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The Eastern Pivot: India-Russia Maritime Synergy in the Indo-Pacific

Nitish Kumar[1*], Jyoti[1]
[1]*Department of Political Science, Maharshi Dayanand University, Rohtak, India*

Abstract—In current geopolitics, when the gravity of international relations is shifting towards the naval, the impact of such drastic changes transforms the India-Russia relationship. This article explores the concept of the Eastern Pivot," which moves the India-Russia partnership from a land-based defense liaison to maritime synergy in the Indo-Pacific. This study focuses on three main pillars: Chennai-Vladivostok Eastern Maritime Corridor, the Reciprocal Exchange of Logistics Support (RELOS) agreement, and India-Russia cooperation in Arctic energy transport corridor. This paper analyzes the synergy that allows India to bypass traditional chokepoints while providing Russia with a legitimate role as a persistent power in the Indo-Pacific. Ultimately, this article asserts a necessary pole of power, enabling India to maintain strategic autonomy amidst deepening US-China bipolarity.

***Index Terms*—Indo-Pacific, Russia, Chennai-Vladivostok, Northern Sea Route, Maritime domain, Trans-Arctic Transport Corridor, Vostok oil, RELOS, Strategic Autonomy.**

1. Introduction: Shifting the Center of Gravity

The Paradigm Shift: Since the collapse of colonial empires in the mid-twentieth century, the economic inclusion process in the Asian continent proceeded only haltingly, primarily due to the four-decade-long hostile power struggle between the West - the victors of WWII – and the Socialist Republic of Soviet Russia, which was then imbued with Marxist ideology and challenging the post-WWII world order put in place by the Western powers.[1] Despite the collapse of the colonial system after World War II, Western countries quickly managed to construct a new system of neocolonialism, exploiting their economic and military dominance in the world.[2] In recent years, there has been an increasing discussion that the world order dominated by the collective West is coming to an end.[3] Readiness for the establishment of a new world order seems to prevail in internatihonal relations, but conceptions of this order vary greatly.[4] Americans and other Western nations envision it as a continuation of the institutions and practices that have dominated the world over the past 50 years.[5] Most of humanity (up to 85%, according to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's estimates) wants an order that would lead to the rapid democratization of international relations and transformation of existing institutions and practices.[6] Initially established largely through the influence of Western economists and oriented toward a Western development model, BRICS today represents an alternative to the Western world, its organizations, neoliberal ideology, and concept of justice.[7] India and Russia are both BRICS members that share strong historical connections. Defense is one of the core areas where India and Russia are doing exceptionally well. The Military-Technical Cooperation agreement for 2021-2031 inked on December 6, 2021, in New Delhi, focuses on joint research development, production, and after-sales support of weapons and military equipment.[8] Nevertheless, an analysis of historical bonds shows that the relationship between India and Russia is primarily based on land. Although the maritime connectivity between both nations stands as the ultimate test of friendship and trust, cooperation was laid with the September 1964 offer of ships and submarines, formalized through an agreement signed in September 1965.[9] In November 2025, India and Russia held high-level interagency meetings in New Delhi. It discussed multiple issues to explore possible collaboration and cooperation, including shipbuilding, trade, and economic, scientific, and technical cooperation. Both sides expressed satisfaction with the comprehensive and forward-looking discussions and reaffirmed their commitment to deepening cooperation across shipbuilding, port development, maritime logistics, Arctic operations, research, and training. The meeting concluded with a shared resolve to build a more resilient, efficient, and sustainable maritime partnership that contributes to the long-term prosperity of both nations and strengthens regional and global connectivity.

2. Strategic Rationale

In December 2025, Russian President Vladimir Putin visited India for the 23rd India-Russia Annual Summit. The visit, which hosted the 23rd India-Russia Annual Summit, was significant as it marked the 25th anniversary of the Declaration on the Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership signed during President Vladimir Putin's first state visit to India in October 2000. Against the backdrop of a complex global landscape, the summit reaffirmed the enduring strength, mutual trust, and strategic convergence that continue to define one of the world's most resilient bilateral relationships – a partnership that remains a vital anchor of global peace and stability.[10] New Delhi and Moscow are redirecting their attention toward the "East," particularly through the Chennai-Vladivostok Eastern Maritime

*Corresponding author: nitish.rs.polsc@mdurohtak.ac.in

Corridor (EMC) and the Northern Sea Route (NSR). This strategic move aims to strengthen partnerships by reducing reliance on traditional geographical routes. Despite rapid naval modernization and increasingly active maritime diplomacy, India's exposure to maritime chokepoints – narrow sea routes through which a very large share of the world's trade and energy supplies move – remains deep and largely unavoidable.[11] Research shows that when these routes are disrupted, the effects are felt quickly in everyday economic outcomes such as fuel prices, inflation, and government finances, especially in countries that depend heavily on imported energy.[12] Over the past two decades, this growing dependence on maritime trade and energy flows has reshaped India's strategic outlook.[13] The idea of the "Indo-Pacific" has emerged not merely as a geopolitical label but as an economic and security framework that reflects the deep interdependence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. In late 2015, Dmitri Rogozin, deputy prime minister in charge of space and defense, tweeted the following: The Arctic is Russia's Mecca".[14] The Northern Sea Route (NSR) is part of the strategic policy of the Russian Federation for the Arctic area. On March 5, 2020, President Vladimir Putin approved the policy principles in Russia's new, 15- year Arctic strategy, Basic Principles of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Arctic Zone Until 2035 (referred to as the Arctic Policy 2035 in this Research Short).[15] That is why both New Delhi and Moscow are looking toward the" East" to bypass traditional geopolitical chokepoints, as disruptions added to these traditional routes are growing day by day. As shown earlier, new routes, such as the Chennai-Vladivostok Eastern Maritime Corridor (EMC) and the Northern Sea Route (NSR), are finding their strategic importance in the official spaces of both countries. Although the relationship between India and Russia has traditionally been land-focused, the evolving global political environment necessitates a maritime orientation. This article contends that the integration of India's Act East Policy with Russia's Great Eurasian Partnership goes beyond conventional military collaboration, forming a strategic and stabilizing third axis that mitigates major power rivalries in the Indo-Pacific region.

3. The Connectivity Pillar: Operationalizing the EMC

Chennai-Vladivostok Eastern Maritime Corridor (EMC): The lack of connectivity between India and Russia is often blamed as one of the major reasons for their limited trade, which has for the past few years hovered around the US$10-11 billion level.[16] In an effort to rectify this situation, preparations for the 2019 summit focused on improving trade ties, with special attention to the Russian Far East.[17] The announcement of the proposed Chennai-Vladivostok maritime corridor was part of the same vision.[18] The Chennai-Vladivostok Maritime Corridor spans roughly 5,600 nautical miles (10,300 km), establishing a direct sea link between Chennai's port on India's eastern coast and Vladivostok, the largest port in Russia's Far East. Referred to as the Eastern Maritime Corridor (EMC), this project was conceived in September 2019 after Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a Memorandum of Intent in Vladivostok, Russia. The Chennai-Vladivostok Eastern Maritime Corridor (EMC) is being activated, and it will take some time, Valerii Khodzhaev, Consul General of the Russian Federation for South India in Chennai, said on Thursday (December 18, 2025).[19] This alternative route appears to be an optimal solution for part of the flows that currently go through congested or longer chains.[20] The shorter the "sea + leg to the warehouse," the easier it is to maintain the price in B2B contracts and delivery stability.[21] The project is not merely a technical solution to logistical inefficiencies; it is emblematic of a broader reorientation in bilateral relations.[22] For Russia, the corridor offers a long-awaited avenue to capitalize on the economic potential of its Far Eastern territories, a region that needs development and growth, especially given the growing influence of China.[23] This route, which connects India's East Coast, specifically the Chennai Port, with the Vladivostok Port in Russia's Far East, reduces shipping distance and transit time, from approximately 40 to 24 days, offering significant time and cost savings for exporters compared to the traditional Suez Canal route.[24] Sagarmala Programme, launched in March 2015, is a flagship initiative of Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways aimed at promoting port-led development in India.[25] The integration of the Chennai-Vladivostok Eastern Maritime Corridor (EMC) with India's Sagarmala Programme and Russia's Far East Development strategy signifies a strategic alignment of two substantial domestic infrastructure initiatives, transforming the corridor from a mere shipping route into a comprehensive economic engine.[26] On the Indian side, the Sagarmala Programme stresses port-led prosperity by modernizing coastal infrastructure to accommodate high-volume bulk cargo shipments. The EMC serves as the international extension of this vision, enabling deep-draft ports along India's eastern seaboard—specifically in Chennai, Visakhapatnam, and Paradip—to function as receiving hubs for Russian energy and mineral resources. Concurrently, the corridor provides a crucial maritime outlet for Russia's top-tier national priority: the Development of the Far East and the Arctic. By establishing a direct connection to Vladivostok, the EMC affords India preferential access to Russia's resource-rich eastern frontier, which hosts numerous Advanced Special Economic Zones (ASEZs) and the Free Port of Vladivostok. With a coastline of approximately 11,099 km, potentially navigable waterways of 14,500, and a strategic location along major global trade routes, India has significant potential for maritime-led economic growth.[27] In light of escalating maritime tensions globally, particularly in the Middle East, it is crucial for emerging powers such as India, to advance strategic initiatives, such as the Chennai-Vladivostok economic corridor. The Chennai-Vladivostok economic corridor (CVEC) benefits both India and Russia by providing security amid growing sea tension.

4. The Defense-Security Pillar: The Reciprocal Exchange of Logistics Support (RELOS) Advantage

India and Russia began discussing RELOS in 2018. In December 2021, it was reported that the RELOS was in its "final stages," with both sides keen to secure "an institutional

arrangement for the reciprocal provision of logistical support and services for the Armed Forces."[28] After eight years of negotiations, the RELOS Agreement was finalized and signed in Moscow in February 2025. In a statement following ratification, the Kremlin said: "The purpose of the Agreement is to define the procedure for the deployment of military formations, port calls by warships, and the use of airspace and airfield infrastructure by military aircraft of the Parties."[29] The Reciprocal Exchange of Logistic Support (RELOS) between long-time privileged strategic partners India and Russia takes their relationship to a whole new level, an expert has said.[30] India's Su-30MKIs**,** S-400 systems, and T-90 tanks will finally receive predictable, planned maintenance instead of costly emergency repairs.[31] Most importantly, linking the Northern Sea Route with the International North-South Transport Corridor cuts shipping time from more than 40 days via The Suez Canal to about 24 days—a remarkable strategic and economic advantage for India's future, the strategic affairs commentator stated[32]. The Indian Navy's access to Vladivostok through the Reciprocal Exchange of Logistics Support (RELOS) agreement greatly increases India's ability to operate in the Western Pacific and Arctic. This strengthens India's presence in the Indo-Pacific region and helps to balance China's influence. The Chennai–Vladivostok corridor relies on strong security, with the Indian Navy able to stop and refuel in Vladivostok to keep this important route safe. Naval interoperability is a cornerstone of the burgeoning India-Russia maritime partnership, marking a strategic shift from periodic INDRA exercises to sustained operational synergy. This evolution aims to deepen coordination between the two navies, facilitating joint patrolling and enhanced Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) across a vast theatre spanning from the Bay of Bengal to the Sea of Japan. Such technical and logistical integration not only boosts operational readiness but also leverages technological synergies, including maritime BrahMos variants and joint underwater surveillance, to establish a decisive security hedge in the Indo-Pacific.

5. The Resource Pillar: Energy and the Arctic

The OPEC World Oil Outlook 2025 report recently stated that India's oil demand is expected to reach 8.2 million barrels per day by 2050, driven by growth in transportation, petrochemicals and industrial activity.[33] Similarly, according to the International Energy Agency (IEA), India's demand for Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) is set to reach 103 billion cubic meters (BCM) annually by the end of this decade.[34] Now, here comes India's formidable equity stake in Russia's energy resources. By acquiring significant equity stakes in major Russian energy projects such as Vostok Oil and Sakhalin-1, India has moved beyond mere imports to becoming a co-owner of the resource base. In this regard, Russia is making efforts to ensure that the routes for transporting energy resources are mutually beneficial for both partners in the deal. Equity stakes act as a bridge, ensuring that the maritime route remains economically viable and strategically essential for India's long-term energy security. In March 2025, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced a new plan to improve Arctic connections. The Trans-Arctic Transport Corridor (TATC) aims to connect key Russian ports from St. Petersburg through Murmansk to Vladivostok and link them to Russia's inland cities and towns via land, rail, sea, and inland waterway systems.[35] The Northern Sea Route (NSR), which earlier was emerging as a shorter alternative route for enabling maritime connectivity between Asian and European ports via the Arctic, would now become a 'key section' of this larger, more comprehensive TATC.[36] Russia's significant push and open call for joint investments in oil, gas, metals, and other mineral development projects in the Russian Arctic, as part of the TATC development plan, create opportunities for Indian companies to pursue long-term investments in such Russian projects.[37] Stable investment in Russian projects and the growth of TATC, especially the Northern Sea route, help India protect against global supply chain problems. Simultaneously it provides Russia with a reliable and growing market in the Indo-Pacific. The maritime synergy between India and Russia extends into the realm of sustainable ocean governance, focusing on joint deep-sea mining and sustainable fisheries in the North Pacific. As the "Eastern Pivot" gains momentum, both nations are exploring the vast potential of polymetallic nodules and rare earth minerals located in the deep seabed, which are critical for the global green energy transition. This cooperation is not merely commercial but also environmental, aiming to establish a framework for sustainable use of marine resources. By leveraging Russia's advanced polar and deep-sea technologies and India's growing maritime industrial capacity, the two countries are positioning themselves as key stakeholders in the North Pacific's blue economy. This partnership fosters long-term economic resilience and aligns with India's vision of a holistic and sustainable maritime domain.[38]

6. The Geopolitical Balancing Act: Multipolarity vs. Bipolarity

Since the establishment of diplomatic ties following India's independence in 1947, relations between Moscow and New Delhi have been shaped by a "high degree of political and strategic trust."[39] So, why does India need Russia?[40] India needs Russian arms and energy, hard interests sweetened by a touch of nostalgia for the Indo-Soviet partnership of the Cold War, and Moscow's reliability as a partner.[41] The Modi government also needs Moscow to signal to Washington that India has options and to create leverage on US President Donald Trump, whose harsh tariffs on India, harsher rhetoric and unexpected outreach to Pakistan have antagonised India.[42] The genesis of the Indo-Pacific lies in the late Japanese PM Shinzo Abe's recognition in 2007 of India's centrality to the region's strategic balance.[43] The US and China are attempting to make the Indo-Pacific a conflict area. India wants to avoid being pushed into a strict alliance. By deepening maritime synergy with Moscow, specifically through EMC and initiatives like joint naval exercises, India ensures a multipolar regional architecture. This engagement provides India with critical leverage, allowing it to maintain Strategic Autonomy while ensuring that the Indo-Pacific remains an open space where neither the U.S. nor China can dictate the regional security

order. This involvement gives India an important influence. This helps India remain independent in its decisions. It also keeps the Indo-Pacific region open, so that neither the US nor China can control the security rules there. At a deeper level, Delhi has kept its relationship with Moscow to ensure that Russia, weakened after its invasion of Ukraine, is not excessively dependent on China and hence not fully aligned with it.[44] Without Moscow, India is much more dependent on Washington. A relationship with Moscow symbolises Delhi's identity as a great power with an autonomous foreign policy that cannot be pressured by the West.[45] Hence, Trump's pressure on India to stop buying Russian oil and abandon Moscow was a key test of Delhi's strategic autonomy.[46] India is a civilizational state rooted in Asia.[47] It seeks an equitable, inclusive, and cooperative world order free from domination.[48] Russia operates differently in the Indo-Pacific maritime domain.[49] It is not constant or dominant.[50] But it is persistent, and it tends to look for opportunity rather than control, including seeking opportunities for engagement where access and relationships can be expanded.[51] India maintains a longstanding and extensive defence relationship with Moscow that adds complexity to alignment within the Quad.[52] New Delhi has been vocal about its desire for "more active Russian partnership" in the Indo-Pacific, reiterated by high level officials across several multilateral forums.[53] However, such participation may invite the ire of Washington, which considers India a crucial Indo-Pacific partner.[54] Indian foreign secretary Harsh Shringla identified Eurasia, the Indo-Pacific, and the Russian Far East as the geopolitical theaters where the two countries can cooperate.[55] The congruence between Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific was identified by Prime Minister Modi in his virtual address at Eastern Economic Forum where he described Vladivostok as a "Sangam" (a confluence of rivers) of Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific.[56] The Chennai-Vladivostok Maritime Corridor connectivity project links the Northern Sea Route and the Pacific creating a "connectivity continuum" that binds the two countries.[57] Russia also plays a pivotal role in supporting India's SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine, which outlines India's strategic approach to the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). It does so by serving as a major defense supplier, enhancing naval interoperability, and collaborating on maritime security efforts, especially in the Arctic and the Far East.

7. Conclusion: The Road Ahead

The Eastern Pivot represents structural changes in India-Russia relations, which have moved from a continental focus to a maritime synergy. Synergy is well established by India's investment in maritime strategic initiatives. Nearly 95% of the country's trade by volume and around 70% by value still traverses the nation's maritime routes, highlighting the sea as the lifeblood of India's commerce.[58] From crude oil and coal to electronics, textiles, and agricultural products, the vast majority of imports and exports flow through bustling ports, connect India to markets around the world.[59] In a bold move to position itself as a global maritime powerhouse, India has set sail with the Maritime India Vision 2030 (MIV 2030), a transformative roadmap launched in 2021.[60] With over 150 strategic initiatives, the vision seeks to modernize ports, expand shipping capacity, and strengthen inland waterways while embedding sustainability and skill development at its core.[61] As mentioned earlier, by integrating the Chennai-Vladivostok Eastern Maritime Corridor (EMC) with NSR, India and Russia successfully institutionalized cooperation through the RELOS policies and joint energy equity in Vostok Oil. Finally, the Indo-Pacific has emerged as a new friendship circle, where India and Russia's shared maritime interests act as a stabilizing force, ensuring a multipolar and inclusive maritime domain.

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