

From Ideology to Pragmatism: Tracing the Evolution of Russia's Foreign Policy Establishment and its Engagement with India and the United Nations (1991–2018)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the intellectual traditions underlying Russian foreign policy since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and analyses how these traditions were translated into concrete policy toward India and the United Nations across the Yeltsin, Putin, and Medvedev presidencies, and into Putin's second and third terms up to the end of 2018. Drawing on the successive foreign policy concepts issued by the Russian Federation between 1993 and 2016, the article argues that Russian foreign policy discourse has been shaped by three competing schools of thought — Westernism, Statism, and Civilizationism — and that the relative ascendancy of each school explains the shifting priority accorded to India in Russia's external relations. The article further demonstrates that, despite fluctuations in bilateral warmth, Russia's advocacy of a reformed but empowered United Nations, and its opposition to a unipolar international order, remained a consistent thread across all three presidencies — even as Russia's own conduct at the UN, particularly its repeated use of the Security Council veto over Syria and its annexation of Crimea in 2014, drew accusations of selectively applying the international-law principles it professed to defend. The study concludes that, as of 2018, the Indo-Russian strategic partnership — formalised in 2000 and elevated to a "Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership" in 2010 and again in the May 2018 Sochi informal summit — rested on convergent interests in counterterrorism, multipolarity, and UN-centred multilateralism, even as new points of friction, including India's expanding defence relationship with the United States and its October 2018 agreement to acquire the Russian S-400 missile system in defiance of US sanctions pressure, had begun to introduce strain into what both governments continued to describe as a time-tested, civilisational friendship.

Key Words : Russian foreign policy; India-Russia relations; strategic partnership; multipolarity; United Nations Security Council; Westernism; Statism; Civilizationism; Primakov doctrine; UN reform; S-400; Crimea annexation

INTRODUCTION

The trajectory of Russia's engagement with India since 1991 cannot be understood in isolation from the broader intellectual currents that have shaped Russian foreign policy thinking since the

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Soviet collapse (Tsygankov, 2010). This article situates Indo-Russian relations within that wider framework, confining its analysis strictly to the period between 1991 and 2018, a span marked by Russia's growing assertiveness following the 2014 Crimea annexation and by the consolidation of a personalised Modi-Putin dynamic in New Delhi-Moscow ties. Section 2 outlines the three principal schools of Russian foreign policy thought. Section 3 discusses the objectives that have guided Russian diplomacy in the post-Soviet period. Section 4 traces the formal foreign policy concepts adopted from Yeltsin through Putin's 2016 concept. Section 5 examines India's evolving place within these concepts across four phases, extending to the Modi era through 2018. Section 6 analyses Russia's approach to the United Nations, including its Security Council record between 2011 and 2018. Section 7 concludes.

Schools of Thought in Russian Foreign Policy

Scholars of Russian foreign policy have identified three broad, historically rooted traditions of foreign policy thinking (Tsygankov, 2010). Westernism holds that the West constitutes the most progressive civilisation, with which Russia shares significant affinities. Its origins lie in Peter the Great's military modernisation and in Tsar Alexander I's defence of the old European monarchical order against revolutionary France, culminating in the Holy Alliance formed with Germany and Austria after Napoleon's defeat. A later, liberal strand of Westernism — grounded in constitutionalism and political equality — informed Mikhail Gorbachev's foreign policy, which emphasised mutual security with the West, bilateral arms-control agreements, and Soviet military withdrawal from Europe and the Third World, encapsulated in the idea of a "Common European Home." Following the Soviet collapse, liberal Westernisers framed Russia's affinity with the West around shared commitments to democracy, human rights, and free markets (Tsygankov, 2010).

Statism is not inherently anti-Western but seeks Western recognition on the strength of Russia's economic and military capability. Its socialist variant emphasised Communist Party control as a safeguard against external capitalist threats, while its post-Soviet liberal variant accepted the importance of democracy and a market economy while insisting that Russia remain a great power capable of responding to threats globally (Tsygankov, 2010). Within Statism, a significant divide emerged between Yevgeny Primakov, who sought to rebuild Russian influence across the former Soviet space and counterbalance the United States through strategic alignment with China and India, and Vladimir Putin, who in his early tenure prioritised bilateral relationships and cooperation with Washington on counterterrorism (Dash, 2007).

Civilizationism rejects Western values and instead champions the export of distinctly Russian values beyond the West. It traces its lineage to Ivan IV's consolidation of Russian lands after the Mongol yoke and to the doctrine of "Moscow as the Third Rome." Unlike the other two schools, Civilizationists insist on Russia's cultural distinctiveness and its status as the centre of its own civilisation, expressed historically through pan-Slavism and, in the Soviet period, through the Leninist-Trotskyist doctrine of world revolution (Tsygankov, 2010). By the mid-2010s, elements of Civilizationist thinking had become more visible in official discourse, as Moscow increasingly framed its foreign policy around the defence of traditional values against a perceived Western effort to "reinterpret" international norms such as human rights to justify unilateral intervention (The Moscow Times, 2016).

Objectives and Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy

Russian foreign policy objectives have undergone substantial change since the late 1980s,

moving from Gorbachev-era “new thinking” through a pro-American phase to a more assertive Eurasianist orientation (Talukdar, 2013). The naïve liberalism of the 1990s gradually gave way to realism and statism, accompanied by a renewed emphasis on gathering the “Russian World” and protecting traditional values — a shift driven substantially by the reluctance of the United States and Europe to integrate Russia on terms Moscow found acceptable (Bratersky, 2014).

Unable to accept a diminished status in world affairs after the Soviet collapse, Russian policymakers adopted a “multi-vector” foreign policy intended to diversify bilateral and economic relationships across regions and thereby restore Russia’s standing as a great power (Melville & Shackleina, 2005). By the mid-2010s this multi-vectorism had acquired a harder edge: Russia paired continued rhetorical commitment to international law and UN centrality with an increasingly instrumental application of that law to its own advantage, most visibly in its invocation of the “responsibility to protect” to justify intervention in Crimea and eastern Ukraine even as it rejected the same principle when used by Western states to justify intervention in Libya and Syria (The Moscow Times, 2016).

Foreign Policy Concepts Under Successive Presidencies

The Yeltsin Presidency (1992–1999)

Boris Yeltsin’s government initially sought integration into Western civilisation through the adoption of individualism, market economics, and political democracy, in the expectation that “shock therapy” would attract Western investment and revive the Russian economy. This period was marked by unresolved disputes with Ukraine, Japan, and the former Yugoslavia, and by protracted internal debate over the country’s foreign policy concept. After successive drafts were rejected by parliament, a foreign policy concept was finally approved in April 1993, establishing priorities that included national security through diplomacy, protection of Russians abroad, integration of the Commonwealth of Independent States, and Russia’s continued role as an active great power (Foreign Policy Conception of the Russian Federation, 1993). Yeltsin’s government also opposed NATO’s intervention in Yugoslavia, warning against the deployment of ground troops in Kosovo.

Putin’s Foreign Policy Concept of 2000

Putin’s 2000 concept, which replaced the 1993 document, was organised around five broad provisions: general principles; the contemporary world and Russian foreign policy; priorities in addressing global problems; regional priorities; and the formation and implementation of foreign policy (President of the Russian Federation, 2000). Its stated priorities included safeguarding sovereignty and territorial integrity, promoting a “stable, just, and democratic world order” grounded in the UN Charter, cultivating good-neighbourly relations along Russia’s periphery, and protecting the rights of Russians abroad. The document identified the drift toward a unipolar world order — and the corresponding marginalisation of UN-led multilateral institutions — as a central threat to Russian interests, calling instead for a multipolar international system built on the collective resolution of key problems (President of the Russian Federation, 2000).

Medvedev’s Foreign Policy Concept of 2008

Medvedev’s July 2008 concept described Russia as a fully-fledged global actor and reaffirmed the protection of Russian citizens and interests abroad. It expressed Moscow’s preference for a distinct Euro-Atlantic security architecture, rejected NATO’s eastward expansion — particularly with respect to Ukraine and Georgia — and opposed the United States’ proposed missile defence

shield in Europe. The concept placed particular emphasis on Russia's eastward engagement, including the Russia-India-China troika, the Russia-China strategic partnership, the BRICS forum, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (Talukdar, 2013).

Following the Russia-Georgia war, Medvedev articulated five guiding principles in August 2008: the primacy of international law; opposition to a unipolar, US-dominated world; Russia's openness to friendly relations, including with the West; the protection of Russians wherever they reside; and Russia's recognition of "privileged interests" in certain regions (BBC News, 2008). In May 2009, Medvedev signed the National Security Strategy until 2020, replacing the security concepts of 1997 and 2000.

Under Medvedev, the "reset" of US-Russia relations produced the New START treaty, signed in Prague in April 2010 (Tsygankov, 2013), and cooperation on Afghanistan, even as disagreements persisted over missile defence, NATO expansion, and human rights. Trenin (2012) characterised the reset as "a clearing operation" that removed irritants rather than a fully developed strategic framework. Medvedev also proposed a new pan-European security architecture stretching "from Vancouver to Vladivostok" (Izvestiya, 2008), while Russia deepened ties with China, the Asia-Pacific region, Turkey, Israel, and Iran.

Putin's Return and the Foreign Policy Concepts of 2013 and 2016

Putin's return to the presidency in 2012 was followed by the 2013 Concept of Foreign Policy, which Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov described as a continuation of the approaches approved in 2000 and 2008 (Talukdar, 2013). The annexation of Crimea in March 2014, and Russia's subsequent involvement in the conflict in eastern Ukraine, marked a decisive turn toward greater assertiveness in Russian foreign policy and provoked a wave of Western sanctions (Britannica, n.d.). Russia's direct military intervention in Syria from September 2015 further entrenched Moscow's role as an indispensable actor in Middle Eastern security affairs, conducted in parallel with a sustained diplomatic effort — through the Astana talks with Turkey and Iran — to shape the terms of any eventual settlement (RFE/RL, 2017).

Putin approved a further Foreign Policy Concept on 30 November 2016. The document reiterated Russia's commitment to a "polycentric" world order, emphasised the primacy of international law and the UN Charter, and warned against Western attempts to use human-rights language to justify unilateral interventions (Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, 2016). Analysts noted, however, a growing gap between the concept's rhetorical commitment to a "powerful and effective" UN Security Council and Russia's own record of using its veto — six times by late 2016 — to block international action on Syria (The Moscow Times, 2016). In June 2016, Russia and China issued a joint declaration on international law during Putin's visit to Beijing, affirming shared opposition to unilateral military intervention, unilateral sanctions, and external interference in the internal affairs of states.

India in Russian Strategic and Foreign Policy Thinking

Russian foreign policy toward India since 1991 is conventionally divided into four phases within the period under study: a phase of uncertainty and confusion (1991–1995); a phase of reprioritisation in which India came to be viewed as a dependable partner (1995–2000); a phase of constructive, institutionalised engagement (2000–2014); and a fourth phase, from 2014 to 2018, in which the partnership persisted institutionally even as India's strategic options diversified and Russia's

own orientation shifted further toward China (Kothari, 2008).

The Yeltsin Years: Uncertainty and Recovery

In the immediate aftermath of the Soviet collapse, Russian foreign policy was dominated by Westernisers and Atlanticists who envisioned Russia's return to the Western fold. India, correspondingly, ranked only seventh among Russian foreign policy priorities in the 1993 concept (Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, 1993), and Moscow's vote in favour of a Pakistan-sponsored nuclear-free-zone proposal at the United Nations in late 1991 alarmed New Delhi. Within the Russian establishment, two schools of thought contended: one, associated with academic and parliamentary circles, favoured preserving the "special" Soviet-era relationship with India; the other, associated with Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev, regarded the India-centric approach as an obstacle to improving relations with Pakistan and the rest of South Asia (Mohanty, 2015).

Despite this drift, defence ties remained a powerful anchor: India accounted for a substantial share of Russian arms exports, and 60–70 per cent of India's defence imports had traditionally originated in the Soviet Union. Yeltsin's twice-postponed visit to India finally took place in January 1993, resulting in a new twenty-year Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation — though, unlike its Soviet-era predecessor, the treaty omitted any explicit strategic or security dimension (Singh, 1995). Yeltsin used the visit to affirm India's status as a strategic partner, endorse India's position on Kashmir, pledge to refrain from arms sales to Pakistan, and publicly back India's eventual candidacy for permanent UN Security Council membership (Sharma, 1997; The Tribune, 1993).

The cryogenic engine deal became an early test of the relationship. Under US pressure — citing dual-use technology concerns — Russia agreed to supply engines to India while withholding associated technology, prompting India to pursue indigenous development instead (India Today, 1993). Subsequent high-level visits, including Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's 1994 visit to Moscow and Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin's visit to India later that year, reaffirmed bilateral commitments on defence cooperation through 2000 and beyond (Strategic Digest, 1994; The Tribune, 1994).

From 1995, the appointment of Yevgeny Primakov as foreign minister marked a turning point. A longtime scholar of Indian affairs and former head of Russia's foreign intelligence service, Primakov elevated India to fourth place among Russia's foreign policy priorities, behind only the United States, the European Union, and China (The Hindu, 1996), and floated the idea of a Russia-India-China strategic triangle during his 1998 visit to New Delhi as prime minister (Mohanty, 2015). Primakov also championed the broader vision of a multipolar world order as a counterweight to unilateral Western dominance (Singh, 2008; Simon, 1997).

The Putin Presidency: Institutionalising the Partnership

Putin's tenure transformed the bilateral relationship into a formal strategic partnership. His October 2000 visit to New Delhi produced a Declaration of Strategic Partnership alongside ten additional agreements spanning political, defence, economic, scientific, and cultural cooperation (Mishra, 2008). A follow-up visit in December 2002 yielded the "Delhi Declaration," which called for the progressive reduction of nuclear weapons, established a joint counterterrorism working group, and saw Moscow explicitly back India's position on cross-border terrorism while pressing Pakistan to dismantle terrorist infrastructure (The Hindu, 2002; Cherin, 2002).

Putin's December 2004 visit produced eleven further agreements and reaffirmed strong support for India's permanent UN Security Council membership, including full veto rights (Embassy of the

Russian Federation in India, 2004; Batra, 2008). His January 2007 visit as chief guest at India's Republic Day celebrations — accompanied by nine additional agreements covering defence, energy, and space cooperation — was widely read as a signal that the Indo-Russian partnership would endure independent of India's deepening ties with Washington, including the US-India nuclear deal (Kundu, 2007; Gopal, 2008).

The Medvedev Presidency: Broadening the Partnership

Medvedev's December 2008 visit to India, coming immediately after the Mumbai terrorist attacks, placed counterterrorism cooperation at the centre of the bilateral agenda alongside ten new agreements (Mohanty, 2010). Both sides reaffirmed support for a multipolar world order grounded in international law, sovereign equality, and non-interference, and expressed satisfaction with the emerging Russia-India-China trilateral format (Mohanty, 2008). Russia also backed India's bid for observer status, and later a more active role, within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

Medvedev's October 2010 visit to New Delhi produced approximately thirty agreements spanning defence, disaster management, energy, nuclear cooperation, information technology, and trade, and elevated the relationship to a "Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership," alongside a further reaffirmation of Russian support for India's permanent Security Council membership (Sharma, 2010; Embassy of the Russian Federation in Republic India, 2010). Prime Minister Manmohan Singh characterised the relationship as a partnership that would continue to develop independently of either country's ties with third parties (BBC News, 2010).

The Putin-Modi Era: Institutional Continuity Amid Strategic Drift (2014–2018)

Narendra Modi's election as prime minister in 2014 did not disrupt the institutional architecture of the relationship, and the annual summit mechanism continued uninterrupted, with the 15th summit held in New Delhi in December 2014, during which Russia agreed to supply twelve additional nuclear power reactors over the following two decades (Vivekananda International Foundation, 2018; India-Russia Relations, 2015). India, notably, did not join Western states in sanctioning Russia following the March 2014 annexation of Crimea and abstained from UN votes condemning the annexation, even as it expressed concern over the developments (Britannica, n.d.).

The relationship was formally elevated to a "Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership" during Modi's first informal summit with Putin, held in Sochi in May 2018 (Brookings India, 2018). The most consequential development of the period came in October 2018, when Putin's visit to New Delhi produced a landmark \$5.4 billion agreement for India to acquire the Russian S-400 Triumf air defence system, concluded in defiance of the threat of sanctions under the United States' Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (Britannica, n.d.).

Notwithstanding this headline defence deal, analysts observed that the substantive depth of the partnership had begun to erode over the preceding decade. According to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute data, Russia's share of Indian arms imports — while still dominant, accounting for roughly 72 per cent of purchases between 2010 and 2014 — faced growing competition from the United States, which overtook Russia as India's top arms supplier by value in 2014 (Britannica, n.d.). The Vision Statement issued at the June 2017 St Petersburg summit had promised intensified cooperation on the joint development of future weapons systems, but observers noted a persistent gap between such declarations and their implementation, with the relationship increasingly described as "stagnating" and drifting toward a more narrowly transactional character (Vivekananda International Foundation, 2018). A further complicating factor was the deepening of

Sino-Russian strategic convergence over the same period, which sat uneasily alongside India's own unresolved territorial disputes with China (Britannica, n.d.).

Russia's Approach to the United Nations

Across every foreign policy concept issued between 1993 and 2016, Russia has consistently affirmed the United Nations — and particularly the Security Council — as the central institution for managing international peace and security, resisting efforts to marginalise it in favour of unilateral action, a position Moscow associated most directly with the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq (Myasnikov, 2003).

The Soviet Union played a foundational role in establishing the UN, participating in the 1943 Moscow Conference, the 1945 Yalta negotiations that shaped the Security Council's procedures — including the veto — and the San Francisco Conference that formally created the UN Charter (Nikitin, 2012). In the final years of the Soviet Union, Moscow began financially and politically supporting UN peace operations, and Russia subsequently contributed peacekeepers to missions in the former Yugoslavia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Western Sahara, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, Haiti, East Timor, Kosovo, and the Middle East, though its overall troop contributions remained modest relative to its great-power status (Nikitin, 2012).

On Security Council reform, Russia has favoured a limited expansion — to approximately twenty members — arguing that a compact council is essential to preserving its effectiveness and its capacity to respond swiftly to emerging threats (Mehrish, 2007).

Tension Between Rhetorical Commitment and Practice, 2011–2018

Russia's conduct at the UN Security Council after the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 exposed a growing gap between its stated commitment to a “powerful and effective” council and its own use of the veto. Between 2011 and early 2017, Russia vetoed proposed Syria resolutions at least six times, including a February 2017 veto — cast jointly with China — of a Western-backed resolution seeking sanctions over the Syrian government's alleged use of chemical weapons (RFE/RL, 2017). By some counts, of thirteen Security Council vetoes cast by Russia on Syria-related resolutions in this period, China joined Russia on seven occasions and abstained on five others where Russia alone vetoed drafts concerning chemical weapons use. Critics argued that Moscow's invocation of international-law principles was applied selectively: it rejected the Western-backed doctrine of the “responsibility to protect” when used to justify intervention in Libya and Syria, while separately invoking related justifications to support its own actions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine (The Moscow Times, 2016).

Conclusion

Russian foreign policy toward India between 1991 and 2018 moved from early ambivalence, shaped by a Westernist tilt in Moscow's broader orientation, through a period of reprioritisation under Primakov's statist realism, to an institutionalised strategic partnership consolidated by Putin and sustained by Medvedev, and finally to a period of institutional continuity under Modi and Putin that coexisted with growing strategic drift. Across this trajectory, Russia and India converged around counterterrorism cooperation, support for a multipolar world order, and disarmament, while consistently backing a strengthened role for the UN Security Council — a commitment India shared even as it declined to censure Russia's own departures from that principle after 2014. By the end of 2018, the Indo-Russian relationship remained institutionally robust, underscored by the

landmark S-400 deal concluded despite US sanctions pressure, even as India's expanding defence relationship with the United States and Israel, its unresolved concerns over Sino-Russian convergence, and the erosion of exclusivity in Russia's defence-supplier role had together introduced significant new strain into what both governments continued to describe as a time-tested, civilisational friendship.

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