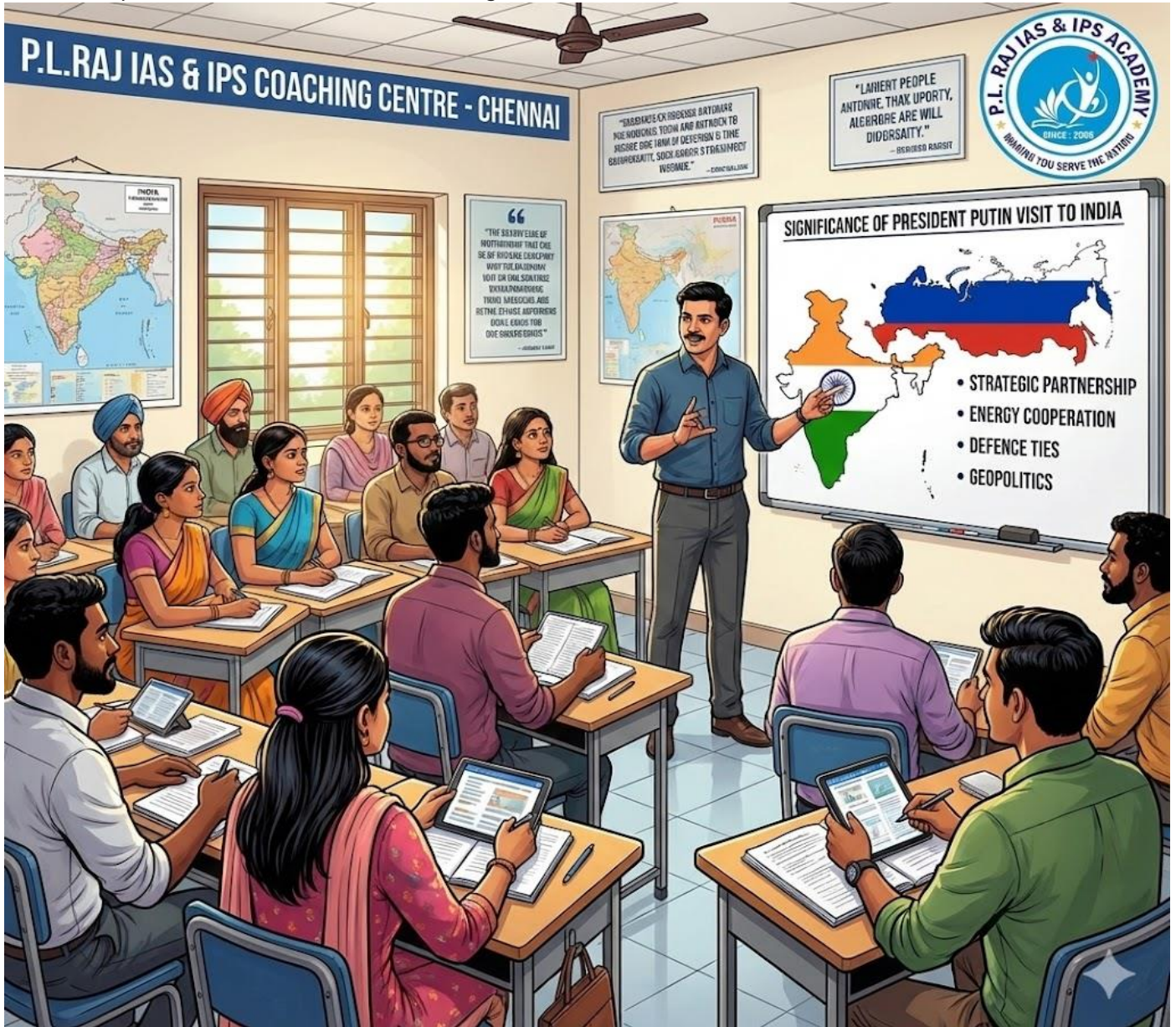


India-Russia Relations – A Time-Tested Partnership in a Changing World.

Introduction

The India-Russia relationship has often been described as one of the most stable geopolitical partnerships in the post-World War II era.¹ Officially termed a "Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership," this bond is currently under the spotlight due to Russian President Vladimir Putin's two-day visit to India in December 2025 for the Annual Summit.² While the geopolitical landscape has shifted significantly due to the Ukraine crisis and subsequent Western sanctions, the core of this bilateral relationship remains resilient, albeit evolving.



1. Evolution of Ties – Historical Phases

To understand the present, aspirants must look at the trajectory of this friendship through four distinct phases –

Phase I – Early Caution to Strategic Warmth (1947–1971) – Initially, independent India maintained a non-aligned stance. However, the Cold War dynamics and US support for Pakistan pushed India closer to the Soviet Union. The watershed moment was the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation, which provided India crucial diplomatic and military support during the liberation of Bangladesh.

Phase II – The Golden Era (1971–1991) – This period saw the peak of bilateral ties. The USSR became India's reliable supplier of defense hardware, affordable technology, and space cooperation (launching Aryabhata).⁵ Culturally, Bollywood and Russian literature created a strong people-to-people bridge.

Phase III – The Post-Soviet Drift (1991–2000) – Following the collapse of the USSR, relations faced a "strategic drift." Russia focused on the West, while India liberalized its economy and diversified its foreign policy. Defense supplies faced disruptions due to the fragmentation of the Soviet military-industrial complex.

Phase IV – Strategic Partnership (2000–Present) – The relationship was revitalized with the signing of the "Declaration on Strategic Partnership" in 2000.⁹ Since then, despite India's growing proximity to the US, Russia has remained a critical pillar of India's strategic autonomy.

2. Relations in the Post-Ukraine Crisis Era

The conflict in Ukraine (since 2022) has been a stress test for Indian diplomacy.¹¹ India has successfully maintained a nuanced stance—refusing to condemn Russia explicitly while calling for "diplomacy and dialogue."

Economic Shift – The most visible change has been in energy. Russia, previously a marginal energy supplier, became India's top oil source as India took advantage of discounted prices to ensure domestic energy security.

Balancing Act – India has faced pressure from the West (specifically US sanctions mentioned in the current context).¹³ The upcoming visit is significant because it happens against the backdrop of US sanctions on Russian energy imports, testing India's ability to pursue its national interest without alienating Western partners.¹⁴

3. Significance of Putin's Visit (2025)

The 2025 Annual Summit carries immense weight for three reasons –

Symbolism of Continuity – The regularity of these summits signals that despite global isolation attempts by the West, Russia remains a priority for India.

Addressing Sanctions – With new US sanctions on Russian energy imports looming, the leaders need to find payment mechanisms (beyond the stalled rupee-ruble arrangement) to keep trade flowing.

Strategic Logistics – The discussions on the RELOS (Reciprocal Exchange of Logistics Agreement) are vital.

This pact would simplify military logistics and could give India access to Russian facilities in the Arctic, a region of growing strategic importance.

4. Three Focus Areas of Bilateral Cooperation

A. Defence – From Buyer-Seller to Co-Production

Defence remains the bedrock of ties, but the nature is changing.¹⁵

Current Status – While negotiations for the Sukhoi-57 and S-400 systems continue, India is reducing dependency.

The Data – As noted in recent reports, India's reliance on Russian arms has fallen from 66% in 2000 to nearly 40% in 2024.

Future – The focus is shifting to "Make in India." Joint ventures like the BrahMos missile and the production of AK-203 rifles in Amethi are the templates for the future.¹⁶

B. Energy – The New Anchor

Energy has replaced defence as the most dynamic sector, though it faces volatility.

Oil Imports – Russia accounts for a massive chunk of India's oil basket, though imports have dipped recently (from ~30% in FY25 to 27.56% in the first seven months of FY26).

Nuclear Energy – Russia is the only country currently building nuclear plants in India (Kudankulam). The 2025 talks aim to expand this to Small Modular Reactors (SMRs).

C. Trade and Economic Imbalance

This is the weakest link.

The Deficit – The trade is heavily skewed.¹⁸ As per HIFY26 data, India's imports from Russia were \$31.11 billion (mostly oil), while exports to Russia were a meager \$2.24 billion (just 1% of India's total exports).

The Challenge – A sustainable relationship cannot rely on one-way traffic. India needs to push pharmaceuticals, machinery, and agricultural goods into the Russian market to balance this deficit.¹⁹

5. Way Forward

For the relationship to thrive in the next decade, three steps are essential –

Diversify Trade – The "arms and oil" model is too narrow. Both nations must operationalize the Chennai-Vladivostok Maritime Corridor and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) to boost non-oil commerce.²⁰

Technological Sovereignty – India should leverage Russia's willingness to share critical technologies (nuclear, hypersonic, space) which the West often denies.

Manage Geopolitics – India must skillfully manage the "China factor."²¹ As Russia grows closer to China due to Western isolation, India must ensure this does not compromise its own security interests in Asia.

Conclusion

The India-Russia relationship is often termed an "all-weather friendship," but the weather is undeniably changing. The drop in arms dependence and the fluctuations in energy imports show a relationship in transition. However, President Putin's 2025 visit reaffirms that while India diversifies its partners, it does not intend to replace Russia. For a multipolar world—a core aspiration of Indian foreign policy—a strong, stable Russia remains indispensable.

Mains Practice Question

1. "Analyze the structural shift in India-Russia relations from a traditional 'buyer-seller' defense engagement to a comprehensive energy and logistical partnership. How does this evolution serve India's strategic autonomy amidst global polarization?" (31 words)

Answer Guidelines / Synopsis

Approach to the Answer –

Directive Word ("Analyze") – Break down the relationship into its constituent parts (Defense, Energy, Logistics) and examine how they are changing. Look at the *why* and *how* behind the shift.

Context – Start by referencing the 2025 Annual Summit and the backdrop of US sanctions to show relevance.

1. Introduction – Define the India-Russia relationship as a "Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership." State the core thesis – The partnership is transitioning from a uni-dimensional defense dependency to a multi-dimensional strategic engagement driven by energy security and logistics, essential for India's independent foreign policy.

2. Body

1. The Structural Shift (Data-Driven)

Defense (The Decline) – Highlight the transition from "Buyer-Seller" to "Co-production" (Make in India). Use the article's data – Russian arms imports dropped from 66% (2000) to ~40% (2024). Mention joint ventures like BrahMos or AK-203.

Energy (The New Anchor) – Discuss how energy has replaced defense as the immediate pillar. Cite the petroleum import data (approx. 30% of India's basket) and the move toward Small Modular Reactors (SMRs) in nuclear energy.

Logistics (The Strategic Reach) – Mention the significance of the RELOS pact and the Arctic trade routes (Chennai-Vladivostok corridor) as new areas of cooperation that go beyond simple trade.

2. Serving Strategic Autonomy

Balancing the West – By continuing engagement (e.g., Putin's visit) despite US sanctions, India signals it will not be coerced by Western pressure, upholding its "Strategic Autonomy."

Balancing China – A weak Russia completely dependent on China is bad for India. Maintaining strong ties ensures Russia remains an independent pole in Asia, preventing a total China-Russia axis that could isolate India.

3. Challenges to Address – Briefly mention the Trade Deficit (\$31bn imports vs \$2bn exports) as a sustainability challenge. Mention the payment mechanism hurdles due to sanctions.

3. Conclusion – Summarize that the "evolution" is a sign of maturity. India is moving from "dependency" to "partnership." Conclude with a way forward – The relationship is vital for a multipolar world order, where India acts as a bridge between the Global South, the West, and Eurasia.