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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

In Xi and Putin's 'No Limits' Partnership, a Growing Asymmetry

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"As the Russia-China relationship turns increasingly asymmetric, what opportunities and risks does this present for India's strategic calculus?"

EDITORIAL SUMMARY:

Indian Express argues that the “no limits” Sino-Russian partnership declared by Putin and Xi on February 4, 2022 — 20 days before the Ukraine invasion — has matured into a structurally asymmetric relationship in which a war-weakened Russia is the junior partner, dependent on Chinese markets, technology, finance and the yuan. For India, the changing equation creates both opportunity (Russia’s continued willingness to engage on defence and energy on autonomous terms) and risk (a Russia with reduced room to balance China, including on the LAC) — and the response must be sustained defence diversification, energy diversification and a calibrated dual-track engagement with Moscow and Washington.

FEBRUARY 4, 2022: A DECLARATION AND ITS AFTERMATH

On February 4, 2022, on the sidelines of the Beijing Winter Olympics, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping issued a joint statement declaring that the friendship between their two countries had “no limits” and that there were “no forbidden areas of cooperation.” Twenty days later, on February 24, Russian forces entered Ukraine. The “no limits” formulation was, in hindsight, a strategic declaration — and one whose meaning has shifted decisively in the years since.

Before the war, the China-Russia relationship was substantial but autonomous. Bilateral trade in 2021 was around $147 billion. The Power of Siberia 1 pipeline had been operational since 2019, carrying Russian gas to China’s northeast. Defence transfers were limited; Russia had historically been protective of its most advanced strategic systems and resisted full technology transfer to Beijing. Diplomatic alignment was real, but neither economy was dependent on the other.

The war compressed this architecture into a tighter, more unequal embrace.

THE ASYMMETRY, MEASURED

The shift since February 2022 is visible across every dimension of the bilateral relationship.

INDICATOR	PRE-2022	POST-2022 / CURRENT
Bilateral trade	~$147 billion (2021)	~$240+ billion (2024)
Russia's largest trading partner	EU	China
Russian crude exports to China	Significant	~2 million barrels per day
Yuan in Russian trade settlement	Marginal	~30%
Power of Siberia 2 pipeline	Negotiation	Advanced negotiation
Tech-component flow	Russia-to-China (limited)	China-to-Russia (substantial dual-use)
Russia's payments alternative	SWIFT	CIPS (China's system, launched October 8, 2015)

The picture is of a Russia that has, in three years, moved from a multipolar engagement strategy with the EU, China and emerging markets to a deep economic dependence on China for both exports (crude, gas) and imports (microchips, dual-use components, machine tools). The yuan has displaced the dollar and the euro in a growing share of Russian foreign trade. CIPS — China's Cross-Border Interbank Payment System, launched on October 8, 2015 — has become the de facto SWIFT alternative for sanctioned Russian banks.

THE REVERSAL OF TECHNOLOGY DIRECTION

Perhaps the most striking shift is in technology. Historically, Russia exported defence and dual-use systems to China — Su-27s, Su-30s, S-300s — though always with selectivity to protect its strategic monopolies. Today, the flow is increasingly the other way. Chinese microchips, machine tools, optical components and dual-use industrial inputs are sustaining Russian defence production for the Ukraine war. Western intelligence assessments have repeatedly flagged this dependence as a secondary-sanctions concern.

Russia has reportedly offered the Su-57 Felon to China on a limited basis, but the broader pattern is that Beijing now sets the technology pace in the bilateral relationship — a reversal that would have seemed implausible a decade ago.

DIPLOMATIC ALIGNMENT WITHOUT ENDORSEMENT

The “no limits” formulation has not extended to unconditional Chinese endorsement of every Russian position. Beijing has supported Moscow at the UN Security Council and has refused to join the Western sanctions regime, but it has not endorsed the formal annexations of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson, and it has maintained relations with Kyiv. The asymmetry is therefore not absolute — China extracts strategic benefit from Russian dependence without underwriting Russian territorial claims.

This selectivity is itself an indicator of asymmetry: the junior partner accepts the senior partner’s conditions on the issues that matter most to the senior partner.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

For India, the changing Sino-Russian equation has concrete, immediate implications.

Defence Supply Chain

Around 60-70% of legacy Indian military equipment is of Russian origin. The remaining S-400 Triumf system deliveries face delays as Russian production is stretched by Ukraine commitments. Spare parts, mid-life upgrades and ammunition flows are all under strain. There is also a quieter concern — that Russian platforms and upgrades may increasingly route through Chinese-origin components, raising both operational reliability concerns and counter-intelligence questions.

LAC and the Lost Balancer

For decades, Russia’s relationship with both Delhi and Beijing gave it a quiet role as a potential interlocutor on India-China tensions. That role has eroded. The October 2024 Galwan-area disengagement was achieved through bilateral India-China diplomacy, without meaningful Russian mediation. A Russia that depends on China economically and technologically has limited capacity, and limited inclination, to pressure Beijing on India’s behalf.

Central Asia

A tacit Russia-China division of labour is emerging in Central Asia — Moscow retains the security lead through the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, while Beijing assumes the economic lead through the Belt and Road Initiative and the China-Central Asia summit format. For India, which has long sought a Central Asia presence through the INSTC, Chabahar Port and the India-Central Asia Summit, this division reduces the strategic openings for Indian engagement.

INDIA'S RECALIBRATION IN MOTION

India has not waited for the asymmetry to fully crystallise before responding.

STEP	STATUS
23rd India-Russia Annual Summit	Putin's visit to India, December 2025 — reaffirmed bilateral autonomy
Defence diversification — France	Rafale, Scorpene submarines
Defence diversification — United States	P-8I, MH-60R, Apache, GE-414 engine
Defence diversification — Israel	UAVs, missiles, electronic warfare
Defence diversification — South Korea	K9 Vajra, future platforms
Atmanirbhar Bharat — Positive Indigenisation Lists	Scaling domestic production
SCO + Quad dual exposure	India hosts both engagements
India-EU FTA	Target conclusion 2025-26

The doctrinal posture is consistent — Delhi will continue to engage Moscow on autonomous terms while widening the supplier base and accelerating indigenisation. The 23rd India-Russia Annual Summit during Putin's December 2025 visit to India was a deliberate signal that bilateral autonomy survives the Sino-Russian asymmetry.

COMPARING INDIA'S AND RUSSIA'S MULTI-ALIGNMENT

India and Russia have, on the surface, similar multi-platform engagement. But the underlying logic differs.

Russia post-2022 is in BRICS Plus, the SCO and the Arctic Council, but increasingly as a participant whose autonomy is constrained by Chinese leverage. India is in BRICS, the SCO, Quad, IBSA, G20 and the Voice of the Global South as a node, not a junior partner — engaging each platform on India's own terms.

This is the doctrinal advantage of genuine strategic autonomy: it requires no patron and depends on no single relationship. The Sino-Russian asymmetry is, in a sense, what India's strategic autonomy doctrine is designed to avoid.

UPSC MAINS ANALYSIS

GS Paper 2 / GS Paper 3 — India's Foreign Policy, Major Powers, Security

- **February 4, 2022 Putin-Xi Beijing joint statement:** "No limits" partnership; 20 days before Ukraine invasion.
- **Power of Siberia 1 pipeline:** Operational 2019; Russian gas to China's northeast.
- **Power of Siberia 2 negotiations:** Advanced; would deepen Russian gas dependence on China.
- **China-Russia bilateral trade:** Around $147 billion (2021); around $240 billion (2024).
- **CIPS (Cross-Border Interbank Payment System):** Launched October 8, 2015; China's SWIFT alternative.
- **Yuan settlement share in Russian trade:** Around 30%, displacing dollar and euro.
- **Russian crude to China:** Roughly 2 million barrels per day post-2022.
- **S-400 Triumf:** Indian procurement faces delivery delays due to Ukraine war stretch on Russian production.
- **23rd India-Russia Annual Summit:** Putin's December 2025 visit to India; reaffirmed bilateral autonomy.
- **Indian defence diversification:** Rafale, Scorpene (France); P-8I, MH-60R, Apache, GE-414 (US); UAVs (Israel); K9 Vajra (South Korea).
- **Positive Indigenisation Lists:** Atmanirbhar Bharat in defence.
- **October 2024 Galwan-area disengagement:** Achieved bilaterally; no Russian mediation.
- **CSTO and BRI:** Russia-China division of labour in Central Asia.
- **SCO + Quad dual exposure:** India's multi-alignment doctrine in practice.

Mains Questions:

1. "The Sino-Russian 'no limits' partnership has become an asymmetric embrace." Examine and assess the implications for India's strategic calculus.
2. India's strategic autonomy doctrine differs from Russia's contemporary multi-alignment because of an underlying difference in dependence. Discuss.
3. Evaluate the impact of the Russia-China asymmetry on India's defence supply chain and indigenisation strategy.
4. Examine the Russia-China division of labour in Central Asia and its consequences for India's INSTC and Chabahar strategy.

Keywords: No limits partnership, Putin Xi 4 February 2022, Power of Siberia 1, Power of Siberia 2, CIPS, October 2015, yuan settlement, SWIFT alternative, Su-57 Felon, S-400 Triumf, 23rd India-Russia Annual Summit, December 2025, Positive Indigenisation Lists, Atmanirbhar Bharat, Rafale, Scorpene, P-8I, MH-60R, GE-414, K9 Vajra, Galwan disengagement October 2024, CSTO, BRI, SCO, Quad, BRICS Plus, strategic autonomy, multi-alignment

> *The deeper lesson of the Sino-Russian asymmetry is that strategic autonomy is not declared — it is structured. Russia entered the "no limits" partnership of February 2022 still believing it was an equal player; three years later, it discovers it has become the junior partner in an embrace from which exit is costly. India's task is to ensure that no such embrace becomes structural for itself. That requires diversified suppliers, diversified payment systems, diversified energy sources, diversified technology partnerships and a foreign-policy doctrine that does not require any single relationship to bear the weight of national interest. The story of Russia after 2022 is the case study in why multi-alignment, properly understood, is not opportunism — it is insurance.*

Sources: Indian Express , MEA

KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

Indian Express argues that the "no limits" Sino-Russian partnership proclaimed at the Putin-Xi Beijing summit on February 4, 2022 — 20 days before the Ukraine invasion — has matured into a structurally asymmetric relationship in which a war-weakened Russia is the junior partner, dependent on Chinese markets, technology, finance and the yuan; for India this changing equation creates both opportunity (Russia's continued willingness to engage on defence and energy on autonomous terms) and risk (a Russia with reduced room to balance China, including on LAC).

✓ SUPPORTING

- The pre-2022 baseline was a substantial but autonomous partnership — China-Russia bilateral trade of around $147 billion in 2021, the Power of Siberia 1 gas pipeline operational from 2019, limited defence transfers (Russia historically protective of full technology transfer), and diplomatic alignment without economic dependence; the war has compressed each of these into a tighter, more unequal embrace.

- Post-2022 indicators of asymmetry are stark — bilateral trade surged to around $240 billion in 2024 making China Russia's largest trading partner; Russian crude pivoted to China at roughly 2 million barrels per day; Power of Siberia 2 negotiations are advanced; around 30% of Russian trade is now settled in yuan; CIPS (China's payment system, launched October 8, 2015) has emerged as the SWIFT alternative; and tech-transfer flows have reversed direction with Chinese dual-use components, microchips and machine tools flowing to Russia in volumes that have triggered Western secondary-sanctions concerns.
- For India's defence supply chain, the implications are concrete — around 60-70% of legacy Indian military equipment is of Russian origin and the remaining S-400 Triumf deliveries face delays as Russian production is stretched by Ukraine; parts, upgrades and spares may increasingly route through Chinese-origin components, raising operational and supply-chain risk; on the LAC, Russia's traditional capacity to act as a balancer against China has eroded and the October 2024 Galwan-area disengagement was achieved without Russian mediation.
- India's strategic recalibration is already visible — the 23rd India-Russia Annual Summit (Putin's visit to India, December 2025) reaffirmed bilateral autonomy; accelerated defence diversification toward France (Rafale, Scorpene), the United States (P-8I, MH-60R, Apache, GE-414), Israel and South Korea; the Positive Indigenisation Lists under Atmanirbhar Bharat; and the dual exposure of SCO and Quad membership that lets Delhi engage Moscow and Washington on their respective merits without committing to either bloc's strategic preferences.

⚠ COUNTER

A counter-reading holds that Russia retains meaningful autonomy and is not a Chinese vassal — Moscow has refused to endorse all Chinese positions, has not transferred its most advanced strategic systems to Beijing, and has maintained an independent BRICS Plus and Arctic engagement; the asymmetry, on this reading, is overstated and Russia will rebound after the Ukraine war ends. India should therefore neither overcorrect by downgrading Moscow nor underestimate the structural pressures Beijing is now exerting on Russian strategic choices.

→ WAY FORWARD

Continue bilateral engagement with Russia on autonomous terms while accelerating defence indigenisation under the Positive Indigenisation Lists; diversify defence suppliers across France, the United States, Israel, South Korea and emerging EU partners; diversify crude across Brazil, Guyana and the United States and LNG toward Australia, Qatar and the United States; monitor Russia-China asymmetric outcomes in the Arctic Council and BRICS

Plus for second-order effects on Indian interests; invest in indigenous semiconductor capability through the India Semiconductor Mission to insulate strategic supply chains; and use SCO engagement to keep Moscow accessible while using Quad to balance Beijing.

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✍️ MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK

QUESTION

"The 'no limits' Sino-Russian partnership declared in February 2022 has become increasingly asymmetric, with a war-weakened Russia as the junior partner." Examine the strategic implications for India's defence supply chain, energy security and LAC posture, and suggest a recalibration framework. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

Indian Express argues that the "no limits" Sino-Russian partnership of February 4, 2022 has matured into an asymmetric embrace in which a war-weakened Russia is the junior partner, dependent on Chinese markets, technology, finance and the yuan — a development with concrete implications for India's defence supply chain, LAC posture and energy security.

BODY

The pre-2022 baseline was substantial but autonomous — bilateral trade of around $147 billion in 2021, Power of Siberia 1 operational from 2019, limited defence transfers and diplomatic alignment without dependence. The war has compressed this.

Bilateral trade surged to around $240 billion in 2024, making China Russia's largest trading partner. Russian crude has pivoted to China at roughly 2 million barrels per day.

Power of Siberia 2 is in advanced negotiation. Around 30% of Russian trade is now settled in yuan; CIPS (launched October 8, 2015) is operating as the SWIFT alternative.

Tech-transfer flows have reversed — Chinese dual-use components, microchips and machine tools flow into Russia in volumes that have triggered Western secondary-sanctions concerns. For India, the implications are concrete.

Around 60-70% of legacy Indian military equipment is of Russian origin; remaining S-400 deliveries face delays as Russian production stretches for Ukraine; parts and upgrades may increasingly route through Chinese-origin components, raising supply-chain and operational risk. On the LAC, Russia's traditional capacity to balance China has eroded — the October 2024 Galwan-area disengagement was achieved without Russian mediation.

India’s recalibration is already in motion. The 23rd India-Russia Annual Summit (Putin’s visit to India, December 2025) reaffirmed bilateral autonomy; defence diversification has accelerated toward France (Rafale, Scorpene), the United States (P-8I, MH-60R, Apache, GE-414), Israel and South Korea; the Positive Indigenisation Lists under Atmanirbhar Bharat are scaling domestic production; and dual SCO-Quad exposure lets Delhi engage Moscow and Washington on their respective merits.

CONCLUSION

The way forward is calibrated. India should continue bilateral engagement with Russia on autonomous terms while accelerating defence indigenisation; diversify defence suppliers across France, the US, Israel, South Korea and emerging EU partners; diversify crude (Brazil, Guyana, the US) and LNG (Australia, Qatar, the US); watch the Arctic Council and BRICS Plus for second-order Russia-China asymmetric outcomes; invest in semiconductor capability through the India Semiconductor Mission; and keep both SCO and Quad active as complementary, not competing, platforms.

A Russia tethered more tightly to Beijing is a Russia with less room for India — and India’s response must be to widen its own room.

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