

Analysis

01 / 2025

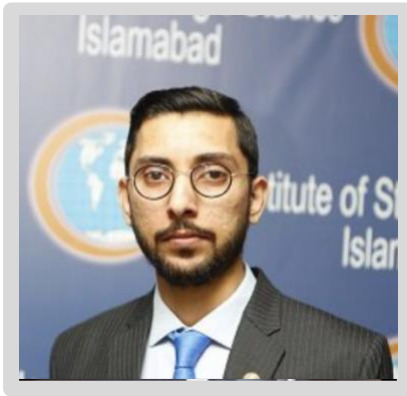
www.csm.org.pl

THE EVOLUTION OF INDIA-RUSSIA DEFENCE COOPERATION AND ITS GRADUAL DECLINE

CENTRUM
STOSUNKÓW
MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH



CENTRE
FOR INTERNATIONAL
RELATIONS



Muhammad Taimur Fahad Khan

Research Associate (Europe & Russia),
Centre for Strategic Perspectives (CSP),
Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI).

The defence relationship between India and Russia has historically been one of the most significant bilateral military partnerships globally. From the 1950s, when the Soviet Union first began supplying military equipment to India, through to the present day, this relationship has undergone numerous transformations. Over the decades, India has transitioned from being heavily reliant on Russian military hardware to diversifying its sources and focusing on indigenous defence production. This write-up delves into the key phases of India-Russia defense cooperation, the reasons behind the recent decline in Russia’s share of India’s defense imports, and the implications for both nations.



1950s-1960s: The Foundation of a Strategic Partnership

The India-Russia (then Soviet Union) defence relationship began in the mid-1950s when Soviet Premier Nikita [Khrushchev visited India](#). This visit laid the groundwork for a partnership that would dominate India's defence procurement for decades.

During the 1960s, India began acquiring Soviet military equipment, including the MiG-21 fighter jets, which became a cornerstone of the Indian Air Force (IAF). The first few MiG-21s were delivered in 1964, and over the next few decades, India inducted a total of 874 MiG-21s, including those produced under license by Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) in India. While the exact financial details of the entire procurement are complex, it's estimated that the early batches of MiG-21s, including the cost of infrastructure and training, amounted to around \$850 million.

The Soviet Union's support during critical conflicts such as the 1962 Sino-Indian War and the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War further solidified this relationship. Although during both these wars, the Soviet help to India was more nuanced (diplomatic and strategic) rather than direct military support, but it significantly contributed to India's military preparedness (such as [continued supply](#) of military equipment to India via previously signed agreements).

By the late 1960s, Soviet arms formed the backbone of India's military capabilities, with key acquisitions including approximately 1,000 T-55 tanks, hundreds of 130mm M-46 field artillery guns, and around 870+ MiG-21 fighter aircraft. This period marked the beginning of a deep strategic alignment, with the Soviet Union becoming India's primary defence supplier.

1970s: Strengthening Military Ties

The 1970s witnessed a further deepening of India-Soviet military ties. [The Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation](#), signed in 1971, was a pivotal moment in this relationship. The treaty played a crucial role during the 1971 Indo-Pak War, with the



Soviet Union providing critical military and diplomatic support to India. India acquired more advanced Soviet military hardware, including submarines and frigates, expanding its naval capabilities.

From late 1960s to early and mid-1970s, India purchased a total of 8 Foxtrot-class submarines costing approximately \$8-10 million and 6 Petya-class frigates, which were critical for anti-submarine warfare and coastal defense. These frigates were delivered as part of a broader Soviet assistance package, costing between \$30 million to \$42 million for all six frigates.

1980s: The Peak of Cooperation

The 1980s were arguably the golden era of India-Soviet defence cooperation. During this decade, the Soviet Union supplied up to 75% of India's military hardware, making it the largest arms supplier to India.

The bulk of these imports included MiG-23 and MiG-27 fighter jets, Mi-24/25 attack helicopters, T-72 tanks, BMP-1 and BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicles, and various naval assets, including Kilo-class submarines and additional Petya-class frigates. The delivery of MiG-29 fighters in the late 1980s further reinforced the Soviet Union's position as India's primary defence partner.

Estimating the financial value of this 75% share requires an understanding of India's total defense imports during that decade. According to various sources, India's total defense imports during the 1980s were estimated to be around \$10-12 billion. Therefore, if the Soviet Union supplied 75% of India's defense imports during this period, the approximate value would be between \$7.5 billion to \$9 billion.

This period was also characterised by joint development projects, including the BrahMos missile system, which highlighted the advanced level of military-technical collaboration between the two nations. By the end of the 1980s, the Soviet Union had firmly established itself as the cornerstone of India's defence strategy.



1990s: Transition and Continuity

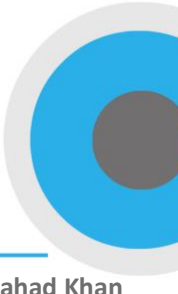
The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 meant the beginning of a new phase in India-Russia defence relations. Despite the challenges posed by the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia inherited the defence agreements and continued to supply military equipment to India. In the 1990s, existing agreements were continued, including the lease of the Admiral Gorshkov aircraft carrier (later INS Vikramaditya).

However, the economic difficulties faced by Russia in the post-Soviet era led to delays in delivery and maintenance, highlighting the first signs of strain in the relationship. Despite these challenges, Russia remained India's dominant defence supplier, though the seeds of diversification were beginning to be sown.

2000s: Modernization and New Agreements

In the 2000s Russia was continuing to dominate India's defence imports, with the supply of T-90 tanks, Su-30MKI fighter jets, and the INS Chakra nuclear submarine. The joint development of the BrahMos missile system during this period was a significant milestone, showcasing the depth of the military-technical collaboration between the two countries.

However, the 2000s also marked the beginning of India's efforts to diversify its defence procurement. While Russia still accounted for around 70-75% of India's military imports during this period, India was increasingly exploring partnerships with Western countries, including Israel, the United States and France.



2010s: The Shift towards Diversification

In the 2010s India significantly changed its defence procurement strategy. While Russia continued to supply a large portion of India's defence equipment, its share began to decline as India increasingly turned to Western suppliers. By the late 2010s, Russia's share of India's defence imports had dropped to around 62%.

Several factors contributed to this decline. India's dissatisfaction with the quality and reliability of some Russian equipment, such as the MiG-29K fighter jets, was a significant factor. Additionally, delays in the delivery of critical systems, including the S-400 air defence system, further strained the relationship. India's growing focus on indigenous defence production, under the "[Make in India](#)" initiative, also played a crucial role in reducing its dependence on Russian arms.

2020s: Decline and Strategic Realignment

The 2020s witnessed a sharp decline in Russia's share of India's defence imports, falling to just [36% as of 2023](#), but still retaining the position of India's main arms supplier. This decline is largely due to India's strategic decision to diversify its defence suppliers and develop its domestic defence industry.

Russia's enhanced strategic relationship with China and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine has exacerbated this trend, with Russia's defence industry struggling to meet both domestic and international demands.

India's shift towards Western suppliers, particularly France and the United States (each with respective share of [33% and 13%](#) of India's total defence imports), has become more pronounced during this period.

Additionally, India has signed agreements for co-production and technology transfer with several Western countries, further reducing its reliance on Russian equipment.



Notably, India [signed a \\$2.5 billion deal with the United States](#) for Apache and Chinook helicopters, including technology transfer components, and has [proposed agreements for the F-21 fighter jets](#) under the 'Make in India' initiative.

With France, India agreed to a [€7.8 billion deal for 36 Rafale fighter jets](#), incorporating significant technology transfer, and also engaged in the licensed production of Scorpene-class submarines.

Israel has co-developed the [Barak 8 missile system](#) with India, involving substantial technology sharing, and has also signed agreements for the [Heron drones](#).

Moreover, India's partnership with the United Kingdom includes the local production of [Hawk trainer aircraft](#) and [potential engine development](#) with Rolls-Royce.

These agreements underscore India's strategic shift towards bolstering indigenous defense manufacturing while diversifying its defense procurement sources.

Despite this decline, Russia remains a significant defence partner for India, particularly in the maintenance and upgrade of existing military hardware, much of which is of Russian origin.

Conclusion: A Strategic Realignment

The evolution of India-Russia defence cooperation from the 1950s to the present day reflects the changing geopolitical landscape and India's strategic priorities. While Russia was once the dominant supplier of military hardware to India, this relationship has evolved, with India now pursuing a more diversified defence procurement strategy.

This strategic realignment does not mean the end of India-Russia defence cooperation. On the contrary, the long-standing relationship between the two countries, built over decades, ensures that Russia will continue to play a crucial role in India's defence landscape.



However, the nature of this relationship has changed, with India increasingly looking to balance its historical ties with Russia with its growing partnerships with Western nations and its focus on indigenous defence production.

Muhammad Taimur Fahad Khan

CENTRE FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS



Centre for International Relations (CIR) is an independent, non-government analytical centre established in 1996 which deals with Polish foreign policy and the most important issues of international politics. CIR is active in research, education and publishing, organises conferences and meetings, and participates in international projects in collaboration with similar institutions in many countries. CIR creates a forum for debate and exchange of ideas in matters of international politics, relations between states and challenges in the global world. CIR's activities are addressed above all to local-government officials and to entrepreneurs, as well as to officials of the central administration, politicians, diplomats, political scientists and the media. In 2014, CIR was again recognised as one of the best think-tanks in East-Central Europe in the study "The Leading Public Policy Research Organisations in the World" conducted by the University of Pennsylvania.

Centre for International Relations | ul. Ogrody 24, 03-994 Warszawa | +48 608 593 632



www.twitter.com/CIR_CSM



www.facebook.com/CIR.CSM