



**GLOBAL INDIA PODCAST  
The Brookings Institution**

**“Why India cares about China-Russia relations”**

**Washington, D.C.  
January 10, 2024**

*Guests:*

**NIVEDITA KAPOOR**  
Research Fellow, Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs  
Higher School of Economics, Moscow

*Host:*

**TANVI MADAN**  
Senior Fellow, Foreign Policy, Center for East Asia Policy Studies  
The Brookings Institution

*Episode Summary:*

India has closely watched the China-Russia relationship for decades because it has shaped India’s foreign policy options. In this episode, Tanvi Madan speaks with Nivedita Kapoor, an Indian expert on Russian foreign policy, about Russia’s evolving role in India’s China strategy and New Delhi’s perception of recent developments in the China-Russia partnership.

[music]

**MADAN:** Welcome to *Global India*, I'm Tanvi Madan, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, where I specialize in Indian foreign policy. In this new Brookings podcast, I'll be turning the spotlight on India's partnerships, its rivalries, and its role on the global stage. This season our conversations will be focused on India's relationship with China, and why and how China-India ties are shaping New Delhi's view of the world.

When people think about India's China strategy, the role of Russia rarely comes up, but Russia has played such a role, and that, in turn, has shaped New Delhi's approach to Moscow. This is why India has cared about China-Russia relations for decades.

In fact, the first time an American president and Indian prime minister met, the subject came up. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru told President Harry Truman in 1949 that what was then the Soviet Union and China shouldn't be seen as a monolith; that their differences would emerge despite their shared communist ideology. Nehru would eventually, though not for a few years, be proven right. And the Sino-Soviet split, when it happened, had deep implications for India.

It is for that reason that New Delhi keenly observed Sino-Soviet and subsequently Sino-Russian dynamics—because the state of the Russia-China relationship has affected India and shaped its options.

This becomes evident if you consider two wars. First, consider the 1962 India-China war. At that time, Sino-Soviet relations were still close. And when push came to shove, Moscow chose to side with its ally China over its friend India. It provided Beijing diplomatic support as well as intelligence during the war. And it encouraged India to accept Chinese terms. Furthermore, it stalled the supply of MiG fighter jets to India.

Second, consider the 1971 India-Pakistan war. At that time, China and the Soviet Union were at loggerheads. That led Moscow to be willing to side with India, when New Delhi needed an insurance policy against Chinese intervention in an India-Pakistan war. The Soviet Union helped India by deterring China and it provided not just military supplies, but also a veto at the UN Security Council.

In both cases, the state of Beijing and Moscow's relations affected New Delhi's options, but they also had implications for Washington. In 1962, when the Soviets were unhelpful or even harmful for India's China strategy, that pushed India closer to the U.S. In 1971, when the Soviets were helpful for India's China strategy, it drew India closer to them and further away from the U.S. It particularly resulted in a deeper India-Soviet defense partnership, whose legacy is evident even today and something that Washington has to grapple with even now.

But this is not just a Cold War story. And today on the podcast, we're going to pick up the story in the 1990s and consider Russia's more recent role in India's China strategy and how New Delhi is perceiving the China-Russia partnership.

To discuss this and more, I'm joined by Dr. Nivedita Kapoor, an Indian expert on Russian foreign policy. She's currently a research fellow with the faculty of World Economy and International Affairs at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow.

[music]

Before I continue on to the interview, I want to thank all of you for listening to or watching the podcast, providing feedback and sending questions on social media. I want to highlight that the last episode of the season of the podcast will be a special Q&A episode in which I will answer audience questions about India-China relations. So, please do send us any questions you'd like answered. You can do so by posting your question on Twitter or X with the hashtag GlobalIndia, all one word. Or if you'd prefer to submit your questions through email, you can send it to GlobalIndia at Brookings.edu.

And now, let's move on to the conversation with Dr. Kapoor.

**MADAN:** Welcome to the podcast, Nivedita.

**KAPOOR:** Thanks, Tanvi, and thank you for having me.

*04:29 What role did Russia play in India's China strategy in the 1990s and 2000s?*

**MADAN:** Nivedita, I want to start our discussion, as I often do in these episodes, by looking back, and in this case to the 1990s and 2000s. During that period, what role did Russia play in India's China strategy?

**KAPOOR:** So, if we look at the '90s, this was a very interesting time for both India and Russia. Russia, of course, was going through momentous changes and India also had started its own economic reform program. So, at this point, the main starting point was that both India and Russia were trying to first establish themselves, stabilize their relationship with each other, and then rebuild their relationship. Because for India, Soviet Union was a critical partner. And with the end of the Soviet Union, it had to once again reorient its foreign policy. And Russia was, of course, finding its feet after the collapse of the Soviet Union. So, this is mostly a period of stabilization.

And if we look at both India and China, if we compare this, then Russia's engagement with China developed at a faster pace in the immediate [post-]Cold War period. Because in the case of China, Gorbachev had already started this process. Brezhnev had indicated it and then Gorbachev took it forward. And at this point, despite the rocky developments in the early Yeltsin period, things settled down pretty quickly between Russia and China.

And China was at this point willing to build relations with Russia. It was also after the Tiananmen Square massacre when the West had stopped military supplies to China. So, it was also looking to get these supplies from Russia.

And an opening was provided when Russia and China started discussing the borders. Because there was this border between the Central Asian states, Russia, and China that had to be settled and that provided an opening. And in 1992, these parties reached an eastern border settlement. So, that was the first sort of step that

was laid down. And Russia was trying to maintain the security of not just of its own borders, but also of the Central Asian states that had now come up. And also, of course, stabilizing the border with China. So, all of these interests came together.

The bilateral trade started improving pretty well. And by 1993, China was actually Russia's second largest trading partner. And from there, we see the relationship develop pretty quickly. So, in 1995, when Russian Foreign Minister Andrey Kozyrev visited China, he said that both Russia and China had common interests in opposing hegemony and a unipolar world. So, by this time, they're already thinking along these lines.

In 1996, we see Russia and China declare their strategic partnership. In '97, they actually sign a joint declaration, which is called the Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order.

So, a lot of their interests are sort of already converging. And Russia can see that China is emerging. It's growing pretty fast. So, China is already this important player that Russia can see.

On the other hand, if you look at the Russia-India relationship, in the '90s, it is still trying to stabilize itself. Because India was reforming its own economy and the relations, especially the trade relations, with Russia, had to be ... they were pretty rocky in the beginning because we were trying to settle the dispute over the rupee-ruble exchange rate. There was this dispute about the amount that India owed to Russia. And there were also other issues of connectivity. There was a very undeveloped banking sector in Russia at that time. So, the trade relations could not be established.

And once both the economies stabilized, we realized that India and Russia had somehow lost their trade complementarity, and the rupee-ruble trade basis ended. And the small and medium enterprises in India that were emerging in the '90s, they were oriented towards the West. So, essentially, both India and Russia were looking to the West in the economic domain.

The one silver lining here was the arms trade or the defense relationship that did continue both for India and China. But if we compare, we realize that especially in the '90s, the focus was very much inwards and it was very much on the bilateral relationship. We don't see the triangle of India, Russia, China emerging at this point. So, that only comes towards the end of the '90s.

*08:54 What led to the Russia-India-China trilateral and then BRICS emerging after the 1990s?*

**MADAN:** And what leads to that triangle coming to the fore, so to speak? Because as you said, it's quite interesting in the '80s, Russia already, or then Soviet Union, reaching out to China with Gorbachev. And one of the things that that is linked to in the triangular sense is then India's efforts to also try to stabilize relations with China. So, even, the 1988 Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi visit [to China] not just shaped or caused by the fact that there had been a big border crisis in 1986–87. But also this idea, as I think Srinath Raghavan has written about, which is that there was concern that, if Russia, or the Soviet Union then, was reaching out to China, well, India better

protect that flank, too, because India had depended so much on the Soviet Union for that balancing against China.

So, it's very interesting when you say that in the '90s, in that early period, that triangle dissipates a bit in terms of its prominence. What causes it to return to the fore, that triangular dimension of Russia-India-China ties?

**KAPOOR:** Yeah. This is something that you will hear if you're in Russia, you will hear it repeated every single time, that because it was the Russian Foreign Minister and later Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov who first talked about Russia-India-China. So, we are reminded quite often in Russia about the fact that Russia has always aspired for a multipolar world with Russia, India, and China as these three important poles in the system.

So, in the emergence of this RIC [trilateral], all three parties had their own interests. And if I start with Russia, by the mid-90s and the end of '90s, Russia is already becoming disillusioned with the West. It believes that its position is not being respected. The pro-Western leadership has been sort of sidelined. We see Yevgeny Primakov become foreign minister and then prime minister, and he was very famously talking about having a balanced relationship of Russia with the East and the West. And that is when he proposes the idea of Russia-India-China. And this is somewhere in 1998.

But the actual formation of the RIC takes at least a few years. And that is also in the end of '90s and the beginning of 2000s, in 2003 when RIC meeting first happened. In between, we also see the India-China relationship, as you say, sort of stabilize a bit more. We have still not sorted out our border issue, of course. But once the India-China ties are normalized in 1988, we do see a willingness to at least have a stable relationship, even if we are not resolving the differences.

So, once that happens, then India has an interest in ensuring a stable border with China. And I think there is a sense that if Russia, India, and China, even if we are just talking to each other, even if it's not an organization that has an implementing mechanism, it does not have its headquarters, it provides a useful platform for negotiations, for talking to each other. So, I think India also saw value in that.

And Russia, of course, sees India and China as its two important partners in the post-Cold War scenario. And if it is getting disillusioned with the West, so then how does it once again regain its position in the international arena? So, it has to put forth its own ideas. And RIC is seen as a format where Russia, with its two key partners, can project its strength and present an idea of a multipolar world. Because by now, and this is another common factor, because Russia, India, and China, even though all three were at that time building relations with the United States—they all saw United States as an important partner—they also realize that this is a hegemonic world. And in that hegemonic world or a unilateral world or a world with just one power, their interests are not always met. So, they also have an interest in pushing for their demands through a multilateral format.

So, this common interest, at this point, they are not trying to balance the United States, but they're just trying to consolidate themselves at this point because they all have limited capacities in different ways, and they want to consolidate themselves

and present their ideas. And you see this carry forward even to the BRIC [Brazil, Russia, India, China], because once from RIC we move on to BRIC later, one of the key demands of BRIC is that we want to reform the Bretton Woods institutions, the international financial governance institutions.

So, there is a dissatisfaction among these three countries about how their position or how their interests are being handled in a world where the United States is the sole power.

So, I think both RIC and BRIC, they're a story of states that are gaining strength, and therefore they want to expand their presence in global affairs, but it's also a story where by coming together they are also trying to make sure that one state does not dominate. So, when there's Russia, India, and China, China does not get to dominate because, you know, there's also India and Russia in that equation. So, they're trying to also balance each other. So, it's both cooperation, but they're still wary, at least India and China, are wary of each other.

**MADAN:** Former Indian ambassador to Russia, P.S. Raghavan described this period as the three countries essentially wanting non-West platforms as opposed to anti-West platforms, as you're saying. That it was very much wanting a voice, particularly at a time when they wanted not unipolarity, which was the reality, but multipolarity.

And I do want to come back when we talk about the more recent phase on this concept of multipolarity and whether Russia and India, China, in your view, or at least Russia and India, in your view, do they actually share a view of what that multipolarity looks like?

But I do want to go from this 1990s, 2000s periods when you did see this triangular relationship work in a stable, constructive way. You saw eventually the Shanghai Cooperation Organization being formed later on as well. And Russia facilitating India's entry into that.

*15:00 What was India's Modi government view of the Russia-India-China triangle?*

I want to take us now maybe to the more recent period from that phase that you talked about. In the 2010s as we go into the Modi government coming in, what was the picture with this new Modi government on this Russia-India-China triangle? Where did things stand?

**KAPOOR:** So, when Modi comes to power, we do see a very interesting shift already happening with the Russia-China relationship. It's fairly often repeated that India would favor a situation where Russia maintained sort of a balanced relationship with China. And if Russia and China get too close or, God forbid, if they form an alliance, then that would really hurt India strategic interests.

So, in this period, 2000s—2007, 2008—that is when you see Russia really come out and express its dissatisfaction with the United States. In 2008, there was the NATO promises that Ukraine and Georgia at some point in future, will become members of NATO, even though it does not start the process. And that is one point which sort of marks Russia clearly saying that this is a red line for us.

So, we can see the Russia-West relationship already deteriorating. And that pushes Russia even further towards China. And between 2008 to 2014 when the Ukraine crisis breaks out. And I think that 2014 Ukraine crisis is this breaking point where Russia's relations with the West reach the lowest point, at that point, the lowest point in the post-Cold War period. And that is where we see a real shift in the Russia-China relations. So, when the Modi government comes to power in India, the Russia-China relationship is already moving in a very different direction.

Of course, you know, New Delhi does not get a vote in how Russia and China engage with each other. But, before 2014, the thing was that Russia was really trying to build a multi-vector policy. Of course, China was an important partner, but before 2014, Russia had good relations ... it was at least trying to build relations with the EU, with the U.S., and was also really trying to build relations with Japan, South Korea. Of course, it had India. So, Russian intentions at that point were very clear: that China is an important partner, but we do not want to be a junior partner of China.

We can see the examples of this happening not just in relations with India. Russia was trying to move into West Asia [Middle East] on its own capacity. In the Russian Far East, in the Arctic, it was Japan and South Korea that were the preferred partners for Russia. And there was sort of an unwritten rule that is often talked about: that Chinese companies should have a minimum role in energy projects in the Arctic.

So, Russia was trying to build all of these different relationships. And SCO is actually a very good example because Russia was trying really hard to preserve its influence in the neighborhood. So, in the case of SCO, it tries to include India, it brings in India. And when China then proposes the name of Pakistan. But the entire idea for Russia trying to bring in India is to make sure that it does not become an organization dominated by China. In fact, China wanted to build a development bank within SCO, but Russia did not want an economically dominant China sort of running the SCO. So, it scuttled the idea of a development bank.

So, it was clear that Russia was trying to sort of balance its relations with China, even though it has limited capacity. It offered India a space that we can engage with Russia on all of these different issues and make sure that Russia has some space when it deals with China.

The problem after 2014 is that because Russia and China came so close together because of the Ukraine crisis and the sanctions and the breakdown of relations with the West, that space that was available to India shrunk. So, as Modi's coming to power, all of these developments are happening.

And that makes it very difficult, because what happens after 2014 is that there are very specific ways in which we see the Russia-China relationship shifting. So, for instance, Russia decides to sell Sukhoi 35 fighter planes and the S-400 missile defense system. Before this, China never got the latest weapons systems from Russia. So, that happened.

The cooperation in energy sector started intensifying. Because if you look at the Arctic oil and gas projects, for the first time, China gets a stake in Arctic LNG 2. Its Silk Road Fund invests in Arctic LNG.

So, we see that earlier the areas that were not the main areas of cooperation or where Russia was trying to preserve its independence, even those areas, we see that China now gets a preferential treatment.

And on the other hand, because of Russia's own weaknesses, its so-called pivot to the east did not really work out that well. So, China becomes the central partner and other partners become less important—or the relationship is not as deep as it is with China. It's amidst all of this that we see the Modi government taking power. And then it also has to respond to its own relations with China.

**MADAN:** And it's quite interesting you mentioned that '07–'08 period as being a time of change in both how Russia sees the West and therefore how it sees China. It also happens to be around the time that previous guests have mentioned that India-China relations start to become of greater concern in New Delhi. And so, it's interesting that that turning point actually coincides. So, to the students out there listening, this is a great period to research in terms of dynamics of what was going on with various dyads and then triangles as well.

But I think it's also interesting, you do see at this period, despite Russia's pivot to the east not having great success, but India and Prime Minister Modi himself trying to actively say, look, Russia, remember, you're an Asian country too, not just a European one—and do more with India and not just China in Asia. But I'm sure we'll talk about that a little bit more.

*20:59 How have the Galwan clash (2020) and Ukraine war (2022) shaped India's view of China-Russia relations?*

I do want to talk about how two things—and you can take them simultaneously or, separately—but how two developments affected how India sees or saw the Russia-China relationship and how it implicates India's concerns. One is the deterioration of India-China ties: there were border crises in 2014, in 2015, but also then you see more intensified crises in 2017 and 2020, obviously with the Galwan clash.

But the second development ... meaning the Russia-Ukraine war. How have these two things shaped India's view of the China-Russia relationship and for that matter, how have they actually changed China-Russia relations?

**KAPOOR:** You're absolutely right that, you know, these crisis points in India-China relations have had a very wide-ranging impact on our foreign policy. Because it basically shifted our balance of threat perceptions vis a vis China. So, suddenly India's prism of looking at different relationships, there China becomes incredibly important. So, whether it's increasing its alignment with the United States, whether it's dealing with other partners in the Indo-Pacific, apart from its own bilateral equation, the factor of China becomes incredibly important and how India builds its relationships with other powers. And also because Indo-Pacific, Indian Ocean, these are absolutely critical geographies for India.

So, this framing of India that is shaping its policy with regard to China, that also impacts how it sees Russia's rapprochement with China, and also how it sees Russia's role in its own foreign policy. So, it affects both these perceptions.



So, basically, once the China challenge really started to come forth and India wanted to manage the situation, the logical idea was to look for a major power that has the capacity to balance China.

And here, because we already see Russia and China had already gotten too close especially after 2014, the clear answer to India's question was the United States and not Russia in this case, because U.S. was the power that had the capacity to manage China its neighborhood. So, this had a security dimension; it has an economic dimension. And also looking at the regional balance of power, because this is also the region where India wants to position itself as a prominent power.

So, within this, how India will look at Russia and the Russia-China relationship is, in what way can Russia aid India in its challenge with China? So, that is the one question that we'll have to ask, which will have to factor in the Russia-China ties. That has already undergone significant shifts.

So, here is when the Russia-China relationship becomes more significant because we get a sense that already Russia's stated goal of establishing a multi-vector foreign policy, that has already suffered a huge setback. And we see that Russia and China start acting together in ways that are very detrimental to the interests of others in Asia.

For example, Russia and China conduct joint patrols in East China Sea. Both Japan and South Korea are aggrieved by this. And in an earlier world, Russia would have taken into consideration at least the interests of Japan and South Korea, or at least not try to overtly subvert their interests. But now, after 2014, Russia is willing to antagonize its neighbors in its cooperation with China.

In the Northeast Asia, in that subregion, we see this shift happening very clearly because in 2022, for the first time since 2006, Russia and China vetoed a U.N. Security Council resolution on North Korea, on strengthening the sanctions on North Korea. After the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Moscow has declared both Japan and South Korea as unfriendly states after they imposed sanctions. After 2014, Japan and South Korea had not actually imposed most of the sanctions. They continued their relationship. Russia was happy to invite them into the Russian Far East, into the Arctic. And Japan had quite a bit of business investments in the country.

But after 2022, this completely shifted. So, even after 2014, whatever space that Russia had created—or it was left—for a multi-vector policy, after 2022, that completely broke down. So, at a time when India and China are already sort of in a crisis situation, Russia and China continued to get closer.

And this is a time when this is not just about Russia getting closer to China. This is a time when China also sees value in its relationship with Russia. This is not a one-sided relationship. And we cannot underestimate the power that Russia adds to China's foreign policy in general. Because if we look at the region, then if Russia is not China's partner, then China has no other allies. It does not have network of allies like the United States.

So, the relationship with Russia is also critical for China. So, their interests sort of start converging very significantly. Their military-technical cooperation since 2019

has actually increased quite a bit, and a lot of it is shrouded in secrecy. So, we are not exactly sure, but we do see a higher level of trust in the Russia-China defense relationship. And now Russia is actually building an early warning, ballistic missile defense system for China. So, that indicates the level of trust that has increased between the two parties.

The economic relationship has grown really close. This year, the bilateral trade crossed \$200 billion. India and Russia, we can't even imagine that at this point.

There's a lot of talk of high-tech sector cooperation, because both Russia and China are facing this pressure from the United States. So, there is a possibility that in the future, because of their antagonism towards the West or their ongoing conflicts with the West, they can come together even in areas like high tech. Because both Russia and China are now in an increasingly antagonistic relationship with the West, that also fuels this relationship. And in that sense, India has gone in that period in the opposite direction because we have gone towards the West.

So, even if India and Russia are not directly fighting with each other, so to speak, on any particular issue, there is a problem in the sense that we are both aligned with opposing major powers: one is with the United States, one is with China.

So, at this point, I should stress that till now Russia has not actually done anything that will directly impinge on India's national interests, but instead it maintains a close defense relationship with us, even when it knows that India is arming itself because one of its challenges and concerns is China. So, it is not that Russia is doing anything directly to harm our interests. But the main problem is that New Delhi is increasingly worried—or it should be worried—because the trend in Sino-Russian relationship, if it continues, then it raises the chances of differences emerging between India and Russia. And I think that is the concern at this point.

*28:27 How did Russia respond to the China-India border crisis of 2020?*

**MADAN:** Nivedita, I do want to ask you while we're on the subject, just two follow ups for our audience who might not know. One, what was Russia's reaction to the China-India crisis of 2020, the border crisis? How did Russia respond and what was what motivated or what shaped its response?

**KAPOOR:** That's a good way to present what Russia has been doing. And that's a good question at this point, because just in the previous question, I did want to stress that Russia has not been actively trying to subvert Indian interests. And that was visible after the crisis in 2020 when Russia did whatever it could to make sure that it could bring both India and China to the table. There were talks of a lot of backchannel diplomacy by Russia between India and China.

And we also saw that because both the ministers from India were in Russia, because Russia was hosting an SCO meeting at that point, and so, Russia did provide a platform—obviously it does not mediate—but it did provide a platform where India and China, because the ministers sat together, they talked to each other, and that was at least the point of contact between the two sides, despite the fact that the situation on the border was really tense.

You'll hear this repeatedly said in Russia that the best situation for Russia would be if India and China have a good relationship. Because, I mean, you can imagine just how much power it would add to Russia's foreign policy if India and China were not at loggerheads. So, it's not in Russian interest to see this exacerbation of Sino-Indian ties.

And whenever the tensions happen, it does take a very neutral stand. Till now it has never displayed any behavior that would suggest that it is tilting towards China in a dispute where India and China are both involved. So, in that way, till now, it has preserved its position, its neutrality in in the case at least, of India-China relations, even if its neutrality in other areas—say, Northeast Asia—might be more suspect, but its neutrality till now has not been suspect when it comes to India-China ties.

**MADAN:** It's fascinating how much as you describe that, I'm thinking back to 1960 when then-Soviet leader Khrushchev is very frustrated because India, China were already at loggerheads before the 1962 war. Because he knows what is going to happen if India-China relations are bad, which is that India would move closer to the U.S. in particular, but the West writ large. And so, he's telling various Chinese officials, look, sort this problem out, because you're just pushing India closer to the U.S. and that is not in the interest of the balance of power that we want to see.

And when you were talking about that this is exactly like Moscow then wanted to see India, China make up, in part because it would complicate Soviet interests and now Russian interests if they don't—it very much echoes that period of time. And eventually during that war, the Soviet Union had to make a choice.

*31:35 How might Russia respond in a future India-China crisis?*

And that brings me to the follow up question to the period today, which is we saw Russia try to continue to supply India, but diplomatically stay neutral during the 2020 crisis. Would that be Russia's response potentially in a future crisis? Is that likely to sustain?

**KAPOOR:** So, if we go by the record that Russia has maintained till now, then I would say that it would try its best to maintain a balance in the relationship. And that is also because it is not in Russian interest to lose any more partners than it has already lost. So, the United States and the EU are already no longer friends of Russia. We don't know how and when the relationship will stabilize. So, if Russia is indeed looking to build its relations in the East, now it really has no other option, then it will need the support of the major powers in this part of the world, and that is both India and China.

And if it takes steps that are detrimental to India's security interests directly, then it will lose out India as a critical partner. And that would mean, of course, then India would for obvious reasons, end up very close to the United States. And that means that Russia will lose a very critical partner in the East.

And then there will be absolutely no chance of Russia being able to balance China, because even now Moscow does understand that this is an asymmetric relationship. Of course, we understand that China also derives benefits from its relations with Russia. But whether you look at economically, whether you look at the future

developments, we see that China is the stronger power at this moment. And this gap is expected to grow because Russia is involved in a long war, there are costs attached to it.

So, Russia is already in a declining position. And a declining state is not in a position to sort of create conditions where it does not have other strong powers. And it cannot just be China, because at some point in the future it will need to balance China. It will need to realize that this is a relationship where asymmetry will continue to grow if it cannot present itself with other partners and if it cannot grow itself.

So, I think the importance of India for Russia will remain, And hopefully because of its own self-interest that are involved, Russia will stay neutral. You know, we are not asking Russia to come out in our support. If it stays neutral, that, I think, would be enough for India.

**MADAN:** Yes, I think that definitely you've seen that shift in expectation where even though traditionally and historically Moscow played a crucial role in helping India balance China and took India's side, as India did Russia's or Soviet Union's against China, that that is no longer the expectation in Delhi. I don't think there's an expectation that Russia will take India's side; that, as you said, [it] will stay neutral.

*34:28 How does India see China's efforts to facilitate Russia-Pakistan ties?*

We've talked about the U.S., so, a fourth country when we're thinking about this trilateral. Let me throw in a fifth, which is Pakistan. We've seen China try to facilitate Russia-Pakistan ties. How has that triangle—Russia, China, Pakistan—shaped up? And how does India see those efforts on the part of China to broker a Russia-Pakistan relationship?

**KAPOOR:** Yeah, Pakistan has been a really interesting player in all of this. And especially for Russia, the importance of Pakistan increased, especially after the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan. So, for a long time, Russia looked at Pakistan through the lens of Afghanistan because it thought that without Pakistan, it would be difficult to promote its own interests in Afghanistan, and it just needed Pakistan for that reason.

But overall, if you look at the bilateral relationship between Russia and Pakistan, we always hear a lot of news of either arms deal happening or some other economic relationship. But what it ultimately results in till now has not been much. Because after 2014, when actually the Russian defense minister first visited Pakistan, there were some minor arms sales that were made to Pakistan, but it did not translate into huge orders.

The economic relationship also remains pretty basic at this point. There was a lot of talk about a gas pipeline, the TAPI [Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India] gas pipeline that we always keep talking about for years. Of course, that has not materialized.

So, in a sense, we have not seen a huge movement forward. And it's also believed to be the case that Russia does not want to antagonize India too much in getting too close to Pakistan. So, that might also be a factor in why Russia has tried to maintain

a balance and not suggest the creation of a China, Pakistan, Russia triangle sort of emerging.

Even now, we did see, unfortunately, Prime Minister Imran Khan was in Russia just before Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine. So, it was not very propitious time to be here. And we did hear again talk about some economic ties being developed, but also because Pakistan's own situations, internal challenges, are quite immense, that has not translated into a lot of developments on the ground.

But eventually, I think in the future, India would like to keep a close watch, especially when it comes to the Indian Ocean, because Russia and China do these trilateral exercises with South Africa. They do this with Iran. Russia also does exercises with India. But eventually, how China and Pakistan come together in Indian Ocean, and if Russia gets in—it hasn't done that now, but that might be something to watch out for.

**MADAN:** One of the things I find interesting about the Russia-Pakistan defense relationship is, as you said, it seems more that Moscow holds out the prospect sometimes to signal India. But, you haven't actually seen that much bilateral defense trade. I think the most significant Russia-Pakistan tie in that sense is more indirect, which is Russian engines on the China-Pakistan JF-17 fighter. So, it's not quite a direct thing, so that has remained limited.

*37:42 What are India's greatest concerns about Russia-China relations?*

Nivedita, you've already touched on a number of these different concerns, but also limits. But if you had to lay out what most concerns India today, and what it would most concern it in the future, about Russia-China relations, what would those concerns be?

**KAPOOR:** I think the main concern here, because the first thing is what are India's foreign policy priorities? And of course, it's looking at the neighborhood first. And then Indo-Pacific, of course, becomes very critical for us because that's the geography where we are. And here we see both Russia and China have very clearly come out against Indo-Pacific and the Quad.

But Russia has been very, very vehemently critical of these ideas for its own reasons, because Russia is seeing this through the prism of its anti-U.S. position. And it says that these formations, Indo-Pacific and Quad, they hamper the development of a multipolar world.

But of course, India does not look at these issues through that lens. So, I think that is one issue which is critical to India, where there are direct differences with Russia. And here Russia and China, of course, their position matches with each—both of them oppose the Indo-Pacific and the Quad, and both of them have their differences with the United States, especially in this region.

I think another area where India would be concerned is, because India depends quite a bit on Russia in sort of maintaining or having a friendly power, let's say, in Central Asia and Afghanistan, and if this rising dependance on China, if that combines with a decline in Russian capacity because there's a long war going on and it has diverted its resources. So, if Russia's decline of influence in Eurasia

combines with its rising dependence on China, that severely limits Indian options in Eurasia. Because India also has limited capacity; we have not been really able to expand our influence, say, in Central Asia or even on connectivity issues. So, I think that is another issue where India would be really concerned.

Because I'm not a defense expert, so I am not 100% in the know of these things. But I read defense experts pointing out that India will need to be careful in the future about how Russia reorganizes its defense manufacturing, because if it starts sourcing more components from China and retrofitting them into its own defense production, is that production coming to India? Is that for export? And so, the proportion or the percentage of Chinese components in Russian arms exports, that could be something that India might be concerned about in the future.

So, I think the ongoing war and how Russia is able to reach its end, how its policies shape out after that, I think that will also give us a sense of where Russia-China relationship and where Russia itself is going. So, yeah, I think those are some of the concerns I would list.

**MADAN:** Just one follow up. You mentioned the concerns about things like the Quad. And I always find it ironic that China and Russia complain about the Quad as "small cliques." But the original small cliques were actually things like BRICS and RIC. They were the original—well, maybe not the original, but very early multilaterals, long before this became a more Indo-Pacific concept.

*41:00 Have closer Russia-China ties spilled over into groupings such as BRICS and SCO, which include India as a member?*

But on that subject, has the closer Russia-China partnership spilled over into these groupings like the BRICS, the SCO, even at the U.N. Security Council? Has it changed the nature of their interactions there? And has that had implications for India, which is also a member of many of these groupings?

**KAPOOR:** Yeah, so, BRICS and SCO I would definitely say there has been an impact, but I would say that is less an impact directly of Russia-China relationship, but more an impact of the India-China relationship. Because the thing is, BRICS and SCO have established themselves in very specific ways. In the areas in which they work, they do a pretty good job in their limited ways. They're fine at that point.

But the next step, let's say, if Russia says what it wants BRICS and SCO to do, it would say that we want to expand the agenda of these organizations and that these would become sort of this basis of a multipolar world, of the formation of a multipolar world, where we can set new rules, because we don't like the rules that exist in the world. So, these organizations will sort of pave the way for development of new rules.

It is here where we see that both the agenda, the expansion of agenda of BRICS and SCO has been pretty limited. We have seen it at every summit meeting, we see all of these long declarations, but the portion of that declarations that are actually implemented is pretty limited. And they can't expand on a lot of issues because India and China do not agree.

So, for instance, if you're looking at a single currency issue or if Russia brings up the issue of de-dollarization within the BRICS format or the SCO format, India does not agree with that because it believes that if we move away from the U.S.-based financial systems, we will end up with the Chinese-dominant system. And that hurts Indian interests. So, even if Russia and China would want to come together and present ideas, whether it's about regional economic order or new rules, India does not always agree with them.

So, it does affect the functioning of BRICS and SCO in the sense that an expansion of agenda becomes more difficult. So, they remain where they are. But a world where BRICS and SCO can present their vision of a new world order, that is missing. And I think that is a function of the tensions among the RIC themselves.

*43:27 Is India's view of multipolarity the same as Russia's or China's?*

**MADAN:** We did see Russia and China outline that new world order in that February 2022, pre-invasion joint statement. It did stress this idea of multipolarity. And we've heard India talk about multipolarity as well separately. Two questions. One, how did India see that joint statement even before the invasion? And second, going back to that question that I previewed earlier, is India's view of multipolarity the same as Russia's or even China's?

**KAPOOR:** That is a very interesting question because when it comes to multipolarity, we all talk about it. But, the problem is none of us have been able to bring it about. So, even if you look at Foreign Minister Jaishankar was actually giving a speech in Russia—must be a couple of years ago—and he said that India and Russia both aspire or both aim towards multipolarity, both as a reality and as an aspiration. So, it's a very strange way to use this thing. Either it's a reality or it's an aspiration, because the problem is we try and create a multipolarity, but we do not possess enough capacity to do it.

Because, in IR [international relations] literature we would say either there's a balanced multipolarity. So, there are several powers which are almost at the same level of capacity, and they balance each other out. Or there is unbalanced multipolarity, where there are three powers at least, three or more powers, where one has the capacity to be a hegemon. So, that's another kind of multipolarity. We don't see either of those happening.

And I really like the idea of what Dani Rodrik and Stephen Walt call "uneven multipolarity." So, we agree that there are more than two powers, but the United States and China surpass the others, like India, Japan, Russia. So, we have these major powers, but we have an uneven multipolarity. And because India, Russia, Japan, we are the smaller major powers, on our own we cannot carry out systemic changes.

So, when we talk about multipolarity, I get very confused because if we cannot affect changes in the international system, then we cannot say that we have established multipolarity.

And I think you are right in saying that our visions of multipolarity differ, mostly because the Russian vision would be where the U.S. rules do not always apply or

the rules-based order that it's always against, it would like to bring in new rules, or it's more of a revisionist power in that sense.

Whereas India, for instance, when we go towards the Quad declarations, we say that we accept the rules-based order. We use that language. So, we might be dissatisfied with some rules, but we are not trying to subvert them. We are also trying to sort of collaborate with the United States and with the other Western powers. So, how do we see this multipolarity being brought about and whether we can actually bring it about is both a question of dispute, I guess.

**MADAN:** So, one thought that I usually hear in India or often hear—less so these days, but nonetheless—that there is this hope that very much like during the Cold War, that, yes, China-Russia relations were close—or China-Soviet—but there was a Sino-Soviet split that benefited India because then India could use the Soviet Union to balance China. We once again hear this kind of hope sometimes expressed in India about a potential Sino-Russian split.

*46:58 Are there limits to the Sino-Russian relationship?*

So, the question I have is how durable is the Sino-Russian partnership? What are the limitations of it? What could be the sources of friction? And are there things that India can do to shape the nature of the Sino-Russian relationship or the extent of that relationship?

**KAPOOR:** That's a really, really good question. And it's important that we focus on this because on the one hand, of course, we are already clear that the Russia-China relationship is a very strong one. It's a mutually beneficial relationship. We do see that balancing tendencies have emerged against China. So, the relationship with Russia has acquired this very significant strategic value for China. And till China remains engaged in this acute confrontation or its rivalry with the United States, then the value of Russia will continue to be high.

And for Russia, we obviously know that China is the key external partner. And in its confrontation with the West, it cannot afford to lose China. So, Russia and China right now are in a mutually beneficial relationship. And so, the dreams of, you know, sort of driving this wedge between the two and causing a rift, at this point I think it would be very, very difficult.

But at the same time, and Russia and China say it's a "no limits partnership," that's what they call it. But there are limits to the partnership. First, it's not an alliance. Right? It's a very, very pragmatic relationship. And we need to understand this pragmatism if we are to exploit the opportunities that this pragmatism presents to us.

So, what do I mean by that? So, the thing is, of course Russia and China right now are very closely engaged with each other at this point. But there are several areas of differences where they try and make sure that these differences do not overlap or they do not overpower the areas of convergence that exist.

So, for example, China does not recognize any of the annexations of Russia, whether Crimea or whether after 2022. Russia does the same when it comes to



several disputes that China has. But in fact, it partners with countries like India and Vietnam, both of whom have active disputes with China.

In the ongoing war of course we do understand that China is critical to Russia in avoiding isolation. But the thing is that this support is not limitless or it's not without its profit considerations. So, if you see that President Xi Jinping did visit Russia in 2023, and that was a very important signal that Russia is not isolated. But there were actually no major agreements that were signed during this visit. And Russia was actually hoping that the Power of Siberia-2 agreement would be signed—in the pipeline agreement—but it was not. And the main reason is because Russia has lost its leverage on the Power of Siberia-2. And China is now striking a hard bargain.

If you look at Russia's exports to China, energy exports, that have gone up considerably, China has made sure that it has a very diversified portfolio of suppliers. Russia is not the only major supplier. So, if you look at oil, natural gas, and LNG, Russia's share in the Chinese market is 18%, 10%, and 6%. So, there has been no significant increase in FDI from China towards Russia. So, it's not replaced the Western investments that have left the region.

On the Arctic, it's the other way around because Russia is a huge proponent of making sure that the littoral states will be the rulemaking states. So, it has increased cooperation with China in the Arctic because that has become really important now. But there's very little military cooperation with China in the Arctic. And Russia has made clear that Northern Sea Route is an internal route, and China has to follow the national laws that Russia has made on the Northern Sea Route.

In the Russian Far East, there was a development plan between Russia and China, a five-year development plan that was, I think from 2014 to 2018. Most of it remained unfulfilled, and they had to make a new plan. Then, after 2018, I think almost about 70 to 80% of its aims remain unfulfilled.

So, what I'm trying to say by this long explanation is that Russia and China, their interests are converging. So, of course they are together. But there are various points where their interests do not always converge or they put their own national interests first. So, in this pragmatic relationship, which is not an alliance relationship, they try and make sure that they help the other party, but never at the cost of their national interests. So, there are several points of differences where they believe that the other party can harm their national interests. So, those are the points that will sort of provide an opening to countries like India in the future.

*51:45 What is the greatest myth or misunderstanding you hear about Russia's role in India's China strategy?*

**MADAN:** Nivedita, that was an incredibly rich conversation that we've had. You've packed in a lot in the period of time we've had. I do want to ask you one more question, which is the question we end all our episodes with, which is this question of what is the greatest myth or misunderstanding that you hear about Russia's role in India's China strategy?

**KAPOOR:** Yeah, you know, I've been thinking about this. And it's not specifically about Russia's role in India's China strategy, but it's about the bigger role of Russia

in general and then how it impacts India's China strategy. And that is about how a lot of times we hear very extreme positions being taken about Russia. Some would say that Russia is now completely over, it's involved in a war and that's going to prove to be its end.

On the other hand, you will hear other extreme opinion that Russia is this great power and that India's relations with the West, India needs to forget about that and focus more on relations with Russia.

What these two positions, extreme positions, do is, one, underestimates Russia and then the other overestimates Russia. And that can be detrimental when you're trying to figure out how the Russia-China equation is going to develop. So, I think if you can try and avoid those extremes, and we can figure out exactly what Russia's capacities are, I think that would be a better way to understand both the Russia-China relationship and how it figures in India's strategy broadly.

[music]

**MADAN:** Avoiding extremes and overestimations and underestimations sounds like a good general philosophy that we all should have as analysts and commentators and scholars. Nivedita, thank you very much for spending this time with us and explaining the India-China-Russia triangle to us.

**KAPOOR:** Thank you so much. This was such an interesting conversation.

**MADAN:** Thank you for tuning in to the *Global India* podcast. I'm Tanvi Madan, senior fellow in the Foreign Policy program at the Brookings Institution. You can find research about India and more episodes of this show on our website, Brookings dot edu slash Global India.

*Global India* is brought to you by the Brookings Podcast Network, and we'll be releasing new episodes every two weeks. Send any feedback or questions to podcasts at Brookings dot edu.

My thanks to the production team, including Kuwilileni Hauwanga, supervising producer; Fred Dews and Raman Preet Kaur, producers; Gastón Reboledo, audio engineer; and Daniel Morales, video editor. My thanks also to Alexandra Dimsdale and Hanna Foreman for their support, and to Shavanthi Mendis, who designed the show art.

Additional support for the podcast comes from my colleagues in the Foreign Policy program and the Office of Communications at Brookings.