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**Deepening Russia – China  
‘No Limits’ Ties in Light of  
Western Sanctions on Russia  
and Its Implications for  
India**

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# Deepening Russia – China ‘No Limits’ Ties in Light of Western Sanctions on Russia and Its Implications for India

## Abstract

*The research article analyses how Western sanctions, imposed after Russia’s Ukraine invasion, accelerated Moscow’s dependence on China, especially in sectors like energy, finance and defence technology. It traces the evolution of Russia–China bilateral relation ‘from rivalry to cautious cooperation’ and argues that this shift could reshape the regional balance, particularly by increasing China’s access to Russian military knowhow.*

*As for the implications of these growing ties and dependence, the study discusses both risks and opportunities for India. The main risks are disruption to Russian-origin defence supplies, reduced diplomatic space and possible Chinese gains in military capability. At the same time, Russia is still expected to retain some interest in balancing ties with India, especially after the Ukraine conflict ends.*

*The paper concludes that India should not abandon its policy of strategic autonomy, but should recalibrate it through diversification, defence self-reliance, stronger border infrastructure and broader partnerships with the US, Europe, Japan, ASEAN and others. It argues that India must hedge carefully, preserve its leverage with Russia and strengthen its long-term security posture in an increasingly uncertain global order. This paper aims to understand the implications of a deepening China-Russia ties and growing dependency of Russia on China for India, especially in the defence sector and the steps that needs to be taken by India to counter these challenges. The paper has been formulated based on the views of Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) {Defence experts and practitioners, who have either studied or have tenanted positions that gave them a deep understanding of Indo-China, Indo-Russia and China-Russia relations}.*

**Keywords:** Deepening Russia-China Ties, Indo-China Relations, Indo-Russia Relations

## Introduction

The Sanctions Regime imposed on Russia by the US, post its Ukraine invasion, has had far reaching impact, much beyond the battlefields— from world economy to geo-politics and

international relations. The immediate impacts have been debated far and wide, but the secondary and tertiary effects and their implications have not been debated much.

One of such effects, is the way the Sanctions Regime has fundamentally transformed the Russia – China ties / and the lasting impact it would have on regional geo-political and security architecture. The bonhomie displayed during the visit of President Putin to India, in December 2025, was seen, by many experts as Russia's strategy to use India to balance out China's dominance in the long run. However, the optics of Putin's visit to Beijing immediately after President Trump's visit paints a strikingly different picture. As we further explore these changes in the following article, their implications for India would also become evident, highlighting the need for the Indian security apparatus to take proactive actions in this respect.

### **Overviews of Russia – China Relations**

From the establishment of PRC in 1949, the Russia – China ties have always been complex. Post the 1949 Chinese Revolution, USSR stepped forward as a key security patron, signing the 1950 China-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance, however the relations soon soured leading to the deadly 1960s-80s confrontation. The relationship underwent a major rapprochement, after decades of confrontation, with reforms introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev, culminating in Gorbachev's 1989 Beijing visit. After 1991, they demarcated borders, built a "strategic partnership" in 1996, signed the 2001 Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and deepened cooperation with an 'opening up' China, hence leading to normalisation of relations. The relationship has seen intense deepening since the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, moving on to declare a "No Limits" partnership just short of Alliance (Maizland, C. F. 2025), (Andras Racz, A. H. 2025).

However, throughout this, Russia had not only supported China but also tried controlling the levers of power being the dominant partner. This was significantly evident when Chairman Mao was kept waiting for days for the meeting with Joseph Stalin in Moscow, signalling Soviet' superiority that led him to comment "I am here to do more than eat and shit". Post Stalin's death in 1956, with a weakening USSR, the Chinese attitude changed which was much evident from the incident when Mao kept Khrushchev waiting during his first visit to China. These incidents showcase that this relationship has always been characterised by cautious cooperation and latent competition (Oksentiuk, A. 2025).

However, it was the collapse of USSR which subsequently laid the foundations of the China-Russia military cooperation with the sale of surplus Soviet weapons to China to support its economy and purchase by China not only to strengthen / modernise its forces but also boost its defence technological capabilities and defence industry through reverse engineering. By mid- 90s Beijing had become one of Moscow’s largest arms importer, though this made Russia cautious and by the late- 90’s it realised that simple sale of weapons was not beneficial in the long run.

Post the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, a Sanctions Regime on Russia was imposed by the Western countries especially USA and with growing geo-political isolation of Russia, this partnership further evolved with even more direct transfer of advanced military technology to China (a threat to US’ hegemon status), with the signing of the ‘Roadmap for Military-Technical Cooperation’ in 2017, focusing on areas like missile defence, air force interoperability and joint development of naval and submarine technologies. Besides this, the Joint Exercises since 2000s and the signing of the SCO framework have also emerged as main pillars of this deepening defence corporation (Oksentiuk, A. 2025).

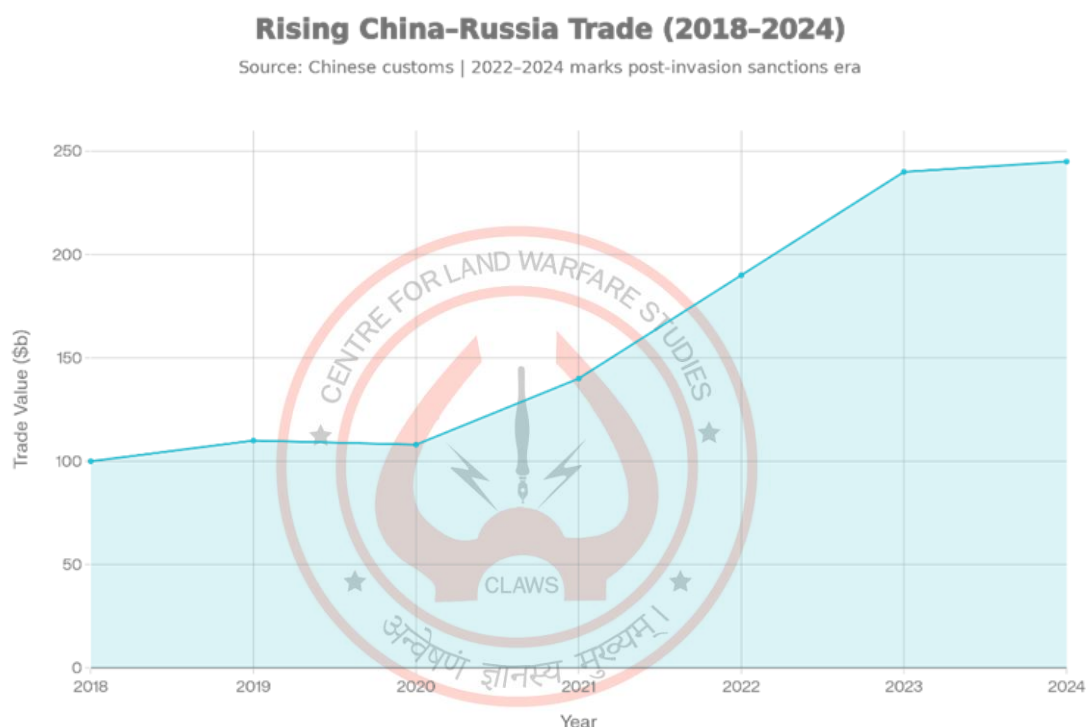
### **Deepening Russia – China Ties in Light of Sanctions Regime on Russia**

With the invasion of Ukraine (launch of Special Military Operations) by Russia on 22 Feb 2022, the sanctions regime was further intensified, thus making Russia the most sanctioned nation to date. In fact, an all-out economic war has been imposed with banning of Russian banks from SWIFT, seizure of assets, individual sanctions, secondary sanctions etc. as described by Stephanie Baker in ‘Punishing Putin’.

To counter / out manoeuvre the sanctions regime besides others, Russia has taken two major steps: firstly, it has systematically reoriented towards alternative international markets, especially India and China, more so with respect to oil and gas, and has boosted its defence industry considerably to sustain the war effort, as also absorb the impact of sanctions on its GDP / economy. Secondly, with China not only buying the bulk of oil but also being the supplier of critical materials, components and technology for the Russian defence industry, especially for Common High Priority List items like chips, semi-conductors and other microelectronic components, it has literally become a lifeline for Russia, especially for its war economy. The current relationship

between the two can be described as ‘a limited form of military alliance that lacks formal legal status’. However, despite the close defence corporation, both still avoids a formal alliance and retain areas of mistrust, with Russia worried about China’s growing military and industrial superiority and IPR infringements and Chinese leadership wary of past Russian hegemony and interferences (Oksentiuk, A. 2025).

**Figure 1: Russia–China Economic Relations Since the Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine**



**Source:** Chart generated using AI and data from SCEEUS report

This growing dependence also marks a shift in the relations with China emerging as an equal, if not dominant, partner, thus giving an upper hand to China and may force Russia to transfer / provide China access to key / critical military technologies which had been restricted so far. However, a lot of experts believes this change to be transitional and that post war Russia would attempt to regain the ‘dominant partner’ role leading to friction in their relations, though it remains to be seen how long the war lasts and how China gains from the present situation

This growing dependence of Russia on China is bound to have major impact on the emerging World Order and especially for India, which probably would be the most impacted, owing to its historic ties with Russia, high dependence of the armed forces on Russia and of late deterioration of relations with western nations, especially USA, owing to its “strategic autonomy” stance and oil imports from Russia.

## **Discussion**

On the issue of ‘impact on long term India- Russia relations’, various Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) seemed to be divided with 46.16% agreeing and same numbers negating it. Their arguments brought out that the long-lasting Indo-Russia relations are mostly independent of China and will not affect the relations in the short run but in the long run things were not certain and would depend on how the future folds out especially the outcome of the Russia- Ukraine conflict and the US- China trade war. While, some still believed that with Russia under pressure of the sanctions and to sustain its war economy may open up / transfer more critical technologies, especially in the defence sector, which may further tilt the regional defensive balance in China’s favour. However, most agreed to the fact that, once the Ukraine conflict is over and sanctions are eased, Russia would surely assert itself and may use its relations with India as a leverage for the same.

On the ‘impact on India’s military readiness vis-à-vis China’, 53.84% SMEs opined that it would have an impact on India, with major reasons being China accessing Russian critical technology (much of Indian defence technology including ‘Brahmos’ has been developed based on these) and delays in procurement and maintenance of Indian defence systems by Russia. While the others argued that Indian technology, though developed from Russian technology, has undergone major upgrades and the impact would be limited and that the Atmanirbhar push has mostly negated the issue of supplies and maintenance. However, on the long-term implications on the military balance between India and China— only 46.15% believed that the impact would be long term, also depending on how long the conflict will last and how the west and India plays out further.

Most of the SMEs (69.23%) agreed that due to the growing dependence of Russia on China, to sustain its War efforts, 'China had emerged as the leading partner in the China-Russian relationship'; however, most agreed that as throughout history, the USSR has been and claimed to be the senior partner in this relationship, it would not want to be treated as a junior partner especially with China wanting the current relationship to reflect the extant power differential — which favours China. These divergences will lead to friction, especially after the Ukraine War concludes, with Russia again asserting its position and India will become critical for the same.

On 'Russia's stance in case of a future India-China conflict', almost all believed that Russia will take a neutral position with 46.15% believing that it would play a peace maker and similar number believing that it will covertly support India due to various reasons.

The descriptive analysis of the quantitative questions as discussed above clearly brought out the complexity of the issue and the need for India to not only keenly observe but be proactive and constantly balance its approach. This laid the foundation for the qualitative questions focusing on the implications and challenges for India and the measures to counter / overcome them.

### **Implications for India and Way Ahead**

➤ **India's Foreign Policy - 'Strategic Autonomy' Stance.** The thematic analysis of the responses clearly brought out that India does not need to abandon its 'Strategic Autonomy' stance but may require to recalibrate in certain dimension. The responses highlighted that there were "No permanent friends or foes, but only permanent interests". and stressed on the following major aspects: -

- **Strategic Autonomy.** India does not need to revisit its foreign policy and Strategic Autonomy to be retained as core, as its advantages outweigh the cost. It has worked well and offers freedom of alignment, issues-based stance, resilience to great power shock, acceptability in all blocks and leverage against China.
- **Diversification.** Reduce dependence on any single partner (especially given Russia's growing tilt towards China) especially for defence, energy and tech and diversify towards US, France and others.
- **Atmanirbharta / Self Reliance.** In conjunction with the previous theme the responses converged on Atmanirbharta as the key medium- to long-term adjustment, stating

that India “definitely requires to have a reset in terms of Atmanirbharta” and must become self-reliant in defence production and critical technologies, with more investment in design and development, securing technology transfer from strategic partners and a whole-of-government effort to create an ecosystem for indigenous defence, energy security, semiconductors and rare earths.

- ***Managing the Growing Russia-China Relations.*** Respondents recognised the growing Russia – China relations and war dependence of Russia on China as a “cause of concern” but still believed that Russia ‘an all-weather friend’ is unlikely to fully back China against India or accept the position of a junior partner in the long run. This implies that India needs to suitably manage and preserve its relations with Russia, persuading Russia to maintain balanced ties and leverage its position as a balancing force in the longer run.
- ***Balancing Western Relations.*** India needs to balance its relations with the west which have been impacted by discounted oil imports and multi-alignment by proactively managing the western concerns by means of broadening partnerships with the US, France, EU, Japan, ASEAN and Gulf Countries, negotiating flexible trade deals without conceding core interests and signalling its commitment to a rule based Indo-Pacific and Global South.

➤ **Security Challenges.** Most of the SMEs agreed that the deepening Russia-China relations pose a risk for India especially with respect to defence supplies and technology and regional geopolitics, with disruptions and uncertainty for Indian security in the near future and compulsion to diversify, build self-reliance and creatively retain leverage over Russia in the medium to long term. The likely implications of the growing dependence of Russia on China especially for the Indian Security Apparatus are as under:

- ***Vulnerability of Defence Supplies and Tech.*** With Russia leaning towards China supply of weapons, ammunition, spares and tech to India will likely be impacted especially during a India-China crisis, given that a large share of Indian platforms are

of Russian Origin. The reliability of Russian defence supply chains becomes suspect, even though Russia will, in all likelihood, take a neutral position, especially in sensitive domains like submarines, missiles and space system.

- ***Shrinking Diplomatic Space and Tilted Neutrality***

- It was generally agreed that Moscow will adopt “official neutrality” in case of any future India-China conflict, however Russia’s tilt towards China because of energy, tech and sanctions dependence cannot be ruled out in the near future. However, the situation may change post the Ukraine crisis as and when the sanctions get eased.
- Moreover, the weakening of Russia’s role as a neutral moderator in South Asia narrows India’s diplomatic manoeuvring space including that in the UN (including on veto behaviour) and in the wider Indo-Pacific geopolitics.

- ***Indian Security Planning and Posture.*** With a tacitly supporting China and with strengthening of capabilities through Russia-China military tech cooperation, Indian security apparatus will have to factor a harder Chinese stance in the region and also with an increasing risk of Russia-Pakistan collaboration with Chinese encouragement, re-assess its threat matrix and readjust its force planning and contingency preparations.
- ***Managing and Leveraging Relationship with Russia.*** As was evident during the visit of President Putin (in December 2025), Russia will avoid ‘losing’ India and retain India as a major arms client. India thus needs to manage and leverage its relationship with Russia well as this in turn will create economic dependence of Russia over India and also push Russia to selectively share advance tech with India to counter balance China in the longer run.

- **Broader Foreign Policy and Economic Implications.** Due to the growing bonhomie between Russia and China, India will need to walk on a ‘strategic tightrope’, maintaining its relations with Russia while deepening ties with US and west amid China’s growing power. Issues like discounted Russian oil, secondary sanctions on India, trade deal with US and rare earths and magnets from China will have to be balanced while maintaining strategic autonomy.

- ***Driver for Diversification and Atmanirbharta.*** Many SMEs viewed these trends as a catalyst to accelerate diversification of defence collaboration and boosting domestic defence production. Indigenous capability building with Atmanirbharta in critical defence tech has been recognised as the core long term safeguard and the ultimate deterrent to any external leverage by most of the SMEs.

## **Way Ahead**

Having deliberated the implications for India and challenges it faces as a result of this deepening relationship, there is a definite need for the Indian strategic planners to focus on certain aspects to not only counter but leverage the situation to its advantage. With long term self-reliance in defence and technology, broad based diversification of partners and retention (non-abandonment) of strategic autonomy and targeted use of its leverage with both Russia and the west, emerging as the core pillars, some recommended measures are: -

## **Foreign Policy**

- ***Calibrated Strategic Autonomy and Diplomacy.*** The policy of Strategic Autonomy has been the corner stone of the Indian Foreign Policy and needs to be exercised well and not diluted. India needs to pursue it better, focused on ‘National Interests First’, with issue-based cooperation, pragmatic procurements and trade deals, multiple collaborations in varied fields and walking the diplomatic tight rope keeping room for hedging, concessions or appeasement as required. India needs to maintain balanced relations with Russia and the west, alongside its regional neighbours and continue to leverage its position in forums like BRICS to engage with both Russia and China while retaining its independent stance. On the military diplomacy front, it would be prudent to increase and reassess the number of defence attaches, enhance defence cooperation within south and south east Asia and leverage the rise of its defence industry grants, deals and joint ventures.
- ***Leveraging India’s Value to Russia.*** India needs to create and deepen Russian dependence on India through enhanced economic and defence ties including more diverse market access and joint projects, so as to keep its position

as an alternative to resist excessive Chinese pressure in the short run and preserve itself as an indispensable partner for the long term Russian post war recovery. Continued collaboration in defence and tech fields will not only help India to learn and gain from Russian tech and evolution cycles, including war experiences, but also help extract guarantees for spares, tech and diplomatic support.

○ ***Diplomatic Hedging & Managing China and the Regional Security Posture.***

India cannot match Chinese financial muscle and must therefore rely on smart diplomacy and patient balancing to maintain its relations with China while strengthening its regional security posture. At the strategic level, the hedging needs to be framed around ‘no permanent friends or foes’, thus balancing relations with Russia and the west leveraging India’s market value and long standing ties and balanced diplomacy to blunt Chinese influence on Moscow while strengthening relations with neighbours in the subcontinent through connectivity, economic integration and development assistance, to prevent their use by China and Pakistan, at the regional level. Some other steps recommended in this direction including enhancing and tightening the border infrastructure and surveillance against China, maintaining adequate stockpiles of Russian-origin platform as a buffer with focus on indigenous production capacity to reduce future dependencies, preparing for two-front contingencies, deepening engagements (including Def and Naval cooperation) with nations in the Indo-Pacific to counter China’s regional dominance.

### **Atmanirbharta in Defence and Critical Technology**

Atmanirbhar Bharat and self-reliance in warfighting, emerged as the most recurring theme, stressing on indigenous defence production capability and capacity, joint production with foreign partners and accelerated development of critical technology (with stress on enhanced R&D and Design, Develop and Produce in India). The priority capability areas include ISR, C4ISR, space, cyber, electronic warfare, AI, robotics, precision artillery, UAVs, and secure navigation, supported by resilient stockpiles, surge capacity and diversified multi-source supply chains.

- **Border Infrastructure and Force Posturing Along LAC.** Most of the SMEs also stressed on the critical need of a rapid, all-weather logistics and border infrastructure along the LAC and northern front to close the gap with China (roads, rail and air field infrastructure in Tibet) along with steps like force restructuring, permanent forward deployment geared for ‘dissuasion and deterrence’, stockpiling WWR, developing and testing sector and threat specific warfighting concepts, to include theatre commands, integrated operations and MDO.
- **Diversification and External Partnerships.** Accelerated diversification of suppliers (especially defence) towards US, UK, Israel, France and others, enhanced bilateral and trilateral exercises beyond the ‘Global South’, deepening of engagements through forums like QUAD and other Indo-Pacific mechanisms and improvement of military links with Vietnam, Philippines, Japan and ASEAN to balance China while still maintaining defence and energy ties with Russia as a hedge and source of leverage, also emerged as a prominent recommendation.
- **Internal Strength, Economic Base and Social Cohesion.** A durable long term defence preparedness also got emphasised requiring a stronger economic foundation including sustained growth for long term capability building, resolving internal social issues and keeping ‘war mongers’ out of planning so that internal fault lines are not exploited by China or Pakistan and strategic decision making remains rational and future oriented.

**Figure 2: Mind Map Generated using the themes that emerged post thematic analysis of the data on the impact of the China-Russian deepening ties on Indian Security apparatus, challenges and ways to counter them**



★ Source: Generated using AI ★

### Additional Recommendations

- Shape mini-lateral formats like BRICS, SCO, IPEF etc. to prevent any emerging China-Russia led order that sidelines India's role.
- Prioritise interoperability and intelligence-sharing with the US, Japan, Australia, and key European partners, without entering formal alliances that constrains freedom of action.
- Strengthen maritime power in the Indian Ocean to offset any future China–Russia naval coordination in the Indo-Pacific.
- Expand energy, technology, and investment links with other regions including global south to avoid over-dependence on discounted Russian energy while preserving a functional defence and energy relationship with Russia. At the same time ring-fence sensitive Indian interests (border issues, IOR, Pakistan) in dialogues with Moscow.

- Use connectivity and infrastructure initiatives (Chabahar, IMEC if revived, Act East corridors) to compete with BRI-style projects backed by a China–Russia tandem.
- Point out diplomatically the Russian positions overly aligned with China against Indian interests (eg. on the LAC or Pakistan) and signal that it will accelerate India’s drift toward the West, thus, reducing Russia’s room for manoeuvre in Asia.

## **Conclusion**

Indian defence and diplomatic forces can no longer afford to work in isolation. Therefore, it is time not for a joint but an integrated effort at the government level to keep the shared dream of ‘Viksit Bharat’ on track. The current geo-political turmoil and imminent yet uncertain end of the Ukraine war in sight, not only poses multiple challenges for India but also brings forth numerous opportunities for India and its policy makers. Moreover, with deepening Russia-China partnership, and while the fissures of mistrust and dominance tussle remain intact, it remains to be seen how India will navigate its way through the dynamic dark alleys of an increasingly uncertain and intolerant global and regional geo-political landscape, by walking a diplomatic tightrope, while retaining its strategic autonomy to emerge as a dominant regional and global power.

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