



RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA: FROM TRADITIONAL FRIENDSHIP TO NEW COOPERATION

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Abstract:

This paper examines the evolution of relations with Russia from their origins in traditional diplomatic friendship to the multifaceted dynamics of contemporary strategic cooperation. It traces historical foundations, post–Cold War realignments, and the emergence of new defence, economic, and technological linkages. Drawing on academic literature, strategic commentary, and policy debates, the study analyzes how geopolitical pressures, elite foreign-policy thinking, and shifting international structures shape the trajectory of bilateral engagement. The paper argues that while the relationship retains symbolic features rooted in historical solidarity, it increasingly reflects pragmatic alignments driven by security imperatives, energy interdependence, and the search

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Introduction:

Relations with Russia have undergone substantial transformation over the past century, transitioning from traditional notions of friendship based on ideological affinity or geopolitical necessity to a more pragmatic and multidimensional set of cooperative arrangements. While historical narratives frequently emphasize the themes of shared struggle, mutual respect, and long-standing diplomatic rapport, these narratives tell only part of the story. In the contemporary era, strategic cooperation with Russia reflects a convergence of interests shaped by global power shifts, regional security concerns, economic complementarities, and the changing priorities of national elites.

This paper provides a structured analysis of these developments. It begins by examining the historical foundations of traditional friendship, identifies the turning points of the post– Cold War period, and then focuses on the rise of strategic cooperation in defence, energy, technology, and multilateral diplomacy. The study also considers the influence of foreign-policy elites, the pressures created by Western institutions and China, and concrete case studies of recent collaboration. Finally, the paper outlines potential challenges and future trajectories, offering an integrated framework for understanding where relations with Russia may evolve in the coming decades.

Historical Foundations of Traditional Friendship:

The notion of a "traditional friendship" with Russia is often rooted in earlier periods of geopolitical alignment, cultural connectivity, or ideological closeness. In many contexts, Russia was perceived as a major power willing to offer support during moments of national crisis, anti-colonial struggle, or diplomatic isolation. Throughout the 20th century, these connections manifested through educational exchanges, military assistance, and symbolic commitments to mutual sovereignty and non-interference. During the mid-20 th century, especially in the context of the Cold War, relations with the Soviet Union were influenced by broader ideological currents. Nations seeking alternatives to Western

influence sometimes found in Moscow an important partner. Bilateral treaties, scientific partnerships, and cultural diplomacy played a key role. During this period, the foundations for long-term trust were laid, often reinforced through elite narratives emphasizing solidarity and shared historical experience.

By the late Cold War, however, relations had both stabilizing and constraining dimensions. The symbolic weight of traditional friendship created expectations of loyalty, yet domestic reforms and geopolitical shifts began to complicate alignment patterns. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 would mark a turning point, requiring a reassessment of the relationship's foundations.

Post–Cold War Reorientation:

The end of the Cold War dismantled many of the ideological structures that had previously governed relations with Russia. As new national priorities emerged and globalization accelerated, traditional friendship narratives faced the pressures of political liberalization, economic restructuring, and exposure to Western institutions. During the 1990s, Russia itself was undergoing deep internal transformation: economic crisis, political volatility, and a redefinition of its international identity. Many partners responded by diversifying their diplomatic engagements, pursuing closer ties with Western states and multilateral institutions. Economic relations with Russia declined in significance, and defence cooperation experienced periods of stagnation or reconsideration. Yet the post-Cold War reorientation did not sever ties. Instead, it transitioned them into a new phase in which cooperation would be pursued on a more selective, interest-driven basis. The 2000s brought new opportunities, especially as Russia regained political stability and economic strength. This allowed bilateral relations to settle into a pragmatic framework that balanced historical goodwill with contemporary strategic calculations.

Strategic Cooperation in the 21st Century:

1. Defence Cooperation

Defence cooperation has traditionally been one of the most visible pillars of engagement with Russia. From arms procurement during earlier decades to more recent ventures into co-development and joint training, defence interaction reflects both military needs and broader strategic considerations. In the 21st century, defence collaboration often centers on technological transfer, modernization of existing defence systems, and training programs. Russia's defence industry provides relatively cost-effective options with proven capabilities, making it attractive to states seeking to diversify their procurement sources. High-level visits between military officials, joint exercises, and long-term maintenance contracts further institutionalize cooperation.

However, defence ties also face challenges from competing suppliers, geopolitical constraints, and the growing influence of other major powers. The diversification of security partnerships especially with Western states or regional powers can create friction or necessitate careful balancing to avoid overdependence on any single partner.

2. Energy and Economic Engagement

Energy remains at the core of strategic cooperation with Russia. As one of the world's leading exporters of natural gas, oil, and nuclear technology, Russia offers resource-rich states opportunities for investment, infrastructure development, and technological collaboration. Natural gas projects including pipelines and LNG facilities reflect

long-term commitments that shape geopolitical relationships. Similarly, Russian involvement in nuclear power plants, particularly through state-owned firms offering financing and turnkey solutions, creates decades-long cooperation. Beyond energy, trade in machinery, metals, fertilizers, and agricultural goods contributes to economic interdependence.

Yet economic relations remain vulnerable to global sanctions, market volatility, and logistical constraints. While energy projects reinforce strategic ties, shifts toward renewable energy or alternative suppliers may influence future trajectories.

3. Multilateral Forums and Diplomatic Alignment

The 21st century has seen increased coordination with Russia across multilateral institutions. Shared positions in the United Nations, regional security forums, and emerging-economy groupings demonstrate areas of diplomatic convergence. Key themes include respect for sovereignty, skepticism of Western-led interventionism, support for multipolarity, and the protection of national development models. In many forums, Russia presents itself as an alternative voice to Western liberal norms. Aligning with this stance can reinforce strategic autonomy for partner states. Nevertheless, multilateral cooperation also reveals limits: differing regional priorities, diverging economic ambitions, and the need to maintain balanced relations with multiple powers mean alignment is often selective rather than comprehensive.

4. The Role of Foreign Policy Elites and Strategic Thought

Foreign-policy elites play a central role in shaping relations with Russia. Historical education, diplomatic experience, ideological preferences, and networks built through study or training programs influence elite perceptions of Russia. Elites with longstanding familiarity with Russian institutions often advocate for stable cooperation, viewing Russia as a predictable and historically trustworthy partner. In contrast, younger generations of policymakers exposed to Western institutions may adopt more cautious or diversified strategic approaches.

Think tanks, military academies, and universities all contribute to shaping strategic thought. The tension between continuity and reorientation often emerges within elite debates: Should the nation preserve its traditional friendship with Russia? Or should it pursue a more flexible foreign policy aligned with emerging global centers of power? These debates continually reshape the trajectory of bilateral relations.

5. Competing Pressures: The West, China, and Global Realignments

The 21st century is marked by intensifying geopolitical competition. Relations with Russia cannot be understood in isolation but must be situated within the broader context of global realignment. Western states exert pressure through sanctions, diplomatic incentives, and security partnerships. Engagement with Western military alliances or trade institutions can complicate defence and economic cooperation with Russia. At times, Western states perceive closer relations with Russia as a challenge to their regional influence. At the same time, China's rise introduces another layer of complexity. For some states, China is an equally important partner economically indispensable and increasingly influential in regional affairs. Balancing relations with both Russia and China require careful diplomacy. In some cases, Russia and China cooperate as strategic partners, creating opportunities; in others, their competition limits the strategic space of smaller states. These competing pressures highlight the need for nuanced

foreign-policy strategies that preserve national autonomy while benefiting from multiple partnerships.

Case Studies of Recent Cooperation:

1. Defence Procurement and Co-development

Recent years have seen renewed interest in acquiring Russian defence systems, ranging from air-defence platforms to fighter aircraft and missile technologies. Collaborative programs have included modernization of legacy Soviet-era equipment and the co-development of advanced systems tailored to national needs. Joint research initiatives in military technology demonstrate mutual trust and a willingness to engage in deeper strategic cooperation. However, these projects also attract scrutiny from Western institutions wary of technological leakage or shifts in regional military balances.

2. Energy Infrastructure - Pipelines, Nuclear Power, and Beyond

Energy cooperation provides some of the most concrete examples of strategic alignment. Pipeline projects create decades-long interdependence through shared infrastructure and contractual obligations. Russia's state-owned energy firms frequently finance, construct, and operate infrastructure projects, making them integral players in national energy strategies. Nuclear energy cooperation has become especially important. Russia's integrated nuclear technology model covering plant construction, fuel supply, operational training, and waste management offers comprehensive solutions attractive to growing economies.

3. New Areas: Digital Technologies, Space, and the Arctic

New domains of cooperation are emerging. Russia's space technology remains globally competitive, contributing to joint satellite programs, remote-sensing cooperation, and launch services. Digital technology partnerships include cybersecurity exchanges and exploration of data-localization frameworks.

The Arctic, where Russia is a dominant actor, offers opportunities for collaboration in shipping routes, scientific research, and resource exploration. Climate change increases the strategic importance of this region, although cooperation can be limited by competing territorial and commercial interests.

Challenges and Divergences:

Despite expanding cooperation, several challenges persist. Geopolitical tensions, particularly Russia's strained relations with Western powers, create uncertainty. Sanctions and financial restrictions complicate transactions, limit access to technology, and slow down joint projects. Domestic political changes also shape relations. Public opinion, elite turnover, and shifts in national priorities can alter the pace or direction of cooperation. Economic

Divergences such as exposure to commodity price fluctuations or differing industrial policies further complicate long-term alignment.

Security dilemmas may emerge when cooperation with Russia is perceived by neighboring states as destabilizing. Regional disputes, international legal constraints, and overlapping spheres of influence can lead to friction. Finally, technological transformations such as the global shift toward renewables or new defence suppliers may reduce Russia's relative significance in certain sectors

Future Trajectories:

The future of relations with Russia will depend on the interplay of geopolitical forces, economic opportunities, and



domestic strategic preferences. Several scenarios appear plausible:

- 1. Deepened Strategic Partnership:** If geopolitical alignment strengthens and key sectors (energy, defence, technology) continue to converge, the relationship could evolve into a sustained long-term partnership. Selective Pragmatic Cooperation: A more likely scenario involves maintaining cooperation in specific areas while balancing relations with Western states and China.
- 2. Managed Divergence:** External pressures or domestic reorientation could lead to reduced reliance on Russia, although historical goodwill may preserve certain cooperative channels.
- 3. Hybrid Models:** Combinations of cooperation and competition, depending on sector and geopolitical context, may characterize future relations. Ultimately, bilateral relations are shaped by an enduring tension between historical ties and contemporary strategic realities.

Conclusion:

Relations with Russia have moved beyond the symbolic framework of traditional friendship to embrace new forms of strategic cooperation. This evolution reflects both continuity and change: continuity in the shared historical experiences that anchor mutual trust, and change in the pragmatic, interest-driven collaborations emerging across defence, energy, technology, and diplomacy.

Navigating global realignments, competing pressures, and economic uncertainties requires adaptable and forward-looking foreign-policy strategies. The trajectory of relations with Russia will depend on how states manage these complexities, balance multiple partnerships, and harness opportunities for mutually beneficial cooperation.

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