



Chapter 8

Russia and South Asia: India and Pakistan

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Introduction

Russia or the threat of Russia has been a factor in South Asian security since the mid-1800s and was the origin of the so-called “Great Game” of British-Russian imperial rivalry.¹ During the Cold War, Russia’s involvement in the region was largely a function of its global confrontation with the United States. Though usually a secondary theater of Cold War competition, South Asia was occasionally catapulted into prominence as during the 1965 and 1971 India-Pakistan Wars or in the decade following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. The drama and dominance of superpower politics during the Cold War often obscured China’s importance but Beijing has always been a significant consideration, not only for Washington and Moscow, but crucially for regional countries as well. The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR, however, brought paradigm-shifting changes to South Asia’s relations with Russia, none more so than India and Pakistan, generally diminishing Russia’s significance for regional countries while raising that of China. As for the United States, though always a central concern from the perspective of regional countries, Washington paid only episodic attention to South Asia during the Cold War; but the end of that long and absorbing contest with the USSR cleared the way for greater and more realistic U.S. engagement, especially with India. Nonetheless, the historical background of the Cold War era remains essential to understanding the practical, material, and even emotional elements that underpin how New Delhi and Islamabad interact with Moscow today. This section will focus on India and Pakistan, examining their responses to Russia’s role in South Asia within the context of a more powerful and assertive China to offer suggestions for United States policy in this season of revived Great Power competition.²

India: History, Pragmatism, and Arms

To a surprising degree, Indian perceptions of Russia today remain shaped by the Fabian socialist worldview that India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, shared with much of the Indian political elite in the years before and after independence in 1947. This worldview, rooted in strong anti-colonialist themes and deep skepticism of the capitalist West as exemplified by the United States, led many Indians to see the Soviet Union as a force to oppose imperialism and to promote the welfare of common people. Combined with practical geopolitical reasons, this skewed image of the USSR contributed to India generally adopting pro-Soviet policy lines

¹ It is useful to remind ourselves that Chinese and Tibetan authorities were also involved in this “game” with enduring consequences for future Sino-Indian relations.

² The author wishes to thank Ms. Meg Atkins for her invaluable research assistance for this essay as well as Minister Ali Jalali, Dr. Hassan Abbas, Dr. Roger Kangas, and Dr. Ashely J. Tellis for their helpful comments.

during much of the Cold War, especially following the signature of the Indo-Soviet “Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Co-operation” in August 1971. Though never a client state of the USSR, India’s “non-alignment” tilted decidedly towards Moscow in the wake of this agreement. New Delhi thus raised few objections to and often seemed to make excuses for Soviet actions such as the 1956 intervention in Hungary, the 1968 suppression of Czechoslovakia, or the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan. The rosy image of the old USSR has certainly faded since the high days of the Cold War, but echoes of this romantic vision persist and have been partly transferred to the Russian Federation. India’s reactions to Russian involvement in Syria, the chemical attack in the United Kingdom, its intervention in the Ukraine, and its annexation of the Crimea, for example, have been muted and equivocal. Despite the fact that the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has repudiated and even castigated Nehru’s policies, therefore, Indian perceptions of Russia remain colored by the “residual diplomatic empathy” of the past³ and Russia is still broadly seen as a “time-tested partner” that has stood by India through thick and thin.⁴

Historical and sentimental attachments, however, are insufficient to sustain a bilateral relationship, and hard geopolitical calculations have always been present in India’s view of Russia. Two areas have traditionally been of especial importance from New Delhi’s perspective: Kashmir and China. On the former, extremely sensitive topic for India, Russia’s permanent seat on the UN Security Council has been seen as a guarantee against any consequential UN action on or discussion of Kashmir since the 1950s. Likewise, Nikita Khrushchev’s description of Kashmir as part of India during a 1955 visit to the state has been recorded with special satisfaction.⁵ More broadly, the relationship with Russia was viewed as a balance to what Indians perceived as an inimical U.S. embrace of Pakistan. For much of India’s independent history, Moscow has also been viewed as a reliable counterweight to China, a means to keep Beijing’s ambitions in check along the 3,400 kilometer disputed border India shares with its northern neighbor.⁶ Beyond these two core issues, Indian leaders often regarded Russia as a “balance” vis-à-vis the United States. This perception was initially a component of Nehru’s Cold War non-alignment policy, but threads of it have lingered to the present, now recast as evidence of India’s determination to maintain “strategic autonomy” in today’s multipolar or “plurilateral” world.⁷ This aspect of the Indo-Russian relationship is occasionally manifested in descriptions of Indian defense acquisitions. Although price, technology-transfer, and co-production are the most important factors in New Delhi’s calculus, some Indians still perceive purchases from U.S. companies as more palatable if matched by acquisitions from Russia sources. On the wider global stage, Moscow and New Delhi generally support one another in multilateral forums such as the Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) grouping, the Shanghai Cooperation

³ Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, “India-Russia Defence Ties Amid COVID-19,” *The Diplomat*, May 1, 2020.

⁴ Nirupama Rao in Wilson Center webinar, “From Summitry to Standoff: What’s Next for India-China Relations?” June 25, 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/summitry-standoff-whats-next-india-china-relations>. Russia’s support for India during the 1971 India-Pakistan War is an especially important touchstone for most Indians (whereas the Nixon Administration sided both openly and covertly with Pakistan).

⁵ J. A. Naik, “Soviet Policy on Kashmir,” *India Quarterly*, 24, no. 1 (January–March 1968): 55–6; Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, “Russian Support to India on Kashmir Is Rooted in History,” *Economic Times*, January 20, 2020.

⁶ India was disappointed, however, in the USSR’s ambivalent stance during the 1962 Sino-Indian war.

⁷ “Plurilateral” is a neologism coined by India’s Minister of External Affairs, S. Jaishankar. See Nayanima Basu, “US-Taliban deal was like watching ‘Pakeezah’ after a long wait, says Jaishankar,” *The Print*, March 2, 2020: “‘As players behave more nationally and agendas become more complex, plurilaterals have emerged as the mechanism to fill the gap left by weaker multilateralism and eroding alliance cultures. Convergence emerges as an adequacy standard for nations to work together,’ he said, even as he highlighted that India should emerge as an industry leader in this through the RIC (Russia-India-China), SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation), Quad (Quadrilateral) and/or JAI (Japan-USA-India).”

Organization (SCO), and the Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral. Both regard these as useful venues to formulate shared positions on global issues, but India, unlike other members, does not use the manifold meetings as platforms to inveigh against the West.⁸

Defense sales have been the cornerstone of Indo-Russian relations since their inception and will remain a crucial consideration for New Delhi for the foreseeable future.⁹ India has invested heavily in Soviet/Russian equipment across all three services for decades for several reasons. From a political perspective, India sought to diversify its sources of arms and the USSR was considered “reliable” as compared to other potential suppliers. The United States, in particular, initially limited its offers to India out of consideration for Pakistan, and Indian leaders soon came to worry that Washington might impose embargos or sanctions in moments of crisis. The Soviet Union also offered far easier terms in most cases and its sales came without onerous conditions (such as American end-use monitoring).¹⁰ In recent years, China has been another factor in Indian decision-making. By remaining closely engaged in an arms relationship with Moscow, New Delhi hopes to prevent Russia from tilting too far towards Beijing. The Indian armed services often grumbled that these political factors saddled them with lower quality weapons that had high life-cycle costs and often suffered from low operational readiness rates. On the practical side, however, Soviet/Russian arms were generally less costly in upfront price and eventually came to include manufacture in India and some co-production as well as technology transfer and joint development.¹¹ New Delhi especially values these technology transfer agreements as it hopes they will promote the establishment of indigenous Indian defense industries. Highlights have included joint development of the BrahMos cruise missile, Soviet/Russian willingness to lease nuclear-powered attack submarines to India, and apparently some Russian technical assistance in the design of the reactor for India’s nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine.¹² Today, although some of India’s Soviet/Russian systems are modern, much is legacy gear dating from the 1970s or early 1980s. India thus finds itself burdened with an enormous stock of aging if not obsolescent hardware with concomitant requirements for spares, repairs, and upgrades.¹³ In addition to the appeal of co-production and the perceived political compulsion to sustain diversity in its list of arms suppliers, India will thus be tied to Russian arms manufacturers for the foreseeable future simply to keep its existing stocks of tanks, artillery, aircraft, and vessels functioning.¹⁴

⁸ Aleksei Zakharov, “Friends in Need: Whither the Russia-India Partnership?” *Russie.Nei Visions* 116, Ifri, October 2019, 10–15.

⁹ Harsh V. Pant, “India and Russia: Ties in Transition,” *Mail Today*, September 5, 2019; Rajagopalan, “India-Russia Defence Ties,” *Diplomat*, May 1, 2020.

¹⁰ Up until the 2010s, Russia’s share in Indian defense purchases was approximately 70 percent, but this had declined to around 58 percent by 2018; from Russia’s perspective, India accounted for almost one third of all Russian arms sales (Zakharov, “Friends in Need,” 19–20).

¹¹ Despite the dominance of Soviet/Russian hardware in the Indian inventory, Russia has never been the source of Indian military doctrine and military exchanges or training exercises outside of technical assistance have been limited. A possible exception is what seems India’s inclination towards a “bastion strategy” for deployment of its future SSBNs, see Vipin Narang, “Russian Influence on India’s Military Doctrines,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, 4, no. 1 (January 2021): 70–72.

¹² Yogesh Joshi, “*Samudra*: India’s Convoluted Path to Undersea Nuclear Weapons.” *Nonproliferation Review*, 26, nos. 5–6 (2019): 486–7; Manu Pubby, “Russia Offers to Jointly Design, Build Submarines,” *Economic Times*, 6 July 2018.

¹³ Sanjib K. R. Baruah, “68 Per Cent of Weapons Outdated: Army Vice-Chief,” *Deccan Chronicle*, March 14, 2018.

¹⁴ For a comprehensive overview, see Sameer Lalwani, Frank O’Donnell, Tyler Sagerstrom, and Akriti Vasudeva, “The Influence of Arms: Explaining the Durability of India-Russia Alignment,” Stimson Working Paper, Stimson Center, April 2020; subsequently published under the same title in the *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, 4, no. 1

Notwithstanding the importance of arms supplies, claims of shared “civilizational values,” and official platitudes about the “Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership,” the Indo-Russian relationship has stagnated in recent years.¹⁵ Other than the energy sector (especially in nuclear power projects), the economic component has been especially weak, with bilateral trade of only some \$11bn compared to nearly \$88bn in goods alone with the U.S. and more than \$95bn with China in 2018.¹⁶ Even the defense arrangements have had problems with disagreements over pricing, maintenance difficulties with Russian equipment, and tardy deliveries, especially of spare parts (during his June 2020 visit to Moscow, the Indian defense minister had to make a personal plea for accelerated delivery of select key components owing to the ongoing border crisis with China).¹⁷

In the political realm, India worries about Russian attitudes towards the Taliban and the future of Afghanistan as it fears a repeat of the 1990s when the Taliban regime had allowed Pakistan to base anti-Indian terrorist training camps on Afghan soil. The two are continuing a bilateral dialogue on Afghanistan and both participate in several multilateral interactions, but it is not clear how close their positions are. Beyond counterterrorism and a broad desire for regional stability, underlying differences persist regarding the future of the Taliban, the possibility of an extremist-friendly regime dominating in Kabul and Pakistan’s role in the country.¹⁸ Moscow’s recent approaches to Islamabad, albeit limited, are also unsettling for New Delhi, which has relied on Russia as a staunch advocate in its perdurable rivalry with Pakistan.¹⁹ Recent Russian statements that its relations with Pakistan are “independent” of its ties to India and that Moscow intends to “develop this relationship further” are more likely to generate suspicion than reassurance in India. New Delhi’s sensitivities regarding Pakistan thus provide Russia with leverage if it wants to curb Indian tendencies Moscow finds objectionable.²⁰

(January 2021): 2–41. See also Yogesh Joshi, “Indo-Russian Defense Relationship Will Continue to Withstand Washington’s Displeasure,” Center for the Advanced Study of India, July 1, 2019, <https://casi.sas.upenn.edu/iit/yjoshi>.

¹⁵ “India-Russia Joint Statement during visit of Prime Minister to Vladivostok,” September 5, 2019, https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateraldocuments.htm?dtl/31795/India_Russia_Joint_Statement_during_visit_of_Prime_Minister_to_Vladivostok; “In Moscow, Rajnath Hails India-Russia Ties,” Press Trust of India, June 23, 2020; Dmitri Trenin in Carnegie Moscow Center webinar, “India-Russia Strategic Partnership: Ready for an Upgrade?” June 26, 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/2020/06/26/india-russia-strategic-partnership-ready-for-upgrade-event-7372>.

¹⁶ Nivedita Kapoor in Carnegie Moscow Center webinar, “India-Russia Strategic Partnership: Ready for an Upgrade?” June 26, 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/2020/06/26/india-russia-strategic-partnership-ready-for-upgrade-event-7372>. India-Russia energy interactions have been focused on nuclear power (including joint assistance to a power reactor in Bangladesh) and mutual investments, but liquefied natural gas is emerging as a new possibility and both have expressed interest in exploiting resources in the Russian Far East (Zakharov, “Friends in Need,” 26–8).

¹⁷ Manu Pubby, “Russia Assures Early Delivery of Weapon Systems: Rajnath Singh,” *Economic Times*, June 24, 2020; “India to Seek Russia’s Help for Urgent Supply of Spares for Fighter Aircraft Fleet, Submarines, Tanks,” *India Today*, June 22, 2020.

¹⁸ Rudra Chaudhuri and Shreyvas Shende, “Dealing with the Taliban: India’s Strategy in Afghanistan after U.S. Withdrawal,” Carnegie India, June 2, 2020; Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, “Foreign Secretary Visit: India, Russia Explore Cooperation in War-Ravaged Afghanistan,” *Economic Times*, February 19, 2021.

¹⁹ Curiously, Indian and Pakistani army teams have attended SCO-sponsored counter-terrorism training in Russia and have participated in Russia’s International Army Games.

²⁰ Nayanima Basu, “Moscow’s Relationship with China, Pakistan Independent of Ties with India—Russian Envoy,” *The Print*, December 21, 2020; Abhijnan Rej, “India’s Foreign Secretary in Russia to Keep Marriage of Necessity on Track,” *The Diplomat*, February 17, 2021.

India-Russia differences are also evident in the larger Asian context. Although both espouse “multipolarity and multilateralism in the world,”²¹ additional differences have arisen over ties to the United States and India’s embrace of the “Indo-Pacific,” a concept Russia rejects as a divisive American construct. Russia has been particularly and pointedly critical of the “Quad” grouping of the United States, India, Australia, and Japan. The Quad has become an increasingly important component of Indian foreign policy, but Moscow has condemned it as a “persistent, aggressive and devious policy” through which “the West is attempting to undermine our close partnership and privileged relations with India.”²² Indeed, many in India speculate that the annual Russia-India summit slated for December 2020 was postponed for the first time since its inception in 2000 owing to differences over the Quad and U.S.-India relations.²³

The China factor is especially problematic for India and Russia.²⁴ Moscow may view India as a tool to diversify its Asian ties (such as countering Chinese dominance in the SCO), but Russian sales of sophisticated weapons to China in recent years have generated doubts in New Delhi about Moscow’s reliability as a bulwark against India’s Asian competitor.²⁵ The current Sino-Indian border confrontation places the Kremlin in a particularly awkward position between the two antagonists. Russia declined to “impose its services on India and China” in the wake of the 2020 skirmishes, but such incidents are likely to bedevil relations among the three countries far into the future.²⁶ While “the past suggests India has a special claim to Russian affections,” notes one insightful commentator, “How Russia responds to India’s request for support in this confrontation with China will, of course, have a major bearing on the future evolution of Delhi’s ties with Moscow.”²⁷

The “special and privileged” relationship with Russia will remain a pillar of Indian foreign policy for the sentimental, geopolitical, and defense considerations outlined above. Modi and Putin seem to enjoy a personal rapport and the annual summit reportedly has been rescheduled for early 2021 with a Putin visit to India. The current global health crisis has also provided scope for cooperation in vaccine research and production. It is far from clear, however,

²¹ Prime Minister Modi after the 2018 Indo-Russian Summit as quoted in Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, “Russia and India Agree on Multipolarity: PM Modi,” *Economic Times*, October 6, 2018.

²² Geeta Mohan, “Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov Calls Indo-Pacific Concept Divisive,” *India Today*, January 15, 2020; Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, “India-Russia Relations Face More Trouble,” *The Diplomat*, December 31, 2020; Rajorshi Roy, “India, Russia and the Indo-Pacific: A Search for Congruence,” IDSA Comment, February 3, 2021.

²³ Nayanima Basu, “Indo-Russia Annual Summit Postponed for 1st Time in Two Decades Amid Moscow’s Unease with Quad,” *The Print*, December 23, 2020. The Indian and Russian governments have both cited the global health crisis as the rationale for delay.

²⁴ Nivedita Kapoor, “India-Russia Relations: Beyond Energy and Defence,” Observer Research Foundation Issue Brief 327, December 2019.

²⁵ Nivedita Kapoor, “India-Russia Ties in a Changing World Order: In Pursuit of a ‘Special Strategic Partnership,’” Observer Research Foundation Occasional Paper 218, October 2019.

²⁶ Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov quoted in “At Russia-India-China Meet, India Talks of Need to Respect Legitimate Interest of Partners,” *The Wire*, June 23, 2020. Beijing, on the other hand, can be pleased that the Kremlin has chosen a more or less neutral stance in 2020 as compared to the 2017 Sino-Indian Doklam crisis when Moscow clearly sided with India.

²⁷ C. Raja Mohan, “Indian Resistance to China’s Expansionism Would Be a Definitive Moment in Asia’s Geopolitical Evolution,” *Indian Express*, June 30, 2020. See also Jyoti Malhotra, “How India Lined Up US, Russia on Its Side of LAC and China Was Forced to Return Friendless,” *The Print*, July 7, 2020; Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, “The Sino-Indian Clash: Russia in the Middle,” *The Diplomat*, June 25, 2020.

that the two countries will be able to move beyond the narrow confines of arms sales to triple bilateral trade by 2025, expand investment, and create new energy corridors as announced during the 20th annual Indo-Russian summit at Vladivostok in September 2019.²⁸ India's economic downturn and the world health crisis render such goals questionable at the very least. Moreover, New Delhi and Moscow are likely to find themselves increasingly challenged to maintain, let alone expand, their traditional bilateral ties while simultaneously navigating between Beijing and Washington in a period of global tensions and an evolving international order.

Pakistan: A Limited Engagement

Pakistan's relations with Russia are also encrusted with history, but neither country has ever viewed the other as a top priority on its foreign policy agenda. Pakistan was conditionally aligned with the United States during most of the Cold War, providing a base for U.S. intelligence collection against the Soviet Union until 1970 and joining both the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO).²⁹ Unsurprisingly, Moscow viewed Islamabad with suspicion and enmity. Following a brief Russo-Pakistani dalliance in the 1960s, Russia decidedly cast its lot with India and relations with Pakistan escalated to hostility during the Soviet war in Afghanistan when Pakistan hosted the array of anti-Soviet mujahedin groups. With the dissolution of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, ties between Moscow and Islamabad lapsed into a phase of mutual caution with both parties focused on other aspects of their international portfolios.

Starting in the mid-2010s, however, Russia opened closer contact with Pakistan, evidently as a part of the Kremlin's broader outreach to Eurasia and its concerns about terrorism emanating from the situation in Afghanistan. Although Pakistan was disappointed when a rumored 2012 visit by Russian President Putin was postponed indefinitely, the number of senior Russian officials traveling to Islamabad grew slowly but significantly and Moscow devoted an increased amount of policy attention to Pakistan. As with India, most of the concrete steps occurred in the defense arena. In 2014, the two sides initiated a series of small-scale maritime counter-narcotics drills and Russia lifted an old arms embargo to permit the sale of military helicopters and other defense items. Small army training exchanges followed in 2016 and the Russian defense minister visited Pakistan four times between 2015 and 2018. Russia is also scheduled to participate in the Pakistan Navy's annual "Aman" exercise in 2021.³⁰

²⁸ "India and Russia Target \$30 Billion in Trade by 2025, Announce New Energy Deals," Reuters, September 4, 2019; Sudha Ramachandran, "What's India Doing in Russia's Far East?" *The Diplomat*, October 9, 2019; Mihir Bhonsale, "India's Look Far East: Strengthening Indo-Russian Relations or Something More?" Observer Research Foundation, January 18, 2020; Hari Vasudevan, "India's 'Look Far East': The Vladivostok Moment in Indo-Russian Relations," Observer Research Foundation Occasional Paper 249, May 2020.

²⁹ Pakistanis routinely highlight membership in these two Cold War entities as hallmarks of their alignment with the United States (as a prelude to accusations of American "betrayal"), but, in fact, signing on cost Pakistan very little (Pakistan, for instance, did not send even a symbolic troop contingent to Vietnam as other SEATO members did).

³⁰ While it seems highly unlikely that Pakistani nuclear doctrine is drawn from recent Russian thinking, one experienced analyst highlights some similarities, even if coincidental, between the two, such as the threat of battlefield nuclear weapons to deter or deescalate limited conventional war. See: Feroz Hassan Khan, "Russia-Pakistan Relations: An Emerging Entente Cordiale," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, 4, no. 1 (January 2021): 53–54.

Coming in the wake of nearly fifty years since the previous Soviet arms transfers to Pakistan, these developments seem dramatic, but the scale is very small and their significance is largely symbolic. Only four Mi-35 attack helicopters and a few Mi-17 transport variants have been sold, for instance, while the number of Russian soldiers training with the Pakistan army has amounted to no more than 200 or so in one event each year. Notably, the equipment and training thus far also seem consistent with Russian claims that its defense relationship with Pakistan is limited to building counter-terrorism capabilities. For both countries, these minor weapons sales are useful as snubs to the U.S. and, for Russia, yet another way to undermine the American role in the region at low cost.³¹ Additionally, the Kremlin may see its outreach to Islamabad as a means to warn New Delhi not to stray too far towards Washington. For Pakistan, however, India is the key target and any point scored against its archrival in their zero-sum dynamic is touted as a win, howsoever symbolic and insubstantial it may be. The likelihood of future major Russian transfers of offensive weaponry to Pakistan is low. Despite a flurry of excited news stories in spring 2019, cash-strapped Pakistan lacks the funds to support serious purchases and Russia is unlikely to offer the sorts of easy loans and low prices Pakistan routinely receives from China for equivalent hardware.³² Pakistan also recognizes that “the primacy of India and Russia’s investment in India is incomparable to what Pakistan can offer.”³³ Indeed, Pakistanis are deeply alarmed by the prospect of India fielding S-400 SAMs and BrahMos cruise missiles, which are seen in Pakistan as underwriting India’s nuclear capabilities and allegedly aggressive intentions. At the same time, some in Islamabad and Rawalpindi (i.e., Army headquarters) may calculate that the steady if incremental normalization of relations with Moscow and occasional bursts of rhetorical bonhomie serve their interests in their interactions with Beijing by demonstrating that Pakistan is not an entirely unquestioning client and that it may have alternative sources of outside support against India.

Other areas of the Russo-Pakistani relationship are nearly devoid of content. Russia has promised assistance to Pakistan’s torpid steel industry and investment in a large internal pipeline project, but bilateral trade has hovered between \$440M and \$660M over the past several years and greater growth seems improbable in the near term.³⁴ Both countries, however, can be satisfied with an improved but limited relationship. Sharing an antipathy towards the United States, they will continue to pursue narrow common objectives in Afghanistan: combating Daesh/ISIS, supporting the Taliban, and diminishing the American presence.³⁵ Russia will continue its small-scale military exchanges with Pakistan but is unlikely to present major

³¹ Ayaz Gul, “Pakistan, Russia Sign Rare Military Cooperation Pact,” *Voice of America*, August 8, 2018.

³² “Pakistan-Russia to Sign \$9 Billion Arms Deal,” *Dunya News*, April 22, 2019; Krzysztof Iwanek, “Russia’s Looming Arms Sale to Pakistan Sets Up a Dangerous Game,” *The Diplomat*, May 16, 2019; “Pakistan Eyes Russian Weapons...and Here’s What Moscow Has in Store,” *Russia Today*, June 14, 2019; Suhasini Haider and Dinakar Peri, “Russian Military Relations with Pakistan Very Minimal, Says Russian Envoy Nikolay Kudashev,” *The Hindu*, February 9, 2018; Snehes Alex Philip, “Russia ‘Won’t Sell War Equipment to Pakistan,’ Ties Limited to Fighting Terrorism,” *The Print*, May 10, 2019. For an enthusiastically far-reaching alternative view, see Andrew Korybko, “Why Is Russia Participating in the AMAN-2021 Naval Drills?” *Express Tribune*, December 11, 2020.

³³ Khan, “Russia-Pakistan Relations,” 57.

³⁴ Faseeh Mangi. “Pakistan to Start Building Gas Pipeline with Russia,” *Express Tribune*, December 16, 2020; Zafar Bhutta, “Challenges Abound in Trade with Russia,” *Express Tribune*, October 4, 2019; Mati-Ullah, “Bilateral Trade between Pakistan and Russia,” Dispatch News Desk, February 6, 2020. The two sides inked new agreements in December 2019, but it remains to be seen if these will bear fruit.

³⁵ Farhad Ramezani Bonesh, “Pakistan Hoping for Stronger Russian Ties,” *Asia Times*, June 22 2020; Ayaz Gul, “Taliban, Russia Demand Foreign Troops Leave Afghanistan,” *Voice of America*, May 28, 2019; Robyn Dixon, “What’s Behind Russia’s Growing Ties to the Taliban?” *Washington Post*, July 1, 2020; Alan Cullison, “U.S.-Russia Rift Kills Afghan Goal,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 7, 2020.

hardware offers given the overriding importance of India in its calculus and Pakistan's inability to pay. Pakistan will be content to showcase any military purchases, training exercises or commercial interaction with Russia to score points against India, but it will remain tied closely to China as its principal arms supplier and geopolitical supporter.

Policy Implications for the U.S.

Russian interactions with Pakistan, with one significant exception, do not present a challenge to U.S. interests. Indeed, though Russia's minor hardware transfers and limited military training exchanges are much less substantive than U.S.-Pakistan counter-terrorism cooperation, U.S. regional goals would benefit if Russian interactions enhance Pakistan's capabilities in this area. Likewise, the economic boost that could come if Russian investments in Pakistani steel mills and pipelines succeed, can be welcomed as helping to make Pakistan more stable and prosperous. The significant exception is Russo-Pakistani collaboration regarding Afghanistan and the Taliban.³⁶ Both evince no little *Schadenfreude* at the difficulties the U.S. and NATO are experiencing, and in their eagerness to see an early U.S. exit, their pro-Taliban inclinations and, in Pakistan's case, the priority it accords to excluding India at any cost, both could create serious obstacles to the establishment of a genuine peace process. Similarly, both governments have periodically espoused unhelpful conspiracy theories about the United States (such as the U.S. being the "hidden hand" behind Daesh) and their continued promotion of these suspicions could reinforce erroneous narratives in both capitals hindering Washington's ability to conduct fact-based dialogue. Although Secretary Blinken highlighted "the importance of continued U.S.-Pakistan cooperation" on Afghanistan in his initial call with his Pakistani counterpart, therefore, these factors could lead Russia and Pakistan, separately and together, to persist as spoilers on the painful road to peaceful resolution of the Afghan conflict.³⁷

Russia poses a greater challenge to U.S.-India relations, especially in arms transfers, the traditional centerpiece of Indo-Russian ties. Since the passage of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) in 2017, the U.S. has sought ways to adhere to the law and punish Russia without harming friends such as India. New Delhi's subsequent decision to buy five sets of S-400 air defense systems from Moscow at an estimated cost of close to \$6bn is the most prominent case to fall under U.S. sanctions legislation so far and has already occasioned intricate negotiations between Washington and New Delhi.³⁸ The S-400 sale, however, is not the only major defense purchase from Russia under consideration in India and, given India's enormous inventory of Soviet/Russian equipment; it will not be the last. Indeed, the 2020 Himalayan skirmishes with China have spurred new Indian requests to Russia while visuals of U.S. fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft flying near the disputed border have become standard fare in Indian media.³⁹ Major Russia-India arms deals already proposed include, for example, purchase or construction of four stealth frigates, projects to manufacture AK-203 assault rifles and KA-226 helicopters in India and a long-term military technical cooperation program for

³⁶ India, understandably, is deeply suspicious of Russia's stance vis-à-vis the Taliban.

³⁷ "Secretary Blinken's Call with Pakistani Foreign Minister Qureshi," January 29, 2021 at www.state.gov.

³⁸ Ashley J. Tellis, "How Can U.S.-India Relations Survive the S-400 Deal?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 8 August 2018; "India Can't Wish Away Defence Ties with Russia," Press Trust of India, June 25, 2019; Carnegie India webinar: "The Sino-Indian Border: Escalation & Disengagement," June 24, 2020, <https://carnegieindia.org/2020/06/24/sino-indian-border-escalation-disengagement-event-7369>.

³⁹ Sabir Hussain, "Defence Ministry Approves Purchase of 33 New Fighter Jets including MiG-29s from Russia," *Hindustan Times*, July 2, 2020. Though often tendentious, interesting insights appear in Liu Zhen, "Russia and US Jostle for Arms Sales to India after Tensions with China over Border," *South China Morning Post*, July 11, 2020.

2021–2030.⁴⁰ Part of the challenge in arms transfers’ lies on the U.S. side, but part also falls to India. Even if India were to make the improbable decision to reduce its path dependency in Russia for weapons, the process would take many years, likely decades.⁴¹ Washington, as one observer suggests, will therefore have to “develop some ‘second-best’ frameworks” to leverage greater Indian cooperation in the Indo-Pacific while simultaneously blunting Russian destabilizing tendencies.⁴² This implies flexibility and creativity not only in U.S. arms sales or transfers to India, but also in wider defense, intelligence, and foreign policy coordination inside Washington and with American allies. Such a holistic approach will be particularly important as India copes with the strategic conundrum of protecting its lengthy land borders—a traditional inclination reinforced by the 2020 crisis—while not losing sight of the growing threats to its maritime interests. For its part, New Delhi must decide whether political considerations (ties with Russia) outweigh operational effectiveness (the ability to integrate incompatible foreign systems) and whether some acquisitions from Russia might ultimately preclude purchases from the United States or others in the West who fear their technology will be compromised if India pairs it with Russian equipment. Whatever the evolution of the U.S.-India hardware relationship, important U.S. interests would be served by widening outreach to the Indian armed forces. As the global health situation permits, for instance, the United States could expand military training and educational opportunities for Indian officers on American soil to increase mutual familiarity and interoperability while building on a broad foundation of Indian-American cultural affinities.

In the larger geopolitical relationship, Modi’s government will continue to pursue its cherished “strategic autonomy,” seeking to benefit from all while antagonizing none. Although India is a key member of BRICS, RIC, and the SCO, New Delhi has no interest in “opposing the West” per se. Washington can thus remain focused on common U.S.-India interests in themes such as a rules-based international order, the U.S.-Australia-Japan-India “Quad,” and the Indo-Pacific concept (which has Prime Minister Modi’s imprimatur) despite Moscow’s opposition. Secretary Blinken spoke with his Indian counterpart shortly after being confirmed to underscore “India’s role as a preeminent U.S. partner in the Indo-Pacific and the importance of working together to expand regional cooperation, including through the Quad.” He reinforced this message in a call with all four Quad foreign ministers in mid-February, stressing the centrality of addressing the world health crisis and climate change as part of the Quad’s agenda and reiterating the commitment to holding ministerial meetings at least annually. Similar messages have been conveyed by Secretary Austin and National Security Advisor Sullivan in early calls with their Indian counterparts.⁴³ Moreover, the breadth and depth of U.S.-India linkages far

⁴⁰ Ajai Malhotra, “India-Russia Strategic Partnership Is Special and Privileged,” *Economic Times*, February 15, 2021.

⁴¹ For rationale supporting such a move see Sumit Ganguly, “To Fight China, India Needs to Forget Russia,” *Foreign Policy*, July 16, 2020.

⁴² Sameer Lalwani, “Revelations and Opportunities: What the United States Can Learn from the Sino-Indian Crisis,” *War on the Rocks*, July 10, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/07/revelations-and-opportunities-what-the-united-states-can-learn-from-the-sino-indian-crisis/>; John H. Gill, “Challenges for India’s Military Strategy: Matching Capabilities to Ambitions?” in *Strategic Asia 2017–18: Power, Ideas, and Military Strategy*, ed. Ashley J. Tellis, Alison Szalwinski, and Michael Wills (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2017), 140–72. The effect of the 2020 Sino-Indian crisis on U.S.-India relations is outside the remit of this essay but see Lalwani’s essay for an excellent introduction. Though rather narrowly focused, some commentators argue that the supply of Russian weapons to India is in America’s interest to help counter China (Salvatore Babones, “America’s India Problem Is All about Russia,” *Foreign Policy*, February 16, 2021).

⁴³ “Secretary Blinken’s Call with Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar,” January 29, 2021 and “Secretary Blinken’s Call with Quad Ministers,” February 18, 2021 at <http://www.state.gov>; readouts of Secretary Austin’s call with Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh and National Security Advisor Sullivan’s call with Ajit Doval, both

exceeds what is evident within the relatively confined spaces of the Indo-Russian relationship (there are, for instance, more than 200,000 Indian students in the U.S. compared to some 11,000 in Russia). Sustaining and promoting ties in all areas of endeavor—science, technology, climate, health, education, agriculture, and especially trade—will maintain the favorable momentum of the U.S.-India partnership and offer expanded opportunities well into the future.⁴⁴ Just as important as material actions will be the new U.S. Administration’s emphasis on buttressing American credibility and predictability through “the power of our example.”⁴⁵ As always, however, Washington will have to use a measured approach to avoid exciting the reflexively skeptical voices still tenaciously prevalent in the Indian political elite.⁴⁶

Finally, it is important to highlight the relevance of U.S.-Russian nuclear weapons developments and arms control measures in relation to India and Pakistan. It is difficult to overemphasize the impact of U.S. and Russian behavior for Indian and Pakistani thinking in these areas.⁴⁷ Pakistan’s nuclear strategists, for example, regard Russian nuclear weapons trends and, most particularly, the 2018 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review as validating and legitimating Pakistan’s deployment of tactical or battlefield nuclear weapons systems.⁴⁸ Likewise, both New Delhi and Islamabad see little reason to pursue regional arms limitation arrangements when, from their viewpoints, the network of larger U.S.-Russian agreements is collapsing with stunning rapidity.⁴⁹ This is not to argue that a robust series of treaties between Washington and Moscow (with or without Beijing) would automatically transfer in some beneficent way to the India-Pakistan dynamic or that U.S. and Russian policy should be dictated by perceptions from Islamabad and New Delhi. It is to suggest, however, that the United States and Russia consider stability in South Asia in the formulation and promulgation of their own nuclear policies.

January 27, 2021 at [defense.gov](https://www.defense.gov) and www.whitehouse.gov respectively. For different perspectives on the Quad, see the *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, Special Issue 2020, “Quad Plus: Form versus Substance,” 3, no. 5, especially Anna Kireeva and Alexei Kupriyanov, “Russia and the Quad Plus: Is there a Way Forward?” 210–228.

⁴⁴ These aspects of the relationship, of course, involve such thorny issues as visa and tariff policies that are beyond the scope of this study.

⁴⁵ “Inaugural Address by President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.,” January 20, 2021 at [http://www.whitehouse.gov](https://www.whitehouse.gov).

⁴⁶ M. K. Narayanan, “Remaining Non-Aligned Is Good Advice,” *The Hindu*, June 16, 2020; Prem Shankar Jha, “Don't Blame Modi for 'No Intrusion' Claim, Blame Him for Dramatic Shift in China Policy,” *The Wire*, June 26, 2020.

⁴⁷ Author’s personal observations from ten years of participation in India-Pakistan, U.S.-Pakistan and multilateral nuclear dialogues under various Track-2 auspices.

⁴⁸ Specifically, the Hatf-IX Nasr system. Pakistan prefers the term “short-range/low-yield” for such weapons.

⁴⁹ It is too soon to assess how the extension of the “New START” treaty will influence thinking in India and Pakistan (“New START Treaty” Fact Sheet, February 18, 2021 at [http://www.state.gov](https://www.state.gov)).

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