

# The Russia-India relationship: A shadow of past ties?

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*In the first of India At LSE's series on foreign relations under Modi, **Tomila Lankina** and **Vladimir Lankin** discuss the historic ties between India and the Soviet Union and ask if Modi's leadership could lead to a revival of these bonds with Russia.*

The imposition of tougher Western sanctions against Russia in recent weeks has aroused much speculation about Russia's pivot to Asia. These discussions have tended to focus on Russia's relations with [China](#) and their implications for regional and global power dynamics. Less attention has been paid to Russia's renewed focus on its relations with India.

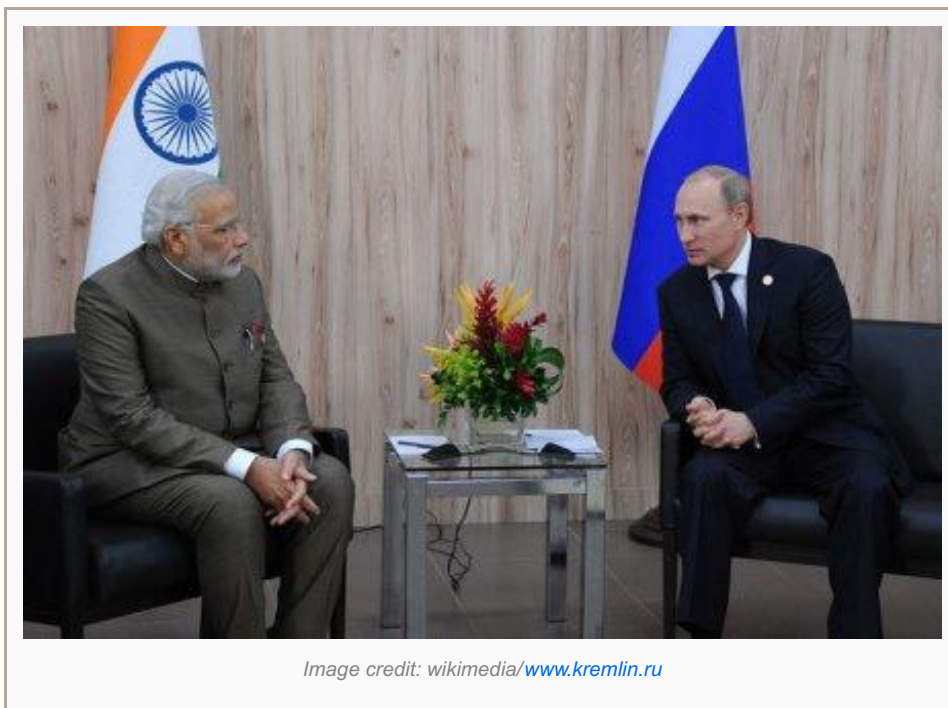


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Throughout the entire post-communist period, India has occupied a somewhat marginal place in Russia's foreign policy—despite even the avowed “Eurasianist” orientation which came to influence Russia's foreign policy from around the mid-1990s onwards. This placid relationship has been a pale shadow of the ties—cultural, economic, and political—that bound the Soviet Union with India despite the latter's non-aligned status and skilful engagement with both the superpowers during the Cold War. Many Indians who came of age in the 1970s and early 1980s still fondly remember reading the *Soviet Land* magazine—a glossy source of doctored information about the achievements of socialism published for Indian consumption. For India's intellectuals, socialism represented an attractive solution to the appalling inequalities that plagued (and continue to plague) India's society. In turn, Soviet citizens could not get enough of the syrupy Bollywood dramas—a form of escapism from the drab realities of Soviet life. The Soviet intelligentsia also admired the art and stories of Rabindranath Tagore, the films of Satyajit Ray, and the music of the Sitar virtuoso Ravi Shankar. These cultural ties served to imprint a mutual fondness among the

peoples of the two countries and a genuine sense of the existence of a vibrant friendship. Sadly, barring the older generation that grew up during the Cold War, this sentiment has been all but wiped out.

True, Russia has recently embraced major new initiatives binding the two countries closer together in the form of institutionalisation of the BRICS constellation, which Russia's President Vladimir Putin sees as a force that could counter America's global power. Russia was also grateful to India when it shied away from overtly siding with the West in its condemnation of Russia's position on Syria and Ukraine. As Western sanctions against Russia's arms exports kick in, we are likely to see greater emphasis on the arms trade side of the Russia-India relationship. Yet, Russia's renewed emphasis on ties with India in recent months is a form of instrumentalisation of *realpolitik* (hard power) objectives that are built on foundations which were once strong but that have been hollowed out over the last 25 years. Until the recent Western sanctions against Moscow, India occupied only a modest share of Russia's foreign trade. The size of the Indian diaspora in Russia—a potential lobby for stronger ties—is minuscule compared to that of Indians living in the United States. The number of Indians that go to Russia to study has dwindled since the collapse of the USSR and consequently the numbers marrying and settling down in Russia has decreased. In addition, the recent major joint project—the [Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant](#) that Russia is helping construct in India—has been plagued with environmental and legal issues and challenges. Russian politicians and government figures routinely make pronouncements about the value of India's technology, skilled workforce, and resources that could be harnessed for mutual projects. There are indeed examples of successful joint ventures in a number of Russian regions. Yet Indian businessmen also routinely complain about abysmal red tape and corruption that plague such ventures and that Russian officials do little to address.

Since India's recent elections, there has been much talk about correspondence between the value systems of the leaders of the two powers—Russia's Vladimir Putin and India's Narendra Modi. Both have resorted to the discourse of nationalism in their domestic and foreign policy rhetoric. At a recent meeting with Putin on the side-lines of the BRICS summit in Brazil Modi even referred to Russia as India's "best friend." Yet Modi is also known to be a savvy and pragmatic leader, one who is unlikely to sacrifice India's carefully cultivated relationship with the power that has been most strongly pushing for sanctions against Russia—the United States. The US has in fact recently sought to encourage major Asian powers to support its sanctions policy on Russia—efforts that are unlikely to be entirely unsuccessful given America's strong geopolitical and economic leverage in Asia. Russia's pivot to India might have acquired greater urgency as the West turns against Russia, but it remains to be seen whether it can bring back to life the strong bonds—epitomised in the slogan "Hindi-Roosi Bhai Bhai"—that existed between the Soviet Union and India.

### **About the Authors**

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