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India-Russia RELOS Pact — What the Defence Logistics Agreement Means

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India-Russia RELOS Pact — What the Defence Logistics Agreement Means

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WHY IN NEWS

India and Russia have **operationalised the Reciprocal Exchange of Logistics Agreement (RELOS)**, enabling both nations to access each other's military infrastructure during war and peacetime. The pact permits stationing up to **3,000 military personnel** in each other's territory and deploying **five warships and ten aircraft simultaneously**. India gains access to **Russian Arctic facilities**; Russia strengthens its **Indo-Pacific presence** through Indian ports and infrastructure.

WHAT IS RELOS?

The **Reciprocal Exchange of Logistics Support (RELOS)** agreement is a **defence logistics pact** between India and Russia that allows both militaries to:

- Use each other's **military bases, ports, and airfields**
- **Refuel, restock, and repair** military assets on each other's territory
- Conduct **joint exercises**, training, and approved military missions from each other's soil
- Deploy up to **3,000 military personnel** simultaneously in each other's country
- Station up to **5 warships and 10 military aircraft** at any given time

Costs are settled through **exchange of goods and services** rather than direct monetary payment — a model that sidesteps dollar-denominated transactions and aligns with the broader India-Russia de-dollarisation framework.

STRATEGIC CONTEXT

The LEMOA Framework — A Useful Comparison

FEATURE	LEMOA (INDIA-USA)	RELOS (INDIA-RUSSIA)
Full Name	Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement	Reciprocal Exchange of Logistics Support
Signed	2016	Negotiated 2021-22; operationalised 2026
Scope	Mutual access to ports, airfields, bases	Mutual access to ports, airfields, bases
Payment	Reciprocal billing in USD	Exchange of goods and services
Strategic balance	US Indo-Pacific framework	Russian Arctic + India IOR
Political sensitivity	High (then); now routinised	Sensitive given Russia-Ukraine conflict

RELOS is structurally similar to **LEMOA** (Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement with the US, 2016) and the logistics pacts India has with **France (MLSA, 2018)** and **Australia (MLSA, 2020)**. India's network of such pacts — spanning the US, France, Australia, Japan, Singapore, UK, and now formalised with Russia — is a strategic tool to **project power and sustain operations** across multiple theatres without permanent overseas bases.

India's Strategic Gains

Arctic Access: Russia controls the **Northern Sea Route (NSR)** — a shipping corridor along Russia's Arctic coast connecting Europe and Asia that is approximately **40% shorter** than the Suez Canal route. Access to Russian Arctic military infrastructure gives India:

- Naval presence in a region where China is rapidly expanding
- Intelligence-gathering capabilities near key energy supply routes
- A foothold in Arctic governance discussions

Logistical Depth: In the event of a prolonged naval operation in the **Indian Ocean Region (IOR)**, Russian bases in the **Caspian Sea, Arctic, and Far East** extend India's logistical reach. For the Indian Navy, RELOS access at Vladivostok (Russia's Pacific Fleet base) provides a forward position in the western Pacific.

Russia's Strategic Gains

Russia benefits from:

- Access to **Indian Navy ports** (Karwar, Visakhapatnam, Mumbai, Port Blair) — critical for Indo-Pacific operations

- Use of Indian **airfields** for long-range bomber missions and maritime patrol
- Symbolic counter to Western efforts to isolate Russia diplomatically and militarily
- Practical logistics for the **Russian Navy's 11th Independent Ship Association** (Indian Ocean deployments)

INDIA'S LOGISTICS PACT NETWORK

COUNTRY	PACT	YEAR	KEY ACCESS
United States	LEMOA	2016	Diego Garcia, Guam, US bases globally
France	MLSA	2018	Djibouti, Reunion, Pacific bases
Australia	MLSA	2020	Cocos Islands, Darwin
Japan	RLSA	2020	Japanese SDF bases, Pacific
Singapore	MoU	2017	Changi Naval Base, Paya Lebar Airbase
UK	MLSA	2021	Diego Garcia, Cyprus
Russia	RELOS	2026	Arctic, Vladivostok, Tartus (Syria)

India now has **logistics access agreements with all five P5 members** — a unique position that reflects its multi-alignment strategy and avoidance of formal military alliances.

THE INDIA-RUSSIA DEFENCE RELATIONSHIP

Historical Depth

India-Russia defence ties are among the oldest and deepest **bilateral** defence relationships in the world:

- **~60% of India's military inventory** is of Soviet/Russian origin (declining but still significant)
- The **S-400 Triumf** air defence system — procured despite US CAATSA threats — is the most high-profile recent acquisition
- **INS Vikramaditya** (aircraft carrier) was acquired from Russia's Gorshkov
- **BrahMos** cruise missile: India-Russia joint venture (BrahMos Aerospace); exported to Philippines, Vietnam
- **T-90 Bhisma** tanks: ~1,000+ in Indian Army service
- **Su-30MKI** fleet: ~240 aircraft, backbone of IAF fighter strength

The CAATSA Problem

The **Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA, 2017)** authorises US sanctions on countries purchasing “significant” Russian defence equipment. India’s S-400 purchase triggered CAATSA — but the US waived sanctions, acknowledging India’s strategic importance. RELOS operationalisation **does not trigger CAATSA** as it is a logistics-sharing, not a procurement, agreement.

Post-Ukraine Complexity

Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine complicated the India-Russia relationship:

- India **abstained** on UNGA resolutions condemning Russia (11 resolutions)
- India **increased Russian crude oil imports** (Russia became India’s largest oil supplier)
- India has **not exported weapons** to Russia or Ukraine
- Russia’s defence industry capacity has been diverted to the Ukraine war, affecting **spare parts supply** to India — a vulnerability being addressed through domestic alternatives

UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS2 — International Relations	India’s multi-alignment, logistics pact network, India-Russia bilateral
GS3 — Internal Security	Defence logistics, military readiness, overseas bases
GS2 — IR	Arctic geopolitics, Northern Sea Route, Russia-India-China triangle
Mains	RELOS, LEMOA, MLSA, CAATSA, multi-alignment, S-400, BrahMos, Arctic, Northern Sea Route

FACTS CORNER

- **RELOS personnel limit:** 3,000 military personnel simultaneously per country
- **RELOS asset limit:** 5 warships + 10 military aircraft simultaneously
- **Payment mechanism:** Exchange of goods and services (no direct cash)
- **India’s first logistics pact:** LEMOA with USA (2016)
- **India-Russia defence imports:** ~60% of India’s military inventory is Soviet/Russian-origin
- **S-400 system:** Procured under CAATSA waiver; deployed with IAF

- **BrahMos range:** 290–800 km (extended versions); Mach 2.8 speed
- **Northern Sea Route:** ~40% shorter than Suez Canal; Russia-controlled Arctic passage
- **Arctic significance:** Estimated 30% of world’s undiscovered gas, 13% of oil reserves lie in the Arctic
- **CAATSA:** US law targeting Russia, Iran, and North Korea — sanctions countries buying significant defence equipment from them

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