisis, with Western sanctions on Russia disrupting oil and gas supplies and Ukraine's grain exports affecting food security worldwide. Military alliances shifted, with Finland and Sweden joining NATO and Russia strengthening ties with China and Iran.

For India, the war underscored the risks of defence dependence on Russia, prompting a push for indigenisation under Atmanirbhar Bharat. Moving forward, India must carefully navigate its foreign policy, defence procurement, and strategic autonomy in an evolving global order.

Implications for India's Defence Strategy

The Ukraine-Russia conflict has exposed vulnerabilities in India's defence strategy, particularly its heavy reliance on Russian military equipment. With Western sanctions on Russia, delays in arms supplies and spare parts have raised concerns about India's military preparedness.

In the short term, India faces challenges in maintaining and upgrading Russian-origin defence systems, including fighter jets, submarines, and missile systems. In the long term, the war has accelerated India's push to diversify defence imports, with increased purchases from France (Rafale jets), the US (Apache helicopters), and Israel (missile systems).

Additionally, India is strengthening its domestic defence industry under the Atmanirbhar Bharat initiative, focusing on indigenous fighter jets, submarines, and missile systems. However, reducing dependence on Russia remains a challenge due to the deep-rooted Indo-Russian defence ties.

Strategically, India must balance its partnerships—maintaining historical ties with Russia while deepening defence cooperation with Western allies. The war has also reinforced the importance of self-reliance, supply chain resilience, and technological advancements to ensure India's security in an increasingly unstable global environment. Moving forward, India's defence policy will need a mix of pragmatism, diversification, and strategic autonomy to adapt to evolving geopolitical realities.

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The Role of Indigenisation & Atmanirbhar Bharat

The Ukraine-Russia conflict has underscored the urgency for India to reduce its dependence on foreign arms import and strengthen its domestic defence industry. As a response, the Indian government has accelerated initiatives under the Atmanirbhar Bharat (Self-Reliant India) programme, focusing on building a robust indigenous defence manufacturing sector.

Key projects include the development of HAL Tejas fighter jets, Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA), and submarine projects under Project 75I. India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) has also been actively working on missile systems, drones, and futuristic warfare technologies.

Public-private partnerships have gained momentum, with major Indian companies like Tata, Larsen & Toubro, and Bharat Forge investing in defence production and exports. The government has introduced progressive policies, such as increasing Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in defence and creating a negative import list to encourage domestic procurement.

While these efforts are promising, challenges remain, including technological gaps, bureaucratic hurdles, and the need for skilled manpower. However, with continued policy support, India is on the path to becoming a major defence exporter while ensuring strategic autonomy in military capabilities, reducing risks posed by global geopolitical uncertainties.

India's Relations with Western Allies

As India works to balance its long-standing defence ties with Russia, its relationships with Western allies, particularly the United States, France, and Israel, have grown significantly. The UkraineRussia war has further accelerated this shift, compelling India to diversify its defence partnerships while maintaining its strategic autonomy.

US-India Defence Ties

The US-India defence relationship has strengthened through agreements like the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) and the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA). Despite CAATSA sanctions on Russian military deals, the US has continued to

deepen security cooperation with India, particularly in maritime security and intelligence sharing under the Quad alliance.

India's Growing Partnerships with France & Israel

France has emerged as a key defence supplier, particularly with the Rafale fighter jet deal. Additionally, India is collaborating with Israel on missile defence systems, drones, and cybersecurity technologies.

Balancing Relations Between Russia & the West

While strengthening ties with Western nations, India remains cautious about not alienating Russia, given its reliance on Russian military hardware and energy imports. Moving forward, India must navigate these partnerships carefully, ensuring strategic autonomy while leveraging global defence collaborations.

Future of India-Russia Defence Relations

The Ukraine-Russia conflict has brought significant challenges to India's long-standing defence ties with Russia. While Russia remains India's largest arms supplier, the war has disrupted supply chains, leading to delays in spare parts, maintenance, and new defence deliveries. This raises critical questions about the future of Indo-Russian defence cooperation.

Potential Areas of Cooperation

Despite challenges, India and Russia continue to explore collaborations in emerging defence technologies, including cybersecurity, space defence, and artificial intelligence (AI). Russia remains a key partner in projects like the BrahMos missile system and nuclear submarine leasing.

Challenges Facing the India-Russia Defence Relationship

The biggest concern for India is the impact of Western sanctions on Russian defence exports, making it difficult to obtain critical military equipment. Additionally, Russia's growing reliance on China for economic and military cooperation is a potential geopolitical risk for India.

Will India Move Away from Russian Arms?

While India is expanding its defence procurement from France, the US, and Israel, a complete shift from Russia is unlikely in the near future. However, the situation underscores the urgency for India to boost domestic defence production under Atmanirbhar Bharat and reduce over dependence on any single country.

Conclusion

India's defence ties with Russia have been a defining feature of its strategic policy, shaped by historical alliances, military cooperation, and geopolitical considerations. However, the UkraineRussia conflict has introduced new complexities, forcing India to navigate a delicate balance between maintaining its longstanding partnership with Russia and adapting to shifting global dynamics. While India's neutral stance has been guided by its commitment to strategic autonomy and national interest, the increasing pressure from Western nations and the impact of sanctions on Russia have prompted India to explore diversification in its defence procurement.

The research highlights that while Russia remains a critical supplier of military hardware, India is actively working towards reducing its dependency through initiatives like Atmanirbhar Bharat and increasing collaborations with countries such as the United States, France, and Israel. The need for a self-reliant defence sector has become more urgent in light of global uncertainties, making indigenisation a key priority for India's long-term strategic planning.

Moving forward, India must adopt a pragmatic approach that balances its traditional defence cooperation with Russia while expanding its strategic partnerships with other nations. Strengthening domestic defence production, enhancing technological capabilities, and leveraging diplomatic engagements will be essential for India to safeguard its security interests while maintaining a multialigned foreign policy. The evolving geopolitical landscape demands a flexible yet firm approach, ensuring that India remains prepared for future challenges without compromising its autonomy or strategic priorities.

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