

Improving EU-India Understanding on Russia

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Introduction

During the Cold-War years, Europe and India engaged with the Soviet Union at very different levels. On many occasions they found themselves supporting the opposite side. Western Europe was part of the American led western alliance. India, however, had very close strategic and economic ties with the USSR, which were institutionalised through the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation. Despite the collapse of the USSR and termination of special bilateral trade relations in the 1990s, India and Russia have maintained excellent political relations. These ties have been institutionalised through strategic partnership signed in 2000 and upgraded to ‘special and privileged strategic partnership’ in 2010.

Both the EU and Russia also devoted a lot of time and energy in the 1990s to build a strategic partnership. Geographical proximity, mutual interdependence in the energy sector, trade and investment linkages and global ambitions helped the EU and Russia to engage with each other strategically in Europe and elsewhere. Due to its position in the UNSC; its international linkages as well as its influence in the EU’s neighbourhood, Russia was a natural partner for the EU to tackle some of the key global and regional challenges. This partnership was built through carefully constructed institutional mechanism involving many dialogues, committees and agreements. Although established independently on their own merits, the strategic partnerships between EU and Russia; EU and India; as well as India and Russia have been useful for all three players to better understand some of the key crosscutting security and economic issues including Afghanistan, Iran, Eurasian integration and energy security.

The Ukrainian crisis damaged the strategic understanding built over years between the EU and Russia. The EU and India reacted differently to Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014. While the EU considered this action as a serious breach of international law, India took a neutral position and more or less accepted Russian interests in the region. Since then EU’s relations with the Russia are tensed and have resulted in sanctions as well as trade and investment restrictions. Despite different dynamics in EU-Russia and India-Russia relations both historically and presently, this paper tries to identify a few areas of joint specific interests involving Russia where the EU and India could potentially exchange.

EU strategy and policies towards Russia

The current legal basis for EU-Russia relations is still the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), which came into force in 1997 and which established a political framework for regular consultation. It has been complemented since then by a range of sectorial agreements covering political dialogue, trade, science and technology, education, energy and environment, transport, and prevention of illegal activities. At the 2003 EU-Russia summit in St. Petersburg,

it was further proposed that four common spaces would eventually be created from Lisbon to Vladivostok to deepen bilateral EU-Russia relations: a common economic space; a common space of freedom, security and justice; a space of co-operation in the field of external security; and a space of research, education, and cultural exchange. Road maps for the implementation of these common spaces were outlined at two bilateral summits in London and in Moscow in 2005. But the negotiations for this type of new agreement were later on suspended after the Georgian crisis of 2008.

In response to the annexation of Crimea and the destabilisation of the Ukraine six years later in 2014, the EU-Russia summit was cancelled, and member states decided not to hold regular bilateral summits as part of the diplomatic measures undertaken (so-called “phase 1”). Since then, the EU has progressively imposed a series of further restrictive measures against Russia whilst bilateral cooperation has been reduced to the possibility of selective engagement in areas of common interests as agreed upon during the EU Foreign Affairs Council in March 2016. The war in Georgia in 2008 followed by the Russian veto against the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia the year after, and the 2014 Ukrainian crisis thus clearly damaged the understanding between the EU and Russia which had been built over the years since the end of the 1990s and has made it very difficult for the EU to continue to work with Russia in the same strategic way. First, Russia’s continued violations of the rule of law and its adoption of restrictive laws over the last few years have increasingly questioned its full compliance with international obligations and shared principles with the EU¹.

Second, there have been since 2014 a range of alleged Russian interferences within European societies aimed at influencing the results of elections and referenda whilst supporting anti-EU parties and far-right movements, including possible interference in the Brexit referendum campaign using overt and covert means currently under investigation by the UK authorities. There are further deep concerns within the EU about the links between the Russian government and populist nationalist parties in Europe that could pose a direct threat to the fundamental values of the European Union itself. A recent report from the European Parliament thus advised that Russia could no longer be considered as “a strategic partner” for Europe given all these areas of tensions².

In 2016, the EU outlined five guiding principles of EU policy towards Russia. This included full implementation of Minsk agreement; strengthening relations with Eastern partners and Central Asia; Strengthening internal EU resilience; selective engagement on foreign policy issues particularly on Iran, the Middle-East peace process, Syria, migration, counter-terrorism, climate change; and support to Russian civil society³. More recently, the EU has accepted that despite tensions it is essential “to maintain open channels with Russia on issues of strategic interest for Europe and for the world”⁴.

The full implementation of the Minsk Agreements and the respect of international law remains the key preconditions for any form of renewed closer cooperation. It is in this context that sanctions have been further upheld in particular those relating to Crimea and Sevastopol, which were extended by the Council on 18th June 2018 until June 2019⁵. In response, Russia renewed its ban on the import of agri-food products from the EU until the end of the year⁶.

¹ See *State of EU-Russia political relations*, European Parliament, page 2, Provisional edition, 2019.

² Text adopted on the State of EU-Russia political relations, European Parliament, 12th March 2019.

³ Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the press conference following the Foreign Affairs Council, 14 March 2016.

⁴ Speech on behalf of High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the European Parliament plenary debate on the state of EU-Russia relations, 12 March 2019.

⁵ See also *EU restrictive measures in response to the crisis in Ukraine*, EU delegation to the Russian Federation, March 2019.

⁶ See also the French Senate Report, Robert Del Picchia and Josette Durrieu, Foreign Affairs Committee, *EU sanctions towards the Russian Federation*, N°659, June 2016.



There are nonetheless some political voices at national level within the EU urging towards some form of reassessment of the EU-Russia ties to seek to soften strategic cooperation in the longer run. The French President, Emmanuel Macron, thus advocated in the wake of the G-7 Summit in Biarritz last August the possibility to consider a new relationship between Europe and Russia in the realms of defence, cybersecurity and strategic relationships, which could be coherent with Europe's own interests towards ensuring stability in Eurasia. The French analysis seeks here to underline what it sees as Europe's long-term strategic benefit in creating "a new architecture based on trust and security in Europe"⁷ in the context of the developing Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), Europe's connectivity strategy and the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative⁸. Whilst Europe's relationship to Russia has been based on mistrust over recent years for the reasons documented above, the French belief is that Europe should in the long term be able to offer a strategic option to Russia for it not to become "a minority ally of China".

The current persistent tensions between the EU and Russia are in many ways further detrimental to the interest of both parties. Russia remains the EU's 4th trading partner totalling 6.4% of EU trade in goods, and the EU is still, by far and despite the sanctions, Russia's first partner amounting to 42,8% of its external trade in 2018. The EU is also the largest investor in Russia with a total stock of foreign direct investment amounting to €235.2 billion last year. Whilst energy continues to play a central and strategic role in EU-Russia ties, imports to the EU increased by 16.7% from 2017 to 2018 driven by the growth of imports of energy products, which account for around 70% of all European imports. This on-going mutual interdependence in the energy field had led both to enter into the so-called Energy Dialogue in 2000 to increase bilateral cooperation. A technological centre had also been inaugurated in Moscow in 2002 and a rapid alert mechanism agreed upon in November 2009, but again, since 2014 these exchanges have been formally stopped at ministerial level⁹.

Whilst the EU believes in the need to de-escalate the current tensions and of engaging in further consultations, notably to reduce the risk of misunderstanding, there seems to be a perceived sense of reluctance from Russian partners blaming the sanctions. Despite these, regular meetings are still taking place between the European External Action Service, the European Commission and the Russian Federation in a range of specific technical contents and dialogues, such as cross-border cooperation, trade, 5G technology and regular contacts in foreign policy at senior management level.

In this context, there have been already a range of contacts between the EU Directorate General for Trade and the Eurasian Economic Commission at a technical level. The EAEU, launched in 2014, indeed aims to create a common internal market based on free movement of goods and services, labour and capital between Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, totalling altogether a GDP of \$1.9 trillion and a population of 184 million. Although the EAEU has not been formally recognised by the EU at a political level, this is of particular relevance for Europe within the context of developing European norms and standards through connectivity¹⁰. The 2018 EU Joint Communication on Connecting Europe and Asia thus made a clear reference to it, advocating that "the EU could engage at technical level with the Eurasian Economic Union and its Member States, with the aim of achieving closer convergence of their technical regulations and standards with the international ones"¹¹. Since Russia represents some 88% of total EU trade with the EAEU, seeking to engage in closer technical dialogues of this

⁷ Speech of French President Emmanuel Macron to the Ambassador's Conference, 27th August 2019.

⁸ See also Karine Lisbonne de Vergeron, *The New Silk Roads: European perceptions and perspectives*, International Studies 55(4), December 2018.

⁹ Pierre Mirel, *Eurasian Union-Russia: after three lost decades, are we moving towards new cohabitation?*, Robert Schuman Foundation, European Issue n°483, 10th September 2018.

¹⁰ See also *A Concensus Proposal for a Revised Regional Order Post-Soviet Europe and Eurasia*, edited by Samuel Charap, Jeremy Shapiro, John J. Drennan, Oleksandr Chalyi, Reinhard Krumm, Yulia Nikitina, Gwendolyn Sasse, Santa Monica: RAND, 2019.

¹¹ Connecting Europe and Asia - Building blocks for an EU strategy: Joint communication to the European Parliament, the Council, The European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the European Investment Bank (19th September 2018), page 8.



kind and facilitate connectivity projects or problem solving in regulations could prove to be of growing relevance for the future of EU-Russia's selective engagement. There are a couple of other areas of specific interest where closer cooperation might be sought in the long run. Of particular significance would be the ability to first, engage further on climate change since Russia approved and ratified last September the Paris Agreement and pledged to reduce emission to 25 to 30 per cent below its 1990 levels by 2030; and second, to strengthen cooperation at civil society and public diplomacy level and engage in subjects of mutual interests and benefits, notably by including closer exchanges at think-tank levels as well as through cultural diplomacy programs. Climate change could, in particular, prove to be of further interest for improving EU-India understanding on Russia and possible EU-India bilateral dialogues looking at the long-term effects of climate change, including shared analysis on a range of potential risks such as induced migration of population in the long run¹².

Russia in Indian strategic thinking

Except for a very brief period of the early 1990s, India and Russia have maintained excellent political relations. In 2000, the two countries signed a strategic partnership agreement, upgraded to a 'special and privileged strategic partnership' in 2010.¹³ At the beginning of his tenure as Prime Minister, Narendra Modi asserted "even a child in India, if asked to say who is India's best friend, will reply it is Russia because Russia has been with India in times of crisis."¹⁴ Earlier, the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh described Russia as a "trusted and reliable strategic partner" and described Indo-Russian relations as "key pillar of our foreign policy"¹⁵. Recently, during his interaction at the Valdai Club in Moscow, the Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar asserted that the world has changed, India and Russia have changed but India-Russia relations have remained "a stable factor in international life".¹⁶

When Russia under Putin started reasserting its positions at the global stage, it realized that as a Eurasian power, its role and influence in dynamic Asia would be limited without a solid partnership with old friends like India. Despite its improving relations with the US, Europe and the ASEAN, New Delhi also did not want to abandon its time-tested relationship with Russia. In a world dominated by a single power, both Indian and Russian vision of a multi-polar world also coincided. The issue of international terrorism has also brought both the countries together.

So far the main pillars of India-Russia relationship are mutual trust, strategic congruence, defence ties, nuclear power and hydrocarbons. Under strategic partnership, more than 240 agreements have been signed over the years since 2000 in military and technical cooperation, space, nuclear energy, hydrocarbons, trade and economics, education and culture. The crux of twenty summits since 2000 and accompanying declarations and agreements has been common positions on major global issues including international terrorism and Afghanistan; desire for a multi-polar world and improvement in bilateral relations. Both have also tried to coordinate

¹² See the forthcoming book from Anatol Lieven, *Climate Change and the Nation State, The Realist Case*, Penguin, 5th March 2020. India is particularly vulnerable to climate change and the IPCC report of 2018 estimates that a further rise in temperatures of only 0.5 degree Celsius would reduce India's rice grain harvest per hectare by more than one sixth. This is coupled with forecast of significant water shortages by 2030 in India and more generally South Asia making the risk of migration of population a significant one in the long term.

¹³ For background of Indo-Soviet and then India-Russia relations see Gulshan Sachdeva "India's Relations with Russia" in David Scott (Ed), *Handbook of India's International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp.213-222.

¹⁴ The Times of India, "Top 8 Things PM Narendra Modi said at BRICS Summit, 16 July 2014, <http://goo.gl/PFPd2b>

¹⁵ The Economic Times, "India, Russia Sign Nuclear pacts, Seal Gorshkov Deal" 13 March 2010. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-russia-sign-nuclear-pacts-seal-gorshkov-deal/articleshow/5678413.cms?from=mdr>

¹⁶ Valdai Club, The Indo-Pacific Concept First Hand: Indian Foreign Minister Speaks at Valdai Club, 28 February 2019. <http://valdaiclub.com/events/posts/articles/indo-pacific-concept-firsthand-indian-foreign-minister-speaks-at-valdai-club/>



their activities at the UN, G-20, BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and RIC (Russia-India-China).

India continues to be an important arms market for Russia. According to SIPRI arms transfer database¹⁷ between 1992 and 2018, India bought weapons worth US\$40 bn. from Russia. This is about 70 per cent of total Indian arms imports and about 29 per cent of total Russian arms exports to the world during this period. Due to Indian diversification, this ratio has come down to about 60 per cent in the last six years. With many new deals including S-400 surface-to-air missile systems, frigates, Kamov helicopters, Russia may bounce back to its earlier position.

Energy is another major area of cooperation. India's public sector oil companies have already invested more than \$10 billion in Russian assets including Sakhalin-1, Imperial Energy, Vankorneft and Taas Yuryakh. As for Russia, a consortium led by Rosneft acquired Essar Oil for \$13 billion in 2017. Since 2018, India is also receiving LNG supplies through tankers. In nuclear energy, a strategic vision for long-term cooperation was declared in 2014. Russia is building Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant. Two units are already operational. Other four units are at different stages of implementation. Russia plans to construct more than 20 nuclear power units in India in the next two decades¹⁸. Recently, the Indian Oil Minister further explored possibilities of increasing Indian footprint in Russian energy sector and invite Russian companies to invest in gas distribution across Indian cities.

Despite various efforts, the weakest link continues to be limited commercial ties. Soviet Union used to be India's number one trading partner. Economic transformation in Russia from a centrally planned economy to a market economy in 1992 coincided with the policies of economic liberalization in India. These developments changed the nature and character of foreign economic relations in both the countries. Therefore, despite having solid economic and trade relations in the past, most Russian and Indian companies are still struggling to adjust in each other's markets. Economic relations are surviving mainly because of defence purchases and some public sector investments by India. 'special relationship' is limited mainly to arms trade and defence technology. Private commercial initiatives are slow to take advantage from Russian economic transformation. Despite good intentions, both the governments have not been able to facilitate any major economic initiative, which could have given a new direction to bilateral commercial ties.

With annual trade worth around \$10 billion, Russia ranked Number 30 last year in the list of India's major trading partners. Various trade targets agreed at earlier summits have not materialized. It is becoming clear that both economies have moved away from each other significantly and limited policy measures have not helped. Both are now keen to launch FTA negotiations with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) consisting of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic and Russia. Industry's perceptions of India-EAEU FTA are positive.

Indian authorities hope to achieve \$30 billion bilateral trade target by 2025¹⁹. In August 2018, Commerce & Industry Minister led a large business delegation consisting of 140 Indian companies to Vladivostok. The delegation also included Chief Ministers of UP, Gujarat, Haryana and Goa. Due to American sanctions, India may be paying some of its major arms imports through Rupee-Rouble mechanism²⁰. This may create some new opportunities for

¹⁷ <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>

¹⁸ Nuclear Engineering International, "Russia and India Increase Nuclear Cooperation", 5 September 2019, <https://www.neimagazine.com/news/newsrussia-and-india-increase-nuclear-cooperation-7400438>

¹⁹ Press Trust of India, "India, Russia to Boost Ties to Achieve \$30 bn Bilateral Trade by 2025" 13 August 2019, <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/business/economy/india-russia-to-boost-ties-to-achieve-30-bn-bilateral-trade-by-2025-4331081.html>

²⁰ Huma Siddiqui, "India to Pay in Rupees for S-400 Missile System from Russia, says top Russian Diplomat" *Financial Express*, 29 August 2019, <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/india-to-pay-in-rupees-for-s-400-missile-system-from-russia-says-top-russian-diplomat/1688845/>



Indian exports. To improve connectivity there is renewed interest in the International North South Transport Corridor. Discussions are also underway on starting a direct shipping link between Chennai and Vladivostok to boost India's Act-East policy²¹.

In recent years Indian authorities are concerned about Russian-Chinese bonhomie. Similarly, India's increasing closeness to the US is being watched carefully in Moscow. Still, a major point emphasized after every important meeting by both is that their partnership is neither against any third country nor at the expense of their relations with other major powers. Within South Asia, Russia has consistently supported India on the issue of Kashmir unconditionally over time or regime change and opposed its internationalization.²² Despite improvement in Russia-Pakistan ties, Russia has again thrown its weight behind India on Kashmir. On recent Indian action concerning the abrogation of Article 370, Russians declared that it is a sovereign decision of the Indian government and this is 'an internal affair of India'²³. Both New Delhi and Moscow seems to have understood each other's sensitivities concerning Jammu & Kashmir and Crimea. A clear Russian support on Kashmir issue may also lead to Moscow bagging some big-ticket defence, nuclear and energy deals in the coming years²⁴. Despite relatively limited commercial linkages, Russia remains an important factor in Indian foreign policy debates. Indian elite believes that a strong Russia is important for maintaining a desired international equilibrium.

Conclusion and recommendations

EU-Russia relations have been over the years mostly dominated by mutual dependence in the energy sector and geo-strategic developments in the EU's neighbourhood. Since 2014, the partnership has been damaged and most inter-governmental relations remain frozen. Both are still trying to figure out new ways of selective engagement in a context of tensions and mistrust. On the other hand, India-Russia ties have been more influenced by bilateral defence and energy deals as well as evolving security architecture in Asia. The pace of development in EU-Russia relations until the Ukrainian crisis of 2014 was very useful for India not only for a multipolar world but also to resolve some of the key issues in the Middle East, Central Asia and Afghanistan. On Ukraine, India has broadly supported Russia. On abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir, Moscow has thrown its weight behind India. On the Iranian nuclear issue, all three are for a negotiated settlement. On Afghanistan, their positions will be evolving in the coming months.

In these circumstances, it is suggested that the EU and India could develop exchanges on a couple of specific issues involving Russia, to increase mutual understanding of strategic interests. Moving from general consideration to specific consultations, however, is not easy. The Afghanistan situation is still unfolding as well as notably the Iranian nuclear issue.

Therefore, on the basis of the above discussion and EU and Indian policies towards the Russian Federation, the following recommendations are proposed to EU and Indian policy makers:

²¹ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury "Chennai-Vladivostok Sea Route: India's Effort to Counter China's OBOR could soon get a Big Russian Helping Hand" *The Economic Times*, 12 July 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/chennai-vladivostok-sea-route-to-make-it-near-east/articleshow/60486508.cms?from=mdr>

²² Anuradha M. Chenoy, 'India and Russia: Allies in the International System' *South Asian Survey*, Vol 15, No. 1, 2008.

²³ India Today "Our Views Exactly the Same: Russia Backs India's Kashmir Stand" 28 August 2019. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/our-views-exactly-the-same-russia-backs-india-kashmir-stand-1592518-2019-08-28>

²⁴ Gulshan Sachdeva, "India-Russia bilateral, Payback time for Russia's support on Kashmir?", 3 September 2019, <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/politics/india-russia-bilateral-payback-time-for-russias-support-on-kashmir-4397621.html>



- Consider exchanging notes and establishing a dialogue mechanism on Russia. Within various EU-India strategic partnership institutional mechanisms, frank conversations about Russia may improve Indian and EU perceptions and understanding about Moscow.
- Consider exchanging on shared analysis of Russia's strategy in Afghanistan within the framework of EU-India discussions on peace-making and peace building efforts. These exchanges could focus on ways to reduce drugs, trade and cooperation in the region and the role that Russia could play in this respect.
- Strengthen dialogues between the EU and India on climate change and Russia's role in it. This could be done, by including long-term analysis of climate changes threats and Russia's developing position as a response to it. This area would be of great significance for the future of EU-Russia ties and India could also have an interest in taking part.
- In the long term, consider creating a trilateral (EU-India-Russia) consultative mechanism to improve understanding of their respective connectivity plans in Eurasia. The three powers have serious plans concerning Eurasian integration and are engaged with each other at various forums and projects.
- Consider exchanges between the EU and India on public diplomacy programs with Russia, including a cultural component and think-tank level initiatives.

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