

Original Article

China Factor in India-Russia Relations: Strategic Triangularity after the Russia-Ukraine War

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Abstract

The 2022 Russian-Ukrainian conflict has altered the strategic triangularity between India, Russia and China, however, the influence of China is changing the bilateral relationship between India and Russia. This paper examines the "China factor" in the India-Russia relationship after the 2022 conflict; It will analyze how deeper Sino-Russian relationships are compelling Moscow to move closer to New Delhi to maintain balance, as well as how India will navigate its own strategic autonomy amid an increased number of border tensions and shifting multipolarity. The paper will use the theoretical framework of the Strategic Triangle to examine enhanced Indo-Russian cooperation in the areas of defense, energy and multilateral organizations, in order to counterbalance Chinese influence. Important findings of the paper include that the 2022 conflict has caused Russia to accelerate its "pivot towards India," which is giving India more opportunities to develop alternative dependency options, but at the same time, the risk of Sino-Russian coordination persists. The paper also indicates that the current state of the strategic triangle is fluid and that India's ability to maintain strategic autonomy is lessening India's fear of being encircled, and therefore, contributes to our understanding of post-conflict Eurasian geopolitics. In addition, the paper finds that increasing border tensions (LAC) and sanctions could hinder this triangularity, and emphasizes the need for flexible diplomatic efforts. The paper provides implications for the long-term stability of a multipolar world and emphasizes the role of India in maintaining equilibrium within the triangle.

Keywords: Strategic Triangularity, India-Russia Relations, China Factor, Russia-Ukraine War, Sino-Russian Alignment, Strategic Autonomy, Defense Cooperation, Energy Pivot, Multipolar Geopolitics, Eurasian Balancing

Introduction

The China factor has transformed the India-Russia-China Triangle since the outbreak of the war in 2022. The "Russia-Ukraine War is creating new tensions and a growing dependence of Russia on China", which has caused Russia to seek closer ties to China, but also causes Russia to attempt to create counterbalancing relationships with other countries such as India to prevent over-reliance on China. This triangular relationship creates an opportunity for Russia to protect itself from the vulnerability created through increased dependence on China due to the significant increase in Chinese geopolitical assertiveness and the historical border dispute between China and India (Rout & Sethy, 2023; Leandro & Oberoi, 2023).

India views the Russia-China alliance as potentially threatening, however, India continues to pursue positive relations with Russia as a way of ensuring Moscow will remain neutral in case of any future conflict with China, similar to India's position regarding the Ukrainian conflict (Sharma & Atri, 2023). Therefore, this strategic calculus illustrates India's approach to multipolarity and how India pursues multiple partners to secure its national interest within an ever-changing global order (Kapoor, 2023).

Therefore, India is employing a hedging strategy to operate in this complex environment, characterized by the rivalry between the U.S. and the China-Russia bloc, and to preserve its strategic autonomy (Park, 2025). Through this multi-alignment strategy, India can differentiate between "opponents and friends" without committing exclusively to any of the major powers and ultimately address its vulnerabilities (Kapoor, 2023).

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This paper examines the impact of the China factor on India-Russia relations and argues that the China factor is causing India and Russia to develop greater strategic convergence. India's ability to operate in a multipolar world is enhanced as a result of its relationships with both Russia and China.

As evidence of this triangular maneuvering by India, this study uses data from India's abstention on all UN Ukraine resolutions and its sudden increase in Russian oil imports. Geopolitical assessments, trade data, and policy discourse from a variety of sources are used as methods of analysis for this research, and triangle theory is used to analyze the interactions in the India-Russia-China triangle.

This study contributes to the field of international relations by demonstrating how conflicts such as the Ukraine conflict can cause significant changes in the degree of asymmetry in triangular relationships, and provide insights into the strategies of countries in the Global South. Through its examination of the defense, energy, and multilateral aspects of the India-Russia-China triangle, this study provides an example of India's role in adapting to a triangle dominated by China.

Background: The Pre-War India-Russia-China Triangle

Prior to the war, the strategic triangle had been defined by Russia's role as an international balancer. The country supplied weapons to both India and China and promoted economic ties between these two countries. In terms of bilateral relations between Russia and India, the relationship is based on the 1971 Treaty of Friendship, which has included defense cooperation. Russia provides India with approximately sixty percent of its military equipment in order to counter the Chinese threat located at the top of the Himalayas (Kashin, 2023). On the other hand, China strengthened its Sino-Russian bond via energy agreements and SCO collaboration, viewing Russia as a way to counter U.S. influence (Nishantha & Upul, 2016). However, as China's economic and military strength increased, it created a situation whereby Moscow and New Delhi viewed Beijing's expanding influence within the trilateral structure with concern. The "China factor" became prominent in the aftermath of the 2014 annexation of Crimea when Russia's reliance on the West was reduced due to sanctions imposed by the West, creating additional leverage for China (Ali et al., 2025). Specifically, India viewed the growing influence of China as a means of being surrounded or encircled, particularly post-2020 Galwan clashes (Kapoor, 2023), resulting in New Delhi strengthening its

bilateral ties with Moscow to serve as a hedge against China. Although, there were some multilateral forums including BRICS, which demonstrated trilateralism and the countries' respective members engaged in joint initiatives, which masked their competitive interests. While Russia pursued a "pivot to Asia," Russia provided India with technology transfers while also selling advanced weapon systems to China. Nevertheless, the three countries have increasingly become asymmetric in terms of their economic power with China having more economic might than India, and thus, China's economic superiority has impacted Russia's ability to remain neutral in Sino-Indian conflicts. Nonetheless, Russia continued to provide India support for its membership in various multilateral export control organizations such as the Nuclear Suppliers Group and the Missile Technology Control Regime (Sharma & Atri, 2023) and thus, exemplified Russia's nuanced position in regards to its relationships with the two countries in the trilateral structure. The balance among the three countries in the pre-war era, therefore, reflects the extremely sensitive nature of the triangle prior to the conflict in Ukraine, wherein Russia attempted to establish strategic depth with both Asian nations, despite China's rising stature in the region and its increasing military capabilities (Rozman, 2022; Kapoor, 2023). Therefore, the delicate balance established in the pre-war triangle was significantly changed by the onset of hostilities in Ukraine and led to a substantial adjustment in Russia's geographic priorities and its relationships in the trilateral structure. As illustrated by this historical context, the triangle presented China with structural advantages, establishing the basis for changes induced by war that further solidified the "China factor" in India-Russia relations. Critical geopolitics view this as a constructed dynamic, in which narratives of multipolarity conceal existing power disparities.

Post-War Shifts: Deepening Sino-Russian Alignment and Russia's India Pivot

The Ukraine war led to an increase in Sino-Russian coordination and provided economic support to Russia via a "no-limits" agreement between Moscow and Beijing. Increased military cooperation, trade volume growth, and increased reliance by Russia on China, with China being Russia's primary trading partner, created concerns in New Delhi regarding the risk of a two-front threat. Therefore, the China element required Russia to develop new alliances with India so as to create a diversified portfolio of partners to help mitigate dependence on China. Thus, Russia has developed a strategy based upon a need for it to

recognize the potential cost implications of China's increasing assertive behavior and modernized military posture; therefore, requiring a multi-faceted approach to balance competing interests versus the desire for domination (Ali et al., 2025).

Thus, the challenges facing Russia's vision of creating a "Greater Eurasia", or developing a network of alliances throughout Asia, were significantly exacerbated by China's independent action as illustrated by the 2020 border conflict with India that represented a direct challenge to Russia's long-term geopolitical goals (Rozman, 2022). Therefore, following the end of the war, Russia has been pursuing increased levels of cooperation with India to reduce their growing dependence on China and to provide themselves with some level of influence within a multipolar international system (Bhagwat & Rogachev, 2025).

Following the end of the war, Russia has also pursued a large increase in trade with India as evident in an increase in oil imports by India to represent approximately 40 percent of India's total energy needs, framed as a mutually beneficial arrangement to counter Chinese dominance in global energy markets. Additionally, the overtures made by Russia to India have included positive statements by President Vladimir Putin towards Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, indicating a strategic shift by Russia to utilize India to counterbalance the influence of China within the region of Eurasia (Kara, 2025). For India, this represents an opportunity to gain leverage in terms of discounted access to energy supplies to improve energy security, and defense agreements such as the purchase of the S-400 air defense system, will enhance India's ability to defend itself against China.

This triangular relationship can be viewed as a form of "soft balancing," where India and Russia collaborate to weaken China's position in Eurasia. The delicate nature of this relationship reflects India's efforts to pursue a policy of multiple alignments and strategic independence to maximize the country's national interest in a world characterized by major power competition (Kara, 2025). At the same time, Russia has attempted to further strengthen its strategic partnership with India through ongoing military technical cooperation and increased economic cooperation including discounted prices for oil shipments and increased fertilizer exports, and is attempting to create an alternative to relationships with Western nations that are increasingly isolated (Liu, 2023). However, this partnership may create some vulnerabilities. Specifically, the weakness of Russia's economy limits the level of concessions Russia is willing to make, and because Russia

remains neutral in regards to the border dispute along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) between India and China, it does favor China. Discursively, Russian media has portrayed India as a "civilizational ally" to support the pivot towards India. In conclusion, the recent changes in the structure of the triangle of relationships among these three countries illustrates how the role of China as a major player in Eurasia has acted as a catalyst to increase the level of convergence between India and Russia.

The China Factor in Defense and Technology Cooperation

While defense has long been a core component of the relationship between India and Russia, it has become an even more important aspect due to the rising influence of China. Before the war in Ukraine began, both countries were major recipients of weapons and other equipment from Russia; however, Russia's imposition of economic sanctions on India, among many other countries, significantly impacted supply lines and caused India to accelerate the development of domestic capabilities to reduce its dependency on foreign suppliers — including Russia — at the same time that India sought to maintain ties with Russia in order to counterbalance China's increasing military power (Kashin, 2023). Following the end of the conflict, Russia and India have collaborated on several joint projects — such as the production of BrahMos missiles and the manufacture of AK-203 rifles — with Russia agreeing to transfer technology to India to help prevent Chinese military advancements (Kashin, 2023). Given India's ongoing use of Russian-made weaponry to defend against threats from China (Kapoor, 2023; Slobodchikoff & Tandon, 2017), this strategic partnership is also necessary to ensure that India can continue to maintain its ability to respond to potential conflicts with China. Additionally, because Russia would prefer to be able to sell military technology and weapons to India — which could potentially provide a market for Russian weapons and technology that is not dependent upon China (Kapoor, 2023) — Russia will likely continue to engage with India as a means of avoiding being completely reliant upon China for weapons and military technology. The triangular nature of the relationship between India, Russia, and China serves to counterbalance the increasingly large size of China's military arsenal. On one hand, when India purchases weapons and other military-related equipment from Russia, this serves to deter China from taking action against India, since China knows that India has access to significant quantities of military equipment that are capable of providing

a credible deterrent. At the same time, Russia benefits by selling weapons and military technology to India, which helps to offset its loss of revenue from sales to China, which has historically provided Russia with a substantial portion of its arms and military technology export business (Sharma & Atri, 2023). From a geopolitical perspective, the factor of China's growing influence in the region also manifests itself in terms of security in Eurasia. For example, Russia's collaboration with India on various Arctic-based military-related issues and projects is intended to serve as a counterweight to China's growing influence in the region through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, challenges related to logistics and delivery have arisen due to the ongoing war in Ukraine, which has forced India to carefully manage its dependencies (Sharma & Atri, 2023). Overall, this dimension of the triangular relationship represents an enhancement of India's deterrence posture and positions Russia as an influential balancer of Chinese assertiveness.

Energy, Economy, and Multilateral Dimensions

Russia and India are both developing their relationships with each other to counterbalance growing Chinese influence in the region. As a result of the discount Russia has offered on oil to India after the war, India now uses less oil from countries in the Middle East which have historically been under Chinese influence. This shift creates a "triangle" of competing influence between India, China and Russia, with India emerging as an alternative buyer of Russian energy resources (Bhagwat & Rogachev, 2025). In addition, due to Russia's weakened economy post-conflict, there is increased potential for Russia to be influenced by China through the use of economic leverage. The weakened state of the Russian economy could also limit its ability to engage in meaningful dialogue about the terms of engagement with India, thereby limiting its ability to develop a strong partnership with India (Rout & Sethy, 2023). India and Russia are engaged in multilateral efforts to reduce the dollar-based nature of international finance and therefore diminish China's influence over the financial system. Both India and Russia are members of the SCO and BRICS, two organizations that seek to promote greater economic cooperation and political coordination among member states. Through the development of the INSTC corridor, India and Russia will be able to link India directly to Russia via Iran, providing a direct route from India to Russia that does not go through China. However, China's dominant role within the SCO makes it difficult for India to pursue its goals of de-dollarizing international finance, since China may

use the SCO to coordinate policy with Russia to limit India's ability to achieve its goals (Chhibber, 2017). In addition, the G-20, with India at the helm as President during 2023 provides an additional forum for India and Russia to work together on issues of mutual concern and to build stronger bilateral ties, all within the context of a highly complex and rapidly changing world (Sharma & Atri, 2023).

In terms of economics, the dynamics described above provide the opportunity for India and Russia to develop new forms of economic cooperation that can help mitigate the negative impacts of U.S. sanctions, including dollar sanctions. For example, India and Russia are working to expand trade between them in roubles rather than dollars, thereby helping to weaken U.S. sanctions and to allow India to access Russian oil and gas without being subject to U.S. sanctions. At the same time, Russia is seeking investment from India to replace the large loans it owes China. However, there are also risks associated with the dynamics described above. These include the risk of secondary sanctions imposed by the United States or other western countries if India and/or Russia violate U.S. sanctions, and the risk of Chinese retaliation in trade disputes arising out of the ongoing competitive relationship between China and India. These risks notwithstanding, the dynamics of cooperation and competition outlined above create opportunities for India and Russia to strengthen their cooperative relationship and to enhance their collective resilience vis-a-vis China, and thus to gain strategic advantage in the current era of great power rivalry (Kapoor, 2023), thereby allowing India to continue to maintain its strategic autonomy in the face of great power rivalries and to pursue both its economic and security objectives (ARAS & Bulut, 2023).

Challenges and Strategic Implications for India

India is facing significant challenges: Sino-Russian Military Pacts are creating an environment of encirclement for India, which will complicate the process of de-escalating border tensions between India and Russia. The fact that there is a Chinese component involved, makes it difficult for Russia to make decisions on how to balance their ties to both nations without offending either one. The addition of the West's pressure on India will also create additional layers for India to navigate while trying to establish closer ties to Russia as well as the need to navigate through sanctions and engage more deeply with Russia. In addition to these factors, due to the Ukraine conflict, Russia has reduced its capability to project power globally, therefore limiting the success of Russia's "Pivot to the East"

and “Greater Eurasia Partnership” initiatives. Therefore, India is being forced to rethink their strategic options and possibly seek additional collaboration with other major world powers to counterbalance a more closely aligned Sino-Russian axis (Kapoor, 2023). The implications for India regarding the pivot are increased autonomy: The pivot gives India more negotiating leverage, as evidenced by G20 mediation efforts. It adds strategically to the idea of multipolarity, making India a swing state in terms of international relations. Possible future trajectories could include the establishment of tri-lateral dialogue mechanisms to reduce the risk of conflicts among the three parties. As such, policymakers should be focused on ensuring a diversified portfolio to reduce dependency. To do so, policymakers will have to carefully navigate the geopolitical environment and use India’s unique position to foster additional partnerships that align with India’s strategic objectives while at the same time hedging against potential risks emerging from the current changing geopolitical environment (Ogden, 2023; Kapoor, 2023). Furthermore, India’s pro-active diplomacy, as shown by Prime Minister Modi’s outreach to President Putin and President Xi, shows a sophisticated method of addressing the complexities of the ongoing geopolitical shifts (Unnikrishnan & Kapoor, 2023; Prabhakar, 2024).

Conclusion

The China factor has greatly influenced India-Russia relations since the Ukraine conflict, establishing a strategic triangularity of convergences that counteract Chinese influence. The pivot enables India to increase its autonomy and balance on multiple poles. These dynamics illustrate the fluidity of the triangle; however, there are also lessons that can be applied to broader geopolitical developments. Therefore, adaptive strategies will be required to maintain an advantage in the face of shifting alliances.

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