

# China-India Brief

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## Guest Column

### The Russia Factor in China-India Relations

By Ivan Lidarev

Russia plays a unique role in China-India relations. As Moscow has partnered with both Beijing and Delhi and is closer to each Asian giant than they are to each other, it has emerged as a trusted third party, a position that no other country enjoys. The originator of the idea of a China-India-Russia troika in the 1990s, Russia has consistently promoted cooperation between China and India in the Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and BRICS formats.



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The *China-India Brief* is a bi-monthly digest focusing on the relationship between Asia's two biggest powers. The Brief provides readers with a key summary of current news articles, reports, analyses, commentaries, and journal articles published in English on the China-India relationship. It features a Guest Column weighing in on key current issues in China-India relations.

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Significantly, with its relative isolation from the West and wartime difficulties, Moscow has doubled down on building closer relations with both China and India, making it a stakeholder in their bilateral relationship.

This unique role has helped Russia emerge as a stabilising factor in China-India relations. While Moscow alone cannot ensure the stability of the China-India relationship, Russia helps stabilise rocky China-India relations in three ways.

### Helping India to “soft balance” China

Russia stabilises China-India relations by helping Delhi “soft balance” Beijing’s power. This enables India to restore some balance in the deeply asymmetric China-India relationship and engage Beijing from a stronger position. Of course, India’s relationships with the US and Japan provide a greater counterweight to China. However, they also threaten China’s security and push Beijing to respond harshly, infringing on India’s security and destabilising relations. In contrast, Russia offers a way of soft balancing China, without these drawbacks.

There are several ways in which Russia helps India “soft balance” China. First, partnership with Moscow helps Delhi dilute China’s leverage in key international clubs. It prevents Chinese **domination of SCO**, an organisation founded and increasingly instrumentalised by Beijing, and offsets Chinese power in BRICS. Second, partnering with Moscow in trade and connectivity helps India push back against the prospect of Chinese economic and infrastructure dominance in Eurasia

through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Initiatives like the North-South transportation corridor and the recent push for a free trade agreement between India and the Russia-dominated **Eurasian Economic Union** serve to counter China’s growing influence in Central Asia and Iran. Third, Russia is an important **Indian partner in Afghanistan**. While Delhi has recently made inroads in Afghanistan, it remains in a weaker position than China, whose interests are mostly aligned with Pakistan’s, and hence needs to cooperate with Moscow. Fourth, with its export of arms, willingness to share military technologies, and cooperation in space, nuclear energy, and potentially **global positioning systems**, Moscow strengthens India’s position and narrows the military and technological gap between India and China. Finally, the India-Russia partnership keeps Beijing slightly off balance by suggesting that Russia is not fully aligned with China and not fully reliable, thus increasing Delhi’s power position vis-à-vis Beijing.

### Confidence building

Moscow also helps to stabilise China-India relations by building confidence between the two sides and reassuring them. Engagement with a relatively trusted third power, with which both sides maintain partnerships but no major points of contention, serves to build confidence between two rivals who profoundly mistrust each other. More practically, this confidence has enabled Russia to serve as an intermediary between China and India.

Moscow has facilitated dialogue between the two sides, for instance during the **2020 China-India border crisis**, and promoted confidence building measures such as participation in Russian military exercises like **Zapad 2022** and trilateral **think-tank dialogues**. Moscow's position as a trusted partner even enabled it to successfully lobby Beijing to accept Indian membership in the SCO, helping achieve a rare high point in China-India relations.

Moreover, Russia's partnership with each side reassures the other by reducing its strategic concerns and thus creates mutual trust. For China, the partnership between India and the reliably anti-American Russia ensures that Delhi will not veer excessively toward the US and rely exclusively on the West for arms and political support at the UN. Without its partnership with Moscow, India will have no major non-Western partner and will find it much more **difficult to stay unaligned** with the US in the face of its rivalry with China. Hence, Russia helps India preserve its strategic autonomy, a major **consideration for Beijing**, and alleviates China's concerns that Delhi might join a US containment of China.

For India, its partnership with Moscow reassures Delhi that China will not be able to build an international order in Eurasia which excludes India and eventually threatens its position in South Asia. Hence, Russia helps reduce India's China-related concerns of encirclement and reassures Delhi of its place in the emerging Eurasian international system.

## Strengthening the ideological basis of China-India relations

Russia also stabilises China-India relations by strengthening their ideological basis. Moscow, Beijing, and Delhi broadly share a vision of international relations, although with some **variation**. This vision is centred on the pursuit of a multipolar world in which major powers play the leading role and have spheres of interest. It also favours the sovereign nation state over concerns about human rights and democracy promotion. Importantly, this vision and its policy agenda are embodied in formats like SCO, BRICS, and RIC, and represent one of the few mostly cooperative sides of the often-competitive China-India relationship. This multipolar vision has come up in joint statements and comments in **SCO summits** and **bilateral meetings** between the three sides.

Russia played an important role in promoting this vision in **Beijing-Delhi relations**. The vision was first proposed by Russian prime minister Yevgeny Primakov and was at the core of his push to promote **China-India-Russia cooperation to limit US unipolarity**. It also served as the foundation for the emergence of the RIC trilateral and later BRICS. A revisionist Russia in a conflict with the West has been a vocal advocate of this multipolar vision and has pushed it forward in its **bilateral statements** with China and India, helping to affirm its place in their foreign policies.

Russian sponsorship has partly insulated this vision from the vicissitudes of the China-India relationship and helped institutionalise it in Beijing and Delhi's understanding of international relations and in the policy programmes of SCO and BRICS. All this has helped the multipolar vision emerge as a political and ideological bridge between China and India despite their disagreements. It has also reaffirmed their shared identities as members of the Global South and countries that want to transform the international system.

## Conclusion

In short, Russia is a stabilising factor in China-India relations. However, there are limitations to such a role. First, as Russia is becoming more dependent on China, it might align more closely with Beijing and be less able to act as a neutral third party. While Moscow and Delhi have increased their engagement to prevent this outcome, it will depend on Russia's position after the end of the war in Ukraine. Second, a US rapprochement with China might change the dynamics of Russia-China-India relations and diminish Moscow's importance for China and hence its stabilising role. Finally, a massive military crisis on the China-India border might reduce Russia's space for stabilising Beijing-Delhi relations, as happened between 2020 and 2024.

Even with these limitations, Russia is likely to continue playing a stabilising role in China-India relations due to its partnerships with both sides, key role in SCO and BRICS, and geopolitical importance for Beijing and Delhi.

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