



# Strategic Partnership between Russia and India from the Perspective of National Elites

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**Abstract:** The focus of the article is the analysis of the prospects of the relationship between Russia and India. The author examines the attitudes of the elites in both countries towards each other, using historical sociology, the theory of cultural hegemony, and post-colonialism to explain the formation and perspectives of these elites. The objective and subjective economic and political conditions have, until recently, hindered any genuine efforts towards bringing the two countries closer, as both sides perceived the West as a more promising partner. This attitude has been shaped by historical factors, such as the formation of the Indian elites under the influence of British political, economic, and military culture, and the reckless admiration of the victors of the Cold War by the Russian elites, which attempted to abandon the Soviet legacy after the collapse of the USSR. Despite declarations of strategic interest in forming a polycentric world and developing bilateral Russian-Indian relations, economic ties have not supported these intentions. However, the conflict in Ukraine and the imposition of Western sanctions have compelled the Russian elites to re-evaluate their priorities. They have been faced with a choice: either to return to a Western orientation, which could lead to internal discontent, or to build stronger ties with China or India. The path chosen will depend on the position of the Indian elites, who have the freedom to take a neutral stance in a conflict far from their borders, and on the outcomes of the Ukrainian crisis.

**Keywords:** Russia, India, Russian-Indian relations, elites, sanctions

Scholars from Russia and India have extensively examined the nature of their countries' relationships over the past decades. While studies during the Soviet era were characterized by an optimistic outlook emphasizing the long-standing ties between the two nations dating back to the 16th century, more recent works have adopted a more pessimistic tone. This shift can be attributed to several factors, such as the stagnation of trade between Russia and India, the gradual drift of India towards

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improving relations with the United States simultaneous with the deterioration of relations between the United States and Russia, and the improvement of relations between Russia and China; the lack of attention by the leadership of Russia towards India and the dearth of new research in Russia in the field of Indian studies. All these factors have made the Russian Indologist community somewhat skeptical about the so-called "special and privileged strategic partnership"<sup>1</sup>.

Simultaneously, the strategic partnership between Russia and India presents an intriguing paradox. Despite lacking a solid economic foundation, it has managed to withstand the test of time and has even progressed. It has frequently been anticipated to crumble in the face of emerging challenges, but it has persisted. However, recent developments such as the conflict in Ukraine, the imposition of anti-Russian sanctions by the European Union and the United States, and indications of potential fuel and food crises have once again given rise to concerns about the durability of this strategic partnership amidst future tests.

The study aims to identify the role of Russian and Indian elites in developing a partnership between the two countries at the current stage and in the future, as well as to outline possible scenarios for the Russian-Indian strategic partnership.

Realism, especially neo-realism, which is very popular among Russian and Indian scholars, is hardly suitable for achieving this aim, with the exception of certain strains, such as neoclassical realism, that account for the influence of elites. However, in our view, even neoclassical realism fails to accord sufficient attention to this factor and is critiqued from within the realist paradigm for lacking methodological rigor (Legro, Moravcsik 1999). The inclination to depict a state as a billiard ball, to personalize it, and to assert that it possesses objective interests offers little insight. History has shown the fragility of the notion of objective interests: within the span of a single generation of Russians, the so-called "objective interests" of the state have undergone numerous transformations, from the aspiration to promote global communism to the pursuit of nuclear disarmament in the name of world peace, and from a subservient position during the Kozyrev era to the revival of great-power rhetoric in Russian official political discourse under Putin's administration.

The article employs the approach adopted at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations of the Russian Academy of Sciences (IMEMO RAS), which assumes that a state's policy is carried out by its leadership, who strive to meet the interests of diverse elite groups (political, military, economic) and the social groups aligned with them, either directly (expert community) or through state institutions (officials). The boundaries between these groups are often blurred. The elites' perception of the world is determined by various factors, including their upbringing, life

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<sup>1</sup> Lunev, S.I. (2009) *Problemnoe partnerstvo* (Troubled partnership) (In Russ.) [Online]. Available at: <https://mgimo.ru/about/news/experts/120029/> (Accessed: November 01 2022)

experience, books read, and personal connections. Elites do not exist in a vacuum: they govern a society that comprises numerous social groups, both real and imagined. Society's conceptions of the world impact the ideas of political elites and vice versa. At the same time, society and elites are influenced by multiple material factors, from natural processes to technological and economic developments, as well as by other societies with which they engage. But the expert community, media, and uncontrolled information flows interpret this real world for them. *Thus, our approach suggests that not only changes in the surrounding world but also the perception of these changes by elites and society play an important role.* Additionally, the mechanism of perception and response varies for different types of elites. For instance, while economic elites are obligated to analyze the economic situation continuously, either personally or through their subordinates, as the results of this analysis directly affect their financial standing, military elites, for example, may never engage in battles and only engage in theoretical speculations.

Thus, the approach adopted in this article uses the theory of elites to analyze different types of elites (the best-known work of this sort is one by Mills (1956); Gramsci's theory of hegemony to examine the interaction between elites and society (Gramsci 1992); the world-systems approach and post-colonial studies to determine the role of elites in the global system (van der Merwe, Dodd 2019; Seid, Harris 2021); and historical sociology to assess to what extent and how the history of a particular society shapes the elites' perception of the world (Hobden 1998). This approach has not yet been employed to analyze Russian-Indian relations. The corresponding sections mention relevant works that apply the abovementioned theories to analyze elites.

This study hypothesizes that the specifics of the mutual perception of the elites of Russia and India is the primary factor that shapes the relations between the two nations. During the 1990s, both countries experienced significant elite transformation in their respective elites. Russian-Indian relations declined because the representatives of new elite groups did not perceive each other as important partners. Although the situation is now beginning to change under the influence of external factors, it remains unclear to what extent the elites of Russia and India are prepared to embrace this shift.

The text is divided into four parts. The first part analyzes the Indian elites' attitude toward Russia through the prism of their genesis, while the second part analyzes the Russian elites' attitude toward India. The third part describes the factors that influence the change in the Russian elites' attitude towards India at the current stage. Finally, the fourth part proposes possible scenarios for the reaction of the Russian and Indian elites to the ongoing global transformations.

### **Elites of India**

The study of Indian elites has received relatively limited attention. Among the key works on political elites, the contributions of Sanjaya Baru (Baru 2021) and Josy Joseph (Joseph 2016; Joseph 2021) deserve mention as they provide a comprehensive

examination of India's political elites in general, along with numerous works that delve into the lives of specific political figures (Moro, 2015; Kidwai, 2011; Baru, 2014; among others). In addition, Harish Damodaran's book (Damodaran 2008) stands out in the literature on economic elites, although there are numerous works on this topic. While many of these studies are written apologetically, they nonetheless offer insightful analyses of the role and influence of economic elites on the country's politics. Finally, military elites have received considerably less attention, with most studies exploring their relationship with civilian authorities, as exemplified by Anita Mukherjee's book (Mukherjee 2020). This is by no means an exhaustive list of relevant works.

### *Political Elites*

In contrast to the American political elites examined in Mills' seminal work, Indian elites are not closely tied to either the economy or particularly the military. Their historical origins can explain this. Unlike the American "elites without history," Indian elites were formed, on the one hand, under the influence of British domination, on the other hand, in opposition to it. The position of the Indian upper class during the British Raj also played an important role: Maharajas, who frequently socialized with the British aristocracy, emulated their customs and excelled in status spending. This historical background shaped the first generation of Indian elites' ideas of propriety and civilization and fostered a desire to mimic British ways of life. The notorious "Delhi Darbar" emerged from this mindset, with entry restricted to individuals with Oxbridge (or later Ivy League) education, those in high positions of power, or those whose parents' connections and positions allowed for continuous engagement with the elite circles. This laid the foundation for the so-called political consensus, the tacit agreement among elites on the key issues of foreign and domestic policy.

Over time, the political elites underwent a transformation. As Great Britain's global influence waned, they increasingly looked to the USSR and the USA while also maintaining a focus on local political practices. However, significant changes only began to take shape in the final decade of the 20th century. The ascension of Narendra Modi to the apex of power marked a turning point. Modi was able to build a support base by appealing to both big business and the dissatisfied masses of farmers and the middle class who were discontent with the dominance of the Delhi Darbar. This led to a gradual transformation of the political elites.

This genesis determined the attitude of the Indian political elites towards the USSR and Russia. At the beginning of Nehru's rule, the USSR was considered a promising but secondary partner compared to Britain. Subsequently, under Khrushchev and Brezhnev on the Soviet side and Indira Gandhi on the Indian one, the role of the USSR in Indian foreign policy was constantly growing. At the same time, it remained guided by British practices, which often coincided with Soviet ones, such as elements of a planned economy in the UK after World War II. Indira Gandhi's attempt to take a "left turn" in the late 1960s was countered by the growing sympathies of the elites for the right. This led to the split of the INC and the formation of a united opposition,

whose actions resulted in the Emergency and subsequent electoral defeat of Indira Gandhi. Such intra-elite balancing meant that the USSR never became a role model for the Indian elites (unlike many of Moscow's allies in the third world), and they always maintained a distance, viewing it only as an important partner.

Following the collapse of the USSR, the appeal of socialism waned, while the United States, as the only remaining superpower, paid little attention to South Asia until the early 21st century. This shift coincided with political developments within India, where the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty's loss of formal power led to a reshuffling of the political landscape. The political instability of the 1990s, combined with dramatic economic changes, briefly enabled the opposition BJP to take power. Despite the INC's return to power in 2004, this was only a temporary interruption. Currently, there is a process of replacing the old elites with new ones, but as it is going very slowly, the former continues to exert significant control over the country's affairs.

In summary, the rapid growth of India's economy in the first decade of the 21st century has bolstered the confidence of its elites, who see the United States as a key geopolitical ally rather than a role model — in the same way they viewed the USSR decades earlier. Russia is considered a weaker partner, although it is undoubtedly important in the context of the formation of a polycentric world order. Indian politicians view Russia as one of the centers of this world order, which enables maneuvering in the international arena, but it cannot replace the United States as India's primary partner. Furthermore, Russia no longer plays a helpful role in containing China — as it did in Soviet times — and its strategic importance to India has declined.

### *Economic Elites*

While the political elites of Indian origin assumed a significant role in the country's life only in the summer of 1947, the economic elites had long been prominent in the country's economic affairs. They were integrated into the economy of the British Raj and benefited from it. Not fully satisfied with their position, they supported the independence movement, which predetermined the initial close relationship between the economic and political elites.

On the eve of India's independence, the business elite sought to secure a dominant role in political decision-making (the Bombay Plan) but was unsuccessful. In the following decades, the economic elites were relegated to a secondary role due to the "License Raj" system, which severely limited their autonomy, and they had to comply with the established rules. The situation changed in the late 1980s with the onset of Rajiv Gandhi's reforms and continued to transform under Narasimha Rao. The economic elites gained greater freedom of action, and their role in political life began to grow; they became key players in the political arena, sponsoring political parties that, in exchange, defended their interests (Joshi 2017: 237-8). This determined the peculiar nature of Indian economic elites' political participation: they do not concentrate power in their hands and generally prefer to stay away from politics, influencing it indirectly. In addition, in the crony capitalism system, many political elite groups are connected

with business through caste and family ties, creating a complex net of mutual interest. Determining whose interests are primary in this system is challenging, but to some extent, economic elites influence political ones. The attitudes of political elites, which since Nehru's time have regarded the economy as a primary factor in the country's domestic and international affairs<sup>2</sup>.

In the context of Indian-Russian relations, the role of Indian economic elites is mainly negative. Although some individual companies and business families, such as the Essar Group, maintain close ties with Russia, most Indian economic elites are primarily oriented towards the West and Japan. This is due to various factors, including linguistic and historical reasons, but the main driver is the presence of other more profitable markets that provide greater short-term returns, are more predictable, and require less investment and effort to enter. Given these factors, the situation is unlikely to change in the near future. As a result, the lack of interest among Indian economic elites in developing a partnership with Russia pushes Indian foreign policy further away from Russia and towards the West, Japan, and Southeast Asia.

### *Military Elites*

The military elites in India are relatively loosely connected to the political and economic ones, which dates back to the well-known events of 1957-62<sup>3</sup>, and distinguishes the Indian case from the American one. While exceptions like Amarinder Singh exist, Indian military elites generally do not enter business or politics after their military careers and prefer specialized think tanks or full retirement.

This is not to say that Indian military elites are unimportant, but their influence is limited to security and military planning. They dominate the security discourse and have formed their cluster of experts, partly consisting of retired members of the military elites. These elites influence ideas about the strategic paradigms of the state as a whole.

The role of Indian military elites in cooperation with Russia is ambiguous. There are people in their ranks who hold favorable views towards Russia (primarily in the Indian Air Forces, the Army, and the submarine arm of the Navy), as they have trained or closely interacted with the Soviet military. At the same time, the Navy as a whole, traditionally associated with Britain, is less enthusiastic about the prospects for cooperation. In addition, age plays an increasingly important role: the number of people

<sup>2</sup> This differs, for instance, from the attitudes of contemporary Russian elites, who believe that military force can compensate for economic weakness, allowing them to pursue an active foreign policy.

<sup>3</sup> During this period, there was a struggle between two factions in the Indian Army. The first faction opposed the army's political intervention, while the second faction sought to politicize the army and erase the boundaries between the army and society. The latter group received support from Minister of Defense V.K. Krishna Menon and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who contributed to replacing senior officers from the first faction with "real patriots" from the second. However, the 1962 war with China revealed that politically loyal officers from the second faction were inadequate commanders (Sharma 2018). This resulted in the reinstatement of officers from the first faction, who were previously dismissed, to senior positions in the armed forces, and subsequently, the army refrained from interfering in politics.



with positive views toward Russia is declining, while those with little interaction with the Russian military are becoming more numerous. The immersion of the Indian military in the Western discursive field also plays a significant role. They start to perceive Russia not as a reliable partner developing advanced weapons but as a country that provides outdated, albeit cheap, weapons that cannot fight modern Western systems. This discourse is reinforced by memories of the Russian defense industry's export mistakes in the 1991-2001 period when Indian consumers complained about both defective weapons and a lack of after-sales service. These disgruntled consumers are now beginning to form a new circle of military elites.

### *Expert community*

Finally, the expert community constitutes a distinct social group that influences the formation of Indian foreign policy strategy. It serves the interests of the ruling elite and has two specific features. Firstly, its members constantly compete for the resources allocated for expertise. Secondly, the expert community solves a dual problem of conveying the opinion of the middle class to the elites, and vice versa, explaining the position of the elites to the middle class. But the main task that the expert community should solve is supplying the elites with high-quality analysis, including the assessment of the possible consequences of specific actions (or inaction). While accomplishing this task, experts again have to overcome a certain duality. On the one hand, they need to provide authorities with reliable and helpful information; on the other hand, they stick to the general direction of the authorities' views and plans since the expert community depends on the money the customer allocates. Leaving aside the difficulty of balancing what the customer needs to hear and what he wants to hear, we can argue that, to a large extent, both the direction and the conclusions of the examination depend on the funding source.

Since Indian political and economic elites, except for a narrow circle of people, do not have a strong interest in obtaining comprehensive and unbiased information about Russia, there is very little funding for this type of research. Only a few centers, such as JNU, the University of Mumbai, and Madras University (and several others), promote interaction with Russia, and while there is a dialogue between Russian and Indian think tanks, all this can hardly be considered systematic work.

## **Elites of Russia**

In contrast to the relatively peaceful development of Indian society under Nehru's Fabian socialism, the Russian elites have undergone at least three significant transformations over the past century. The first of them (the February and October revolutions) involved the physical destruction and expulsion of the old ruling class and the discrimination of those who remained to prevent their return to power and erode their class attributes. The second transformation, which occurred in 1937-1940, also led to the partial physical destruction of the ruling elites through repression and the

redistribution of power, including the persecution of their families. The most recent transformation, which began in 1985 and is still ongoing, resulted in a redistribution of power that formally withdrew it from the partocratic ruling elite in favor of grass-roots functionaries within the same ruling communist elite. While this process was less violent than the earlier revolutions, as it was carried out by part of the ruling elites rather than counter-elites, it is still incomplete.

These processes have been extensively analyzed by Russian and Western sociologists (Ponedelkov, Starostin 2004; Kordonskii 2008; Semenova 2012; Hughes, John 2001; Yakovlev 2021). However, Russian scholars may face challenges in transcending their lived context, while Western sociologists usually do not have sufficient levels of immersion. Additionally, both sides may be subject to their personal biases. Nonetheless, a general characterization of the present-day elites can be attempted.

### *Political Elites*

Contrary to the view prevailing in the Western media, which is good at helping Western elites justify their policy towards Russia but does not help understand Russia, the current regime in Russia can hardly be called authoritarian. Social elevators work, and society retains the ability to influence decision-making, albeit not primarily through parliament but via a system of alternative representative bodies, with the All-Russian Popular Front being the most influential. Elections function as a plebiscite, demonstrating the level of support towards the government's policies. The regime rests on the consensus of society and government, both of which comprise a range of groups, including those with pro-Western inclinations, and the Russian president is forced to consider their interests when making decisions. However, the president, far from being a powerless balancer, actively participates in foreign policy processes. Like Modi in India, Putin assumes a decisive role in shaping foreign policy while considering various groups' interests.

In contrast to India, Russia is a presidential republic, with political factions within parties playing a lesser role. Of greater importance is the fact that a significant proportion of the present-day Russian elites are individuals who have embraced pro-Western perspectives from the prior generation of Yeltsin-era politicians. They possess a customary admiration for the core of the semi-periphery and regard the nations of Asia as a periphery.

At the same time, the course towards patriotism, the quest for historical roots, and the rejection of servility towards the West, which began during the first Chechen war and intensified during Putin's first term, gradually brought to power a new generation of people who form the basis of the current regime. This group includes numerous ex-security officials, several of whom served alongside Putin, and people from the president's inner circle. The most challenging thing is to identify the views of the new generation, which is made up of relatively young people (born in 1980-1990). Among them, there are also representatives of various views, but they have not yet entered the political arena, and their heyday is yet to come.



### *Economic elites*

The *economic elites* are loyal to the government and maintain relations like those in India. On the one hand, they determine Russian foreign policy interests while, on the other, adapting to geopolitical realities. Neither the business nor the president obediently executes each other's will. At the same time, it is crucial to recall the origin of the Russian economic elites and their initial focus on collaborating with the West instead of the East. This can be explained by economic factors (transporting goods to the West was less expensive, and the West was willing to pay more for resources) and personal considerations. The economic elites viewed the West as an exemplar of "real capitalism" and, following post-colonial traditions, sought to imitate Western society, copying its status symbols and behaviors. Moreover, the West did not question the origin of the funds deposited in European banks. Rare exceptions, such as Igor Sechin, who began working with China long ago, or Oleg Deripaska, exploring Africa, only confirm the rule.

### *Military elites*

Military elites in Russia, as in India, play a relatively minor role in the political arena, although for a different reason. During the Soviet era, the army was under complete control of the Communist Party and was viewed as one of the key tools for maintaining the state. The military elites were integrated into the decision-making process, mainly in secondary and advisory roles. For instance, only Zhukov, Grechko, and Ustinov represented the military elites in the Politburo, with the first staying there for only six months and the second for three years; in total, the defense ministers had a seat in the Politburo for only 12 years out of the 46 post-war years, and the Chief of the General Staff and the Commander-in-Chief of the Navy were never represented. The military-industrial complex played a special role, with its representatives, such as Ustinov, having greater political weight. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was a short-lived surge in the self-awareness of the military elites as a social group. Officer congresses and numerous publications in the press emerged, appealing to the army as the only institution capable of "saving Russia". However, with the strengthening of a new political hierarchy, the military elites returned to supporting roles, backing Yeltsin during the constitutional crisis of 1993 and the 1996 elections. The military elites function as they did in the Soviet times, contributing personnel to strengthen the bureaucratic and political apparatus. While they have some influence on strategic decisions, their degree of influence is much less than that of their counterparts in the US and even India.

### *Expert community*

Finally, the Russian expert community is very heterogeneous. It does not yet recognize itself as a distinct social group and is transforming. Although several analytical centers in Russia, such as the Institute of Oriental Studies (IOS), the Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO), and MGIMO University, are

actively involved in India-related research, many of them face challenges due to the lack of trained middle-aged personnel, who would be the mainstay of research activities. Additionally, the relatively low wages for researchers discourage new personnel from joining the community. One of the advantages of Russian expertise production is its adherence to traditional formats. This has allowed scholars to continue their research on India even during the most challenging times, covering all the relevant fields, including the fundamental ones, such as linguistics and history. However, this rigid structure poses a challenge, as it does not allow quick adaptation to the market's needs. Although this has not been a significant issue, it has become apparent as there is an increasing demand for research that caters to market needs.

In general, it can be said that the Indian and Russian elites share some similarities and differences. The main difference is that the Russian political system, in contrast to the Indian one, has yet to pass the test of several power transfers. In all instances (Yeltsin to Putin, Putin to Medvedev, and back to Putin), power has been handed over to a loyal successor, not an opposition leader. As far as political elites are concerned, the similarities are apparent. In both Russia and India, foreign policy-making is centralized to a large extent in the hands of strong leaders, Putin and Modi, respectively. The difference is that while there is a political consensus regarding Russia in India, which sees it as one of the future pillars of a polycentric world, no such consensus exists in Russia, as until recently, the level of interest in India among the Russian political elites had been negligible.

In economic terms, there is a similarity between the Russian and Indian economic elites, as neither has a significant interest in the other. The only exception is the military-industrial complex, located at the interface between the economic and military elites, which supplies Russian weapons to India. Regarding the military elites, there are specific differences between the two countries. The Russian military is mainly focused on local theaters of operations, whereas the Indian military has a broader perspective and is interested not only in the supply of Russian weapons but also in Russia's involvement in the region's security system.

The expert communities of both countries have shown limited interest in each other. In the case of Indian experts, this is largely due to their historical ties and closer relationships with Britain and the United States rather than Russia. Meanwhile, Russian experts have displayed limited interest in India due to a shortage of Indologists and the state's insufficient attention to the country. The amount of knowledge needed by the Indians about Russia and the Russians about India was completely covered by the available experts.

### **Ukrainian conflict as a game changer**

It is hardly necessary to provide a detailed description of Russian-Indian relations during the Soviet era, as they have been extensively covered in various articles and monographs. The memory of this historical friendship, manifested in the friendly

mutual perception of the population and part of the elites, still helps maintain ties between the two countries, despite declining economic and security contacts. However, it should be noted that the significance of this factor is gradually diminishing as new generations of Indians no longer feel nostalgic for the old friendship with Russia. This is especially important in the context of political elites, as neither Modi nor his associates have any personal connections with Moscow.

Until recently, bilateral relations between the two nations have remained stagnant. The trade turnover between Russia and India stalled at about \$11 billion, with the majority attributed to the purchase of weaponry. Russia has struggled to increase trade through the sale of oil and gas due to competition from other suppliers, such as the countries of the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf. Additionally, Russia has not shown interest in importing Indian services since its IT market is self-sufficient and does not require outsourcing to other countries.

Following the start of a special military operation, Russia faced Western sanctions and was cut off from Western markets, technologies, and investments. Under these conditions, the Russian political and business elites had to reorient themselves towards China, India, and the countries of Southeast Asia, which were earlier implicitly perceived to be less important for the politics and economy of Russia than the West. The ASEAN countries, however, are too weak to withstand the possible onslaught of US sanctions. Focusing exclusively on the PRC requires, firstly, additional qualifications of personnel (knowledge of the Chinese language) and, secondly, the restructuring of technological standards. Additionally, it may be unsound as Russia risks becoming overly dependent on China for key technologies and consumer goods. This is forcing the economic elites to change their priorities to improve relations with India drastically.

The rupture in relations with the West also impacts Russia's political shift towards India. Russian political elites are utilizing the rhetoric of decolonization, which suggests the existence of neo-colonialism by Western elites against non-Western countries perceived as victims of colonial policies that have been ongoing for the past 500 years, evolving in form but not in substance. At the same time, critiques of (neo)colonialism are not necessarily Marxist or anti-capitalist; instead, Russian elites focus primarily on the issue of the sovereignty of former colonies. Partnership with India is becoming significantly more important to the current Russian political elites than before when India was regarded as just one of the partners in a future multipolar world.

### **Possible scenarios**

The current situation requires the Russian elites to reconsider their approach to India to maintain their status. The only other option is to surrender to the West in some form, which entails relinquishing all territorial acquisitions and future claims and accepting a subordinate position to the Western elites. However, to accept these conditions, Russia would need to suffer a military defeat or undergo a significant social

crisis, which involves a shift in ideology, values, and perspectives. There are currently no indications that such changes are likely to occur.

On the other hand, the Indian elites have more flexibility and can choose between two main options: align with the West, distance themselves from Russia, or continue balancing between the West and Russia. Both options have advantages and disadvantages, and both have supporters among the Indian elites.

Based on these assumptions, several options for future strategic partnership development between Russia and India can be proposed. For the sake of caution, we will limit ourselves to the next few decades and focus on the most apparent possibilities so as not to step on the slippery ground of futurology. We proceed from the premise that, in its current position, Russia cannot exist as an autarchy with its relatively small market and economy highly dependent on foreign markets.

#### *Option 1. Turn back to the West*

In this scenario, most loved by Western experts, as Russia loses the conflict and internal unrest begins, supporters of a pro-Western orientation come to power, the West makes concessions, lifts sanctions, and opens borders.

This course of events is unlikely due to the solid anti-Western sentiments in Russia. In any case, it would pose a significant danger for India. This scenario would effectively turn Russia into a resource colony of the West, as it was in the 1990s, and erase its role as an independent power center. Russia's alliance with China, which Indian elites fear, would no longer be a concern, but China would lose access to resources from Russia. China's northern border would become unstable, leading to the need to allocate resources there instead of building a blue-water navy. China's vulnerable sea communications, remaining the only way to obtain resources, would become even more unprotected. This would seriously undermine China's economic and political position, leading it to abandon attempts to change the world's political system. For India, this would mean a weakening of Western interest, a decrease in investment and technology transfer, a slowdown in development, and a gradual comparative weakening and visualization by the West.

#### *Option 2. Pivot to the East toward China*

This scenario implies that Russia remains cut off from the West, which continues to pressure its economy and undermine its political stability. Russia's authorities persist, cannot abandon territorial acquisitions in Ukraine for internal reasons, and are looking for new partners in the East. If India does not meet Russia halfway, Russia will have to focus on the remaining partners, particularly China and Iran. This option would pose a severe threat to the future of Russian-Indian relations for several decades, especially if India, in the context of strengthening China thanks to Russia's resource base, gradually but inevitably draws closer to the United States.

### *Option 3. Pivot to the East toward multipolar Asia*

This option involves Russia seeing India as a critical partner in the region and becoming a major donor of technology and resources. This, in turn, would present Indian elites with a choice. If they are willing to take a certain level of risk, the benefits outweigh the costs: they would prevent Russia from becoming pro-Chinese or pro-Western and establish a stronger bond with Russia. It would reverse the 1971 situation, in which the USSR assisted India in dealing with Pakistan. However, even with the utmost diplomatic skill of the Indian elites, this option will inevitably result in an inevitable deterioration of relations with the West, which would affect the interests of the economic elites.

### *Option 4: Slow Pivot to the East*

The scenario with the highest degree of uncertainty involves Russia and India acting on a situational basis, with their political and economic elites hesitating to commit to long-term cooperation. India is not experiencing significant technological advancement through its relationship with Russia, and the Russian economy continues to fluctuate between partnerships with India, China, and other countries. While this uncertainty can persist for a considerable period, it remains unstable due to various external and internal factors, such as growing economic problems, shifts in foreign policy, and changes in domestic political alignments. At any moment, these factors could lead Russian elites to gradually move towards implementing one of the first three scenarios.

## **Conclusion**

The Russian elites will have to undergo significant transformations regardless of how events unfold. The first scenario would resemble thirty years ago, enabling the comprador economic elites to seize political power. However, it would trigger widespread social discontent, which could lead to immediate unrest or an accumulation of grievances resulting in the desire to regain lost greatness. The second and third scenarios would result in the expansion of influence for those groups that can swiftly reorient themselves to new markets and prospects (China or India, respectively) and a decline in influence for those who cannot. This, in turn, would lead to an increase in instability, albeit less severe than in the first case.

In all four scenarios, the Indian elites face an uncomfortable dilemma, being forced to abandon their usual course of multipolarity based on cooperation with Western countries. Worst of all, the situation cannot return to pre-conflict since the fragile balance of mistrust between Russia and the West has been disrupted, and the world will no longer be the same. In any of the scenarios, the Indian elites will have to make sacrifices, and in some cases, these sacrifices will be borne by the political elites, while in others, by the economic elites. This can lead to problems and a violation of the intra-elite consensus. Be that as it may, the future of the strategic partnership between Russia

and India will depend, among other factors, on the choices made by the Indian elites: whether they accept the hand extended to them in times of need or prefer to turn away to maintain their strategic plans, the implementation of which still may be doubtful in a collapsing world order.

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## Стратегическое партнёрство России и Индии с точки зрения национальных элит

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ИМЭМО РАН

Статья посвящена анализу перспектив российско-индийских отношений. Автор, используя комплексный подход, включающий теорию элит, объясняет генезис и мировоззрение этих элит через призму исторической социологии, теории культурной гегемонии и постколониальной теории, анализирует взаимное восприятие индийскими и российскими элитами друг друга. Он приходит к выводу, что до недавнего времени как субъективные, так и объективные политические и экономические причины способствовали тому, что российские и индийские элиты не видели особой необходимости в более тесном сближении, рассматривая западные страны в качестве более перспективных партнёров. Такой подход сложился исторически: если индийские элиты сформировались под влиянием британской политической, экономической и военной культуры, то российские элиты после распада СССР восхищались победителями в холодной войне и подражали им, пытаясь преодолеть советское наследие. Политические декларации о стратегической заинтересованности в формировании полицентричного миропорядка и развитии двусторонних отношений не подкреплялись соответствующим развитием двусторонних экономических связей. Однако после начала конфликта на Украине и введения Западом санкций против Москвы российские элиты вынуждены пересматривать



свои приоритеты. Они столкнулись с выбором: либо вернуться к ориентации на Запад, что могло бы привести к внутреннему недовольству и даже нестабильности, или попытаться выстроить связи с Китаем и Индией. Выбор пути зависит как от позиции индийских элит, которые могут себе позволить проводить любую политику, так как конфликт на Украине прямо не затрагивает их интересы, так и от того, с каким результатом завершится украинский кризис.

**Ключевые слова:** Россия, Индия, российско-индийские отношения, элиты, санкции.

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