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India-Russia Relations in the 21st Century: An Analysis of Military Cooperation

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Abstract

India and Russia have maintained one of the most enduring and multifaceted strategic partnerships in the post-Cold War international system, with military cooperation serving as its central pillar. This research paper explores the evolution, scope, and future trajectory of India–Russia military cooperation in the 21st century. It situates the bilateral defence relationship within the broader and the transition to a more balanced partnership characterized by co-development, licensed production and long-term strategic planning. The study examines key military programs such as the Su-30MKI fighter aircraft, T-90S Bhishma main battle tanks, BrahMos supersonic cruise missile, S-400 air defence system, and submarine collaboration, all of which underscore the depth of technological and strategic engagement between the two states. However, the paper also identifies emerging challenges that complicate this traditional partnership. These include India's growing diversification of defence suppliers, increasing military cooperation with Western countries, concerns over delayed deliveries and technology transfers, and Russia's closer strategic alignment with China, especially in the aftermath of the Ukraine conflict. The study concludes that while India's quest for strategic autonomy may alter the character of future engagements, the structural depth and historical trust underpinning the India–Russia military partnership continue to hold relevance.

Keywords: India-Russia, defence cooperation, BrahMos, S-400, IRIGC-MTC, INDRA exercises, military imports.

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Introduction

India's military ties with Russia trace their roots to Cold War-era Soviet support, evolving into India's primary arms supplier through the late 20th century. From over 70% of India's imports in earlier decades, Russian systems formed the backbone of India's armed forces. This strategic partnership has transformed in the 21st century into a more complex relationship involving licensed production, joint ventures, and increasing push for self-reliance. This paper explores these dynamics with a focus on military–technical cooperation, institutional structures, and current strategic context. The strategic partnership between India and Russia, particularly in the realm of military cooperation, represents one of the most enduring bilateral defence relationships of the post-World War II era. Rooted in the shared geopolitical imperatives of the Cold War period, Indo-Russian defence ties were originally shaped by the Soviet Union's role as India's principal arms supplier and political ally. This cooperation was underpinned by a convergence of strategic

interests: India's pursuit of military modernisation amid regional conflicts and superpower rivalries, and the Soviet Union's interest in cultivating a strong regional partner in South Asia to counterbalance the influence of Western-aligned powers, especially the United States and China (Pant, 2017). Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian Federation inherited the defence legacy of its predecessor and sought to recalibrate its strategic ties with India. The transformation of this relationship was institutionalised through key agreements, such as the 1993 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation and the 2000 Declaration on Strategic Partnership, which laid the groundwork for deeper, multifaceted collaboration in military–technical domains. The establishment of the India-Russia Inter-Governmental Commission on Military-Technical Cooperation (IRIGC-MTC) in 2000, later reinforced by the 2021–2031 Long-Term Programme for Military-Technical Cooperation, reflected a shared commitment to advance joint production, technology transfer,

and sustained defence engagement (Ministry of Defence, 2021). In the 21st century, India has remained one of Russia's largest defence clients, with more than 60% of India's military equipment being of Russian origin. The bilateral defence relationship has expanded beyond traditional arms imports to include licensed production (e.g., Su-30MKI fighter aircraft and T-90 tanks), joint ventures (e.g., BrahMos supersonic cruise missile), and cooperative initiatives in high-end systems such as S-400 Triumf air defence platforms and nuclear submarine technology (SIPRI, 2023). Regular joint military exercises such as INDRA, as well as interoperability operations and naval exchanges, have further institutionalised strategic engagement between the two militaries.

Nevertheless, this long-standing relationship has come under increasing strain in recent years. Several external and internal variables have reshaped the strategic calculus of both states. India's increasing engagement with Western defence partners, its emphasis on defence indigenisation under the *Atmanirbhar Bharat* (self-reliant India) initiative, and evolving threat perceptions-particularly along its northern borders-have compelled New Delhi to diversify its military procurement sources. Simultaneously, Russia's closer alignment with China, exacerbated by its geopolitical isolation following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, has introduced additional uncertainty into India-Russia relations. The imposition of potential secondary sanctions on India under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), particularly in relation to the S-400 deal, has further complicated strategic decision-making (Joshi, 2022). Against this complex and evolving backdrop, the present study seeks to critically examine the nature and scope of India-Russia military cooperation in the 21st century. The analysis begins with a historical overview of defence relations and proceeds to evaluate major joint military programs, the role of institutional frameworks, the significance of joint exercises, and recent strategic developments.

Historical Evolution of India-Russia Relations

The trajectory of India-Russia relations, especially in the military domain, is deeply rooted in the historical evolution of strategic alignments during the 20th century. Though the present relationship is framed within the geopolitical context of the 21st century, a full understanding necessitates tracing its origin to the Cold War era and examining the key milestones that have defined and reshaped the bilateral dynamic.

The Soviet Legacy (1950s-1991)

India's strategic cooperation with the Soviet Union began to deepen significantly in the aftermath of its independence in 1947. During the early years of the Cold War, the Indian leadership, under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, adopted a policy of non-alignment, resisting pressures to join either the U.S.-led or Soviet-led blocs. Despite this formal posture of neutrality, New Delhi gravitated towards Moscow, particularly in the context of mounting tensions with Pakistan and China. Military cooperation began to take root in the 1960s, especially after the Sino-Indian War of 1962 and Indo-Pakistani War of 1965, which exposed significant deficiencies in India's defence preparedness. The Soviet Union became a principal supplier of military hardware, providing MiG-21 fighter aircraft, T-series tanks, and naval platforms at concessional rates and with provisions for licensed production. The 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation marked a high point in the

bilateral relationship, signed just months before the Bangladesh Liberation War. The Soviet veto at the United Nations Security Council in favor of India during this conflict underscored the strategic value of the alliance (Raghavan, 2013). By the 1980s, India was importing over 70% of its defence equipment from the USSR, making it the single largest recipient of Soviet military aid. The establishment of technical support facilities and training academies also ensured long-term dependence and institutionalized military ties. This period also saw the expansion of defence cooperation into more sophisticated domains, including nuclear energy, space, and advanced missile technology.

Post-Soviet Transition and Strategic Realignment (1991-2000)

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought considerable uncertainty to India's foreign policy calculus. Russia, grappling with economic collapse and domestic instability, initially adopted a Western-oriented foreign policy, temporarily deprioritizing traditional partners like India. Moreover, India itself began diversifying its foreign engagements, initiating diplomatic openings with the United States, Israel, and Western Europe. However, by the mid-1990s, both nations realized the mutual strategic value of renewing and stabilizing their defence ties. In 1993, India and Russia signed the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, followed by the 1994 Military-Technical Cooperation Agreement, laying the institutional foundation for continued arms sales and collaboration. These agreements were critical in ensuring continuity in the supply of spare parts, maintenance services, and technological upgrades for the vast inventory of Soviet-era equipment used by the Indian military (Pant, 2017). This transitional period also saw the emergence of new joint ventures and long-term procurement plans. Russia emerged not just as a supplier, but a strategic collaborator in India's military modernization. The 1998 nuclear tests (Pokhran-II) further cemented the partnership, as Russia resisted Western-led sanctions on India and continued cooperation in civilian nuclear energy and defence.

Strategic Partnership Era and 21st Century Milestones (2000-Present)

The turn of the millennium marked a new phase in India-Russia relations with the signing of the Declaration on Strategic Partnership in 2000 during President Vladimir Putin's visit to India. This agreement institutionalized high-level political and defence dialogues, leading to the formation of the India-Russia Inter-Governmental Commission on Military-Technical Cooperation (IRIGC-MTC).

Several key developments followed in the first two decades of the 21st century:

- The joint development of the BrahMos supersonic missile (est. 1998; operational deployment began in 2005).
- India's induction of Russian-built Su-30MKI fighter jets, under license production by HAL.
- Collaboration in nuclear submarine technology, with the leasing of INS Chakra, and assistance in the development of India's indigenous Arihant-class SSBNs.
- The signing of the \$5.43 billion deal for the S-400 Triumf air defence system in 2018, despite the threat of U.S. sanctions under CAATSA.
- Renewed agreements on AK-203 assault rifle production, highlighting ongoing efforts toward co-manufacturing and *Make in India* initiatives.

As India's global strategic profile evolved, so did the nature of its defence partnerships. While ties with the U.S., France, and Israel expanded, Russia remained a reliable supplier of high-end strategic systems and a partner in advanced technologies that other nations were often reluctant to share. Notably, Russia has supported India's nuclear submarine ambitions, an area where cooperation from Western countries has been absent due to proliferation concerns. In December 2021, both countries reaffirmed their cooperation through the "India–Russia Partnership for Peace, Progress and Prosperity" joint statement, which included the 2021–2031 Roadmap for Military-Technical Cooperation. This roadmap aims to expand joint research, production, and logistics support for Russian-origin equipment in India over the next decade (Ministry of External Affairs, 2021).

Key Military Programs

India and Russia have engaged in a number of significant joint military programs that have shaped the operational readiness, technological capabilities, and strategic reach of the Indian armed forces. While the traditional buyer-seller relationship dominated much of the Cold War period, the 21st century has witnessed a marked shift toward co-development, licensed production, and technology transfer. These programs reflect not only a deepening of bilateral military ties but also a concerted effort by India to localize defence manufacturing under the *Atmanirbhar Bharat* initiative. The following subsections examine five of the most impactful Indo–Russian defence projects: The Su-30MKI fighter aircraft, T-90S Bhishma main battle tank, the BrahMos cruise missile, the S-400 air defence system, and collaboration in submarine and naval technologies.

Su-30 MKI Fighter Aircraft

The Su-30MKI project is arguably the most emblematic example of Indo–Russian military cooperation in the aerospace domain. Developed jointly by Russia's Sukhoi Design Bureau and India's Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL), the Su-30MKI represents a customized variant of the Russian Su-30 multirole fighter, tailored specifically to meet the Indian Air Force's (IAF) operational requirements. The agreement, first signed in 1996, provided for the licensed production of 272 aircraft in India, with over 220 units delivered as of 2024 (SIPRI, 2023). The Su-30MKI program is significant not merely for its volume but for its role in establishing technological self-reliance. HAL's Nashik division has undertaken domestic assembly, integration of Indian and Western avionics, and maintenance capabilities. The fighter continues to be upgraded, including with Israeli and French-origin systems, and proposals have been floated to equip the aircraft with the BrahMos-A air-launched cruise missile (Kumar & Rao, 2022). This co-development project has laid the foundation for future Indian aerospace ventures, including the Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA) program.

T-90s Bhishma Main Battle Tank

India's procurement and licensed production of the Russian T-90S main battle tank designated *Bhishma* in Indian service have been pivotal for the Indian Army's mechanized warfare capabilities. An initial purchase of 310 tanks in the early 2000s was followed by a licensed production agreement through the Heavy Vehicles Factory (HVF) in Avadi, Tamil Nadu, enabling India to build over 1,000 units indigenously (Ministry of Defence, 2020).

The T-90S offers advanced firepower, thermal imaging sights, and night-fighting capabilities. Recent agreements have focused on the domestic production of 1,000-horsepower engines, marking a shift toward self-sufficiency in critical subsystems. Additionally, modernization programs are underway to integrate active protection systems, battlefield management systems, and improved armor, ensuring the T-90S remains competitive in the evolving threat environment.

Brahmos Supersonic Cruise Missile

The BrahMos missile project stands as a landmark in Indo–Russian joint development, representing the successful synthesis of Indian and Russian technological capabilities. Formed in 1998, BrahMos Aerospace is a joint venture between India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and Russia's NPO Mashinostroyeniya. The missile named after India's Brahmaputra and Russia's Moskva rivers is capable of speeds up to Mach 2.8 and can be launched from land, sea, air, and potentially submarines. Initially deployed in the Indian Navy and Army, BrahMos variants are now being inducted into the Air Force, with successful integration on the Su-30MKI platform. The missile's high accuracy, speed, and versatility have made it a key asset in India's deterrence posture (Shukla, 2023). In recent years, India has begun exporting BrahMos missiles, notably to the Philippines, and has received interest from countries such as Vietnam, Brazil, and the United Arab Emirates, thus marking India's emergence as a defence exporter.

S-400 Triumf Air Defence System

One of the most consequential modern procurements in India–Russia defence relations has been the S-400 Triumf air defence system. India signed a USD 5.43 billion agreement with Russia in 2018 to acquire five S-400 units, despite the risk of U.S. sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). The S-400 offers a multi-layered air defence shield capable of neutralizing a wide range of threats, including ballistic missiles, UAVs, and aircraft, at ranges up to 400 km. Its deployment enhances India's air defence capabilities against regional adversaries and acts as a strategic counter to developments such as Pakistan's acquisition of Chinese HQ-9 systems. The acquisition of the S-400 also demonstrates India's strategic autonomy in defence procurement, resisting external diplomatic pressure to maintain long-standing security partnerships.

Naval Cooperation: Frigates and Submarines

Naval cooperation between India and Russia has also been extensive. India has inducted numerous Russian-origin platforms, including Kilo-class (Sindhughosh-class) submarines and Talwar-class frigates. Russia has also played a key role in India's nuclear submarine program. India leased INS Chakra II an Akula-class nuclear attack submarine from Russia between 2012 and 2021. Negotiations for leasing another Akula-class submarine (tentatively named INS Chakra III) by 2028 are underway. Moreover, Russia provided critical assistance in designing the Arihant-class SSBNs, which form the sea-based leg of India's nuclear triad (Raja Mohan, 2021). These developments underscore the strategic depth and technological dependence embedded in Indo–Russian naval cooperation.

Conclusion

India-Russia military cooperation in the 21st century stands as a complex and evolving pillar of both countries' strategic engagements. While deeply rooted in the Cold War era and characterized historically by a high degree of defence dependence, the nature of this bilateral relationship has undergone significant transformation in response to shifting geopolitical dynamics, technological imperatives, and national strategic priorities. What began as a largely one-directional arms supplier-recipient model has gradually developed into a multidimensional partnership encompassing joint production, co-development of advanced weapons systems, and long-term institutional collaboration. The enduring significance of India-Russia defence ties is best reflected in landmark programs such as the Su-30MKI, T-90 Bhishma and the BrahMos missile, all of which underscore the transition toward *Make in India* and localized defence manufacturing. At the same time, high-value procurements such as the S-400 Triumf air defence system and sustained naval collaboration-including nuclear submarine technology and stealth frigates-demonstrate the strategic trust that underpins the relationship. Mechanisms such as the India–Russia Inter-Governmental Commission on Military-Technical Cooperation (IRIGC-MTC) and the long-term cooperation roadmaps ensure institutional continuity and serve as platforms for expanding this collaboration in line with both nations' evolving defence objectives.

However, the 21st century has also introduced new challenges that complicate the India–Russia military partnership. India's growing alignment with Western powers-particularly through forums such as the Quad-and its increasing defence acquisitions from the United States, France, and Israel reflect a broader strategy of diversification and hedging. Conversely, Russia's strategic tilt toward China, accelerated by its political and economic isolation following the Ukraine conflict, has raised apprehensions in Indian strategic circles about the long-term reliability of Moscow as a defence partner. Furthermore, logistical delays, maintenance backlogs, and potential exposure to U.S. sanctions under CAATSA have added layers of operational and diplomatic risk to continued reliance on Russian systems. Despite these uncertainties, India has consistently emphasized the importance of strategic autonomy a guiding principle that enables it to pursue defence relationships with multiple partners while preserving its national interest. Russia, in turn, continues to view India as a critical partner in its broader pivot to Asia and as a key market and collaborator for its defence exports and innovation ecosystem. Going forward, the future trajectory of India-Russia military cooperation will depend on a careful balancing of strategic, economic, and technological considerations. India will need to assess its defence procurement strategies through the dual lenses of operational readiness and geopolitical prudence, while also deepening efforts to indigenize and modernize its defence production ecosystem. Russia, for its part, must address India's concerns over delivery timelines, spares availability, and after-sales support if it is to remain a preferred partner in a rapidly diversifying global defence market.

In conclusion, while the geopolitical context has evolved, the structural depth and strategic logic of India–Russia military cooperation remain resilient. The partnership, though tested by external pressures and internal reforms, continues to offer mutual strategic benefits. Its sustainability in the coming decades will hinge on both nations' ability to adapt to new global realities while preserving the institutional memory and mutual trust that have long defined their defence relationship.

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