

Krzysztof Iwanek

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9245-6499>

University in Białystok

Perception of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine in the Indian Strategic Discourse, 2022–2025. The Case of MP IDSA

Zarys treści: Niniejszy artykuł omawia postrzeganie przez indyjskie środowisko strategiczne inwazji Rosji na Ukrainę od lutego 2022 r. do momentu pisania niniejszego artykułu (październik 2025 r.). Autor analizuje komentarze Instytutu Studiów i Analiz Obronnych im. Manohara Parrikara (MP IDSA), publicznego think tanku podlegającego indyjskiemu Ministerstwu Obrony. Tekst skupia się na tym, jak indyjscy autorzy postrzegają rosyjskie działania wojskowe przeciwko Ukrainie oraz jakie wnioski wyciągają z tych obserwacji, w tym dotyczących stosunków między New Delhi a Moskwą.

Outline of content: This article discusses how India's strategic community has perceived Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine from February 2022 to the time of writing (October 2025). The sources analysed for this case study are commentaries from the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP IDSA), a public think tank under the Indian Ministry of Defence. The text focuses on how Indian authors perceived Russian military actions against Ukraine and the conclusions they drew from these observations, including their views on New Delhi-Moscow relations.

Słowa kluczowe: stosunki indyjsko-rosyjskie, polityka zagraniczna Indii, polityka zagraniczna Rosji, rosyjska inwazja na Ukrainę, postrzeganie Rosji przez Indie

Keywords: India-Russia relations, India's foreign policy, Russia's foreign policy, Russian invasion of Ukraine, Indian perception of Russia

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has placed India in a delicate position, as New Delhi strives to retain a partnership with both the West and Moscow. Thus, the Indian government chose not to condemn Russia or issue any other statement that could be interpreted as New Delhi clearly siding with one party in the conflict

or the other (the lack of such statements remains true at the time of writing, in October 2025). While remaining politically neutral, India was not entirely unaffected by the war. It may be argued that the Russian invasion of Ukraine caused both repercussions for New Delhi – the need to evacuate Indian citizens in the first weeks of war; the challenge of facing Western criticism for non-condemnation of Russia – as well as positive effects, in the form of being able to import immense quantities of Russian petroleum crude, which Rosneft offered to India on discount prices due to losing most of the Western markets. Thus, while arms trade remains one leg on which the India-Russia partnership stands, the other leg is now the crude trade.

This article, however, will focus neither on New Delhi's diplomatic stance on the invasion nor on India's benefits and losses arising from the war, as both of these subjects have been covered elsewhere.¹ The focus here will be on how India's strategic community perceived the invasion. The main research questions asked in the course of this analysis will be: What do the authors belonging to India's strategic community think of the progress of the Russian invasion of Ukraine? Has the course of events affected their thinking of Russia, the Russian armed forces, and the Russian military industry? What conclusions do these authors draw from these observations when it comes to India-Russia relations? The significance of these questions stems from the fact that the Ukrainian battlefields have arguably become a test for the Russian weaponry, while New Delhi continues to be one of its most important buyers.

The author had previously researched Indian perspectives on the Russian invasion of Ukraine as presented in the Indian media, and therefore, the focus here will be on another set of sources.² This article is based on a qualitative analysis of commentaries on the Russian invasion of Ukraine published by one Indian think tank in the period of February 2022 – September 2025. The case study is limited to the publications of the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, hence MP IDSA, a government think tank that works under the country's Ministry of Defence. While there are many more think tanks in India, and while there is undoubtedly a need to pursue a much wider study of their publications on this subject, due to space constraints, this article had to be limited to

¹ Cf., e.g., K. Iwanek, 'Eksport rosyjskiej ropy do Indii w 2022 r.', *Analiza Ośrodka Badań Azji* (21 March 2023), https://www.wojsko-polskie.pl/aszwoj/u/6a/4b/6a4bde88-378c-4cf4-a822-e4aa3505d0a0/2023-06_analiza_osrodka_badan_azji_eksport_rosyjskiej_ropy_do_indii.pdf (accessed: 27 Aug. 2025); id., 'Eksport rosyjskiej ropy do Indii w 2022 r.', *Analiza Ośrodka Badań Azji* (21 March 2023), https://www.wojsko-polskie.pl/aszwoj/u/6a/4b/6a4bde88-378c-4cf4-a822-e4aa3505d0a0/2023-06_analiza_osrodka_badan_azji_eksport_rosyjskiej_ropy_do_indii.pdf (accessed: 27 Aug. 2025); V. Raghunandan, P. Katinas, 'April 2025 – Monthly Analysis of Russian Fossil Fuel Exports and Sanctions', Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (14 May 2025), <https://energyandcleanair.org/april-2025-monthly-analysis-of-russian-fossil-fuel-exports-and-sanctions/> (accessed: 28 Aug. 2025).

² K. Iwanek, *Zimna gra interesów. Recepcja rosyjskiej inwazji na Ukrainę w mediach indyjskich* (Warszawa, 2022).

one case study. A full review of the Indian perception of the Russian invasion across the spectrum of the Indian strategic community would perhaps merit an entire monograph. However, the MP IDSA represents an interesting case as, while not being the largest think tank in India,³ it is a government institution and one focused on defence matters. This makes MP IDSA a particularly suitable choice for this kind of case study. As we shall see, this does not at all mean that all the authors concerned here present the same view; specific interesting nuances and differences across the commentaries will be noted. Altogether, 43 MP IDSA publications have been analysed for this study.

From ‘crisis’ to ‘invasion’. A shifting tone on Russia’s war against Ukraine

In the author’s earlier research on 300 media news pieces published during the first month of the invasion (22 February – 22 March 2022), it was concluded that Russia was seldom condemned in government-aligned Indian media; this occurred more often in Centrist or Left-leaning media.⁴ The tendency to condemn or not condemn Moscow was often correlated with the choice of words used to describe the events. The authors and the media that tended to be more critical of Russia would use the word ‘invasion’ more often. The authors who did not criticise Russia sometimes used words like ‘crisis’ or even ‘special military operation’, the latter taken straight from Moscow’s narrative. While this is partially a generalisation, it may be said that the choice of these words may often indicate an author’s attitude to Moscow’s actions. The choice of the term ‘invasion’ is often, though not always, seen as a form of criticism of Russia. However, it may also be seen as a simple statement of who attacked whom, without judging what caused the event. The phrase ‘special military operation’, in turn, may be perceived as an attempt to partially justify Russian actions. However, as we shall see in a moment, this is often not the case with the texts analysed for the sake of this study. Words like ‘war’ and ‘conflict’ should be seen as the most neutral of all possible ones and thus positioned between ‘invasion’ and ‘special military operation’.

A part of the above conclusion on early media commentaries cannot be extended to the narrow case study selected here. An outright condemnation of Russia in the texts published officially by the MP IDSA authors would, of course, be impossible, given that it is a government think tank – as mentioned earlier, New Delhi has not condemned Russian actions. In such cases, government think tanks across the globe, not just in India, align their main narratives with their governments’ foreign policy objectives.

³ The distinction belongs to the ORF, formally a private entity, although a one closely connected to the current government.

⁴ Iwanek, *Zimna gra interesów, passim*.

However, even amongst the commentaries published by MP IDSA in this period, an inevitable shift in tone may be observed; changes in semantics are one indication of this shift. The usage of the word ‘crisis’ or the ‘special military operation’ seems to fade away by around mid-2024. The phrase ‘special military operation’ appears to have been primarily used in 2022 and 2023, and then, more sparingly, by around May 2024 (with the last noted use in December 2024, but in quotation marks⁵). Moreover, even texts that use the term ‘special military operation’ are often critical of the Russian armed forces.⁶ This case study is obviously concerned with a narrow sample, and thus broader conclusions should perhaps be avoided; it is unlikely that this semantic shift should be seen as a general attempt to criticise Russia. The discontinuation of the use of the phrase ‘special military operation’ instead marks a simpler, neutral realisation that the situation in Ukraine indeed turned out to be a protracted, full-fledged war. Moreover, the Russian sources themselves ceased to shy away from the term ‘war’ at a similar period: in the early months of 2024.⁷

⁵ B. Sharma, ‘The Imperative of Reviving Cooperation in the Arctic’, MP IDSA (3 Dec. 2024), <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/issuebrief/the-imperative-of-reviving-cooperation-in-the-arctic-2> (accessed: 10 Oct. 2025).

⁶ For such an earlier use of ‘crisis’ cf., e.g.: B. Sharma, ‘India–Russia Relations and India’s Act Far East Policy’, MP IDSA (24 May 2024), <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/issuebrief/india-russia-relations-and-indias-act-far-east-policy> (accessed: 9 Oct. 2025); A. Bhada, ‘Europe Responds to Agrarian Crisis’, MP IDSA (26 June 2024), <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/comments/europe-responds-to-agrarian-crisis> (accessed: 9 Oct. 2025). For the use of ‘special military operation’, cf., e.g., R. Singh, ‘The Wagner Group: A Tool of Hybrid Warfare’, MP IDSA (31 May 2023), <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/issuebrief/the-wagner-group-a-tool-of-hybrid-warfare> (accessed: 10 Oct. 2025). However, as will be mentioned further in the text, the author is also critical of Russia’s use of the Wagner group. Cf. also S. Rao, ‘The Balticconnector Incident: Hybrid Attacks and Critical Infrastructure Protection’, MP IDSA (16 Feb. 2024), <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/issuebrief/the-balticconnector-incident-hybrid-attacks-and-critical-infrastructure-protection> (accessed: 9 Oct. 2025). However, reading the whole text makes it clear that this particular author is very critical of Russia by the standards of the Indian strategic community. The same author has subsequently left MP IDSA and has become even more critical of Russia in her commentaries published elsewhere. The use of both ‘special military operation’ and ‘invasion’ – D. Kumar, ‘Early Military Lessons from Russia’s Special Military Operation in Ukraine’, MP IDSA (28 March 2022), <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/issuebrief/early-military-lessons-from-russias-special-military-operation-in-ukraine> (accessed: 10 Oct. 2025). ‘Crisis’ and ‘conflict’, cf.: R. Kamaria, ‘The Ukraine Crisis and India’s Fertiliser Security’, MP IDSA (9 June 2023), <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/comments/the-ukraine-crisis-and-indias-fertiliser-security> (accessed: 9 Oct. 2025); M. Banerjee, ‘Assessing China’s Role as a Mediator in Ukraine Crisis’, MP IDSA (26 May 2023), <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/comments/assessing-chinas-role-as-a-mediator-in-ukraine-crisis> (accessed: 10 Oct. 2025). ‘Crisis’, ‘conflict’, and ‘military action’, cf. J. Wahlang, ‘Kazakhstan’s “Multi-Vector” Foreign Policy Amidst the Ukraine War’, MP IDSA (23 Apr. 2023), <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/comments/kazakhstans-multi-vector-foreign-policy-amidst-the-ukraine-war> (accessed: 10 Oct. 2025).

⁷ ‘Explainer: Why is Russia Changing Its Language About War’, Reuters (22 March 2024), <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/why-is-russia-changing-its-language-about-war-2024-03-22/> (accessed: 10 Oct. 2025).

However, it is even more important to note that in the MP IDSA commentaries, the word ‘invasion’ does appear too – sometimes even in earlier texts – and that it is sometimes accompanied by critical words about Russia (although not a condemnation of the invasion as such). One author, Anshu Kumar, terms the conflict Russia’s “invasion” of Ukraine and a “war of attrition”.⁸ IDSA’s another expert, Harinder Singh, not only uses the word ‘invasion’ but also criticises Moscow’s targeting of Ukrainian civilian infrastructure and the use of the Wagner mercenary unit, notorious for its atrocities.⁹ The word ‘invasion’ has also been used by Muddassir Quamar,¹⁰ Mayuri Banerjee,¹¹ and Rajorshi Roy.¹² In the case of the third author, this usage had also occurred in January 2022, before the invasion began.¹³ As one reason for the upcoming conflict, the author considered the explanation that perhaps “the Kremlin’s gameplan has all along been a military intervention”. However, Roy also pointed to both sides, the West and Russia, taking positions that led to this situation, and thus does not seem to be blaming only Moscow for initiating the conflict.¹⁴

Other aspects of a critical approach to Moscow’s actions are visible too, including in the texts that do not make use of the word ‘invasion’. Swasti Rao referred to the 2023 sabotage of the Balticconnector as Russia’s “hybrid attack” and deemed the possibility of a Russian attack on the NATO frontier states no longer “unthinkable”.¹⁵ Ajay Lele believed that “[w]hile President Putin has been positive in his views when talking about peace, they do not match with his actions in the warzone”.¹⁶

⁸ A. Kumar, ‘Trump’s Outreach to Putin Has Implications for the Baltics’, MP IDSA (10 March 2025), <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/issuebrief/trumps-outreach-to-putin-has-implications-for-the-baltics> (accessed: 9 Oct. 2025).

⁹ H. Singh, ‘Ukraine and the Community-isation of War Effort’, MP IDSA (23 Apr. 2023), <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/comments/ukraine-and-the-community-isation-of-war-effort> (accessed: 10 Oct. 2025). Cf. also for another use of the word ‘invasion’ and the praise of Ukrainian open-source intelligence and Western intelligence as one of the factors that hampered the Russian invasion, id., ‘Open-Source Intelligence: The Tool of First Resort in Ukraine War’, MP IDSA (22 May 2023), <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/comments/open-source-intelligence-the-tool-of-first-resort-in-ukraine-war> (accessed: 10 Oct. 2025).

¹⁰ M. Quamar, ‘The Ukrainian Crisis and Dilemmas for Turkish Foreign Policy’, MP IDSA (14 March 2022), <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/comments/the-ukrainian-crisis-and-dilemmas-for-turkish-foreign-policy> (accessed: 10 Oct. 2025).

¹¹ M. Banerjee, ‘Chinese News Media Narratives on the Ukraine Crisis’, MP IDSA (14 May 2023), <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/comments/chinese-news-media-narratives-on-the-ukraine-crisis> (accessed: 10 Oct. 2025).

¹² R. Roy, ‘Navigating the India–Russia Strategic Partnership’, MP IDSA (8 July 2024), <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/issuebrief/navigating-the-india-russia-strategic-partnership> (accessed: 9 Oct. 2025).

¹³ Id., ‘Looming Spectre of Conflict in Eastern Europe?’, MP IDSA (3 Jan. 2022), <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/comments/looming-spectre-of-conflict-in-eastern-europe> (accessed: 10 Oct. 2025).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Rao, ‘The Balticconnector Incident’.

¹⁶ A. Lele, ‘US–Ukraine Strategic Cooperation in Resource Extraction’, MP IDSA (5 May 2025), <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/comments/us-ukraine-strategic-cooperation-in-resource-extraction> (accessed: 9 Oct. 2025).

The same author also referred to Moscow's action with regards to Crimea as 'annexation';¹⁷ so does Krutika Patil.¹⁸ It is worth pointing out that, contrary to these authors, New Delhi has never used words like 'invasion' or 'annexation' in its official statements related to Russia's actions in Ukraine.

One also observes the phrase 'special military operation' occurring in quotation marks in some of the MP IDSA publications, with the context of such use expressing even more doubt about Moscow's real intentions. In April 2024, Niranjana Chandrashekhara Oak concluded that:

Although the aim of the so-called "special military operation" was to "demilitarise and denazify Ukraine", Putin's speeches clearly suggest that the real objective was to deter NATO from being present at the borders of Russia. However, things turned out exactly the opposite, and the neutral Nordic countries on the north-western border of Russia also became parties to NATO. Thus, Russia's three core demands – prevention of NATO expansion, no assault weapons on the Russian borders and rolling back NATO's military capacity and infrastructure in Europe to where they were in 1997 – have gone for a toss.¹⁹

Three aspects are of note here. First, like many of his peers, Oak believes that the Russian strategy so far failed. Secondly, Oak rejects a large part of the Russian narrative by adding the phrase *so-called* before the 'special military operation' and by distrusting Moscow's declared objective of 'denazification'. However, Oak also appears to agree that Russia's concern about NATO expansion was legitimate. This appears to be a larger phenomenon. As mentioned earlier, this author had earlier researched 300 news pieces from the first month of the invasion; within that sample, most of the Indian authors also did not repeat the Russian claims about the need for 'denazification' as a legitimate reason for the invasion. However, a considerable number of such authors argued that NATO expansion was a legitimate reason.²⁰ Thus, Indian authors tend not to perceive the war through the lens of political ideologies (and thus, they reject the 'denazification narrative'). However, they often perceive it as a result of great power rivalry and of clashing interests – including the interests of Western countries (and thus, they accept the 'NATO expansion' narrative). In conclusion, while a particular Indian expert may criticise the Russian military for strategic blunders or for atrocities committed against

¹⁷ Id., 'Ukraine's Strategic Minerals: Trump's War Alimony', MP IDSA (27 Feb. 2025), <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/comments/ukraines-strategic-minerals-trumps-war-alimony> (accessed: 9 Oct. 2025).

¹⁸ K. Patil, 'Russia-Ukraine Conflict and Geopolitics of Data Routing', MP IDSA (29 Apr. 2022), <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/issuebrief/russia-ukraine-conflict-and-geopolitics-of-data-routing> (accessed: 10 Oct. 2025).

¹⁹ N.Ch. Oak, 'Ukraine War, A Thorn in the Arms Control Talks', MP IDSA (18 Apr. 2024), <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/comments/ukraine-war-a-thorn-in-the-arms-control-talks> (accessed: 10 Oct. 2025).

²⁰ Iwanek, *Zimna gra interesów*, pp. 8–9.

civilians, this does not have to indicate that a majority of such analysts perceive the Russian invasion of Ukraine as entirely unjustified.

Still, while the above instances of criticism or scepticism towards Russia are not numerically dominant, they seem to indicate that the initial successes of the Russian narrative in India have weakened over time. At some point, it became clear – even to Russia’s well-wishers – that Moscow’s promises of a limited, short military operation were divorced from reality. While this is hard to measure, the authors considered here – being analysts of the strategic community who focus on analysing military conflicts – are, in general, probably less susceptible to such triumphant political propaganda than some other authors. Moreover, it is clear that it is not just Russia’s self-construed image of a ‘benign’ power that has suffered over the course of the past three and a half years, but Russia’s image of a power as such.

Russian failures on the Ukrainian battlefield as seen from the Indian perspective

Russia’s image as a country with a powerful military suffered a considerable decline as a result of the conflict in Ukraine. Moscow’s defeats and immense losses have been noted by various Indian commentators.²¹ As one MP IDSA’s expert, N.Ch. Oak, expresses this, “the protracted Ukraine war has dented Russia’s image as a great power”. However, the same author concludes that “Russia is still a significant military power”.²² On 28 March 2022, a month into the war, Deepak Kumar observed that Russia’s swift triumph over Ukraine has not been assured and pointed to several factors as potential reasons. His list includes facets such as Russian battalion tactical groups being unable to operate in a ‘cohesive’ manner, Russia’s “poor situational awareness”, and numerous mistakes on the frontline of operations.²³ The Russian military command has not been spared by other writers. In a September 2023 discussion, several MP IDSA pointed to Moscow’s inadequate use of its navy, despite a clear supremacy in this regard.²⁴ Painting a grim picture of Moscow’s use of the Wagner mercenary group in the war, Rajneesh Singh, writing in May 2023, also noted that the Russian forces pushed this group to the forefront of the battle of Bakhmut, where it suffered immense losses. The battle, the Indian author concluded, defied “military logic”.²⁵ Listing many successes of

²¹ Cf. e.g. Kumar, ‘Trump’s Outreach to Putin’.

²² Oak, ‘Ukraine War’.

²³ Kumar, ‘Early Military Lessons’.

²⁴ N.Ch. Oak, ‘Monday Morning Meeting on Maritime Dimensions of the Ukraine War’, MP IDSA (11 Sept. 2023), <https://www.idsa.in/idsa-event/monday-morning-meeting-on-maritime-dimensions-of-the-ukraine-war> (accessed: 10 Oct. 2025).

²⁵ Singh, ‘The Wagner Group’.

Ukrainian war preparedness in April 2023, Harinder Singh concluded that the “Russians might have under-estimated the Ukrainian resistance”.²⁶

In another commentary, published in March 2023, the same author concludes that:

The Ukrainian state seems to be doing all things right. [...] Russia lacks the capability to defeat Ukraine. On the other hand, Ukraine with a steady supply of weapons arms, lacks the combat power to push back the Russian forces from its territory. A military stalemate could well emerge.²⁷

Thus, it is not that the author believes in a complete victory of Ukraine over Russia, but he does not believe in a reverse scenario, either. This opinion, expressed a year after the conflict began, marks a sea change from how many commentators – not just Moscow’s well-wishers – believed in Russia’s military supremacy in the first days of the war.²⁸

Apart from issues of strategy and tactics, the MP IDSA authors also observed, on several occasions, that the Russian military proved not as technologically dominant on the battlefield as one might have earlier assumed. For instance, Abhay Kumar Sinh and R. Vignesh notice the expanding Ukrainian capability to strike Russian navy ships in the Black Sea; the authors conclude that this “would make the Black Sea Fleet less efficient and more vulnerable in its naval operations against Ukraine”.²⁹ Moreover, the fact that the Russian armed forces are experiencing high-scale losses affects the Russian arms export to India directly. Rahul Wankhede noticed how the Russian invasion of Ukraine caused delays and other problems in deliveries of Russian military equipment to India.³⁰

²⁶ Singh, ‘Ukraine and the Community-isation’.

²⁷ Id., ‘The Corporatisation of Ukraine War. A Case of Unfolding Assymetry’, MP IDSA (25 March 2023), <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/comments/the-corporatisation-of-ukraine-war-a-case-of-unfolding-asymmetry-in-military-power> (accessed: 10 Oct. 2025).

²⁸ However, as the Ukrainian attempt at a counteroffensive in mid-2024 resulted in a defeat, in November that year an anonymous Strategic Digest by MP IDSA again pointed to the Russian forces having an edge in aspects such as their ability to replenish their forces and expand its weaponry; “the outlook for Ukraine appears grim”, the digest concludes, *MP IDSA. Strategic Digest*, 6, no. 22 (16 Nov. 2024), <https://www.idsa.in/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Strategic-Digest-6-22-161124.pdf> (accessed: 10 Oct. 2025).

²⁹ R. Vignesh, A.K. Sinh, ‘Attack on Sevastopol: Key Takeaways’, MP IDSA (4 Oct. 2023), <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/issuebrief/attack-on-sevastopol-key-takeaways> (accessed: 9 Oct. 2025).

³⁰ R. Wankhede, ‘Stealth Frigates and India–Russia Defence Cooperation’, MP IDSA (20 Aug. 2025), <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/comments/stealth-frigates-and-india-russia-defence-cooperation> (accessed: 9 Oct. 2025). Cf. also id., ‘AK-203 Rifle Joint Venture and India–Russia Defence Cooperation’, MP IDSA (27 Feb. 2025), <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/issuebrief/ak-203-rifle-joint-venture-and-india-russia-defence-cooperation> (accessed: 9 Oct. 2025); Roy, ‘Navigating the India–Russia Strategic Partnership’. More on such delays in the India–Russia arms trade: J.C.K. Daly, ‘Russian Arms Exports Collapse by 92 Percent as Military-Industrial Complex Fails’, Jamestown Foundation (15 Jan. 2025), <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-arms-exports-collapse->

However, outside the purely military domain, some authors have also pointed out that Russia remained resilient in the face of Western pressure in other areas. Krutika Patil argued that “Russian concern of being blocked from the global internet by the West has not materialised”.³¹ Considering the state of the Russian economy, A.R. Duarah concluded that it proved to be resilient in the face of sanctions, and while the “Ukraine conflict highlights the structural issues that the Russian economy has been facing”, he concludes that “[a]ny chance for a total economic collapse” is “unlikely”.³² Another author, Rajneesh Singh, is far less charitable, however. Here are the conclusions of his MP IDSA-published 2023 monograph.

After analysing the sanctions and export control measures imposed by the West, the strategies and counterstrategies, this study concludes that Russia faces grim economic prospects. It is likely that sanctions may have a long-term economic consequence, and may negatively affect Russia’s defence industrial base. However, in the short to medium term, Russia will still have resources to fund its war in Ukraine.³³

At the risk of stating the obvious, a collapse of the Russian economy would have caused significant challenges for New Delhi, as it would lead to a halt in Russian arms to India (although not necessarily the crude exports). Thus, Russia’s resilience in the face of Western sanctions is likely one of the reasons why Indian experts believe New Delhi is right to retain its partnership with Moscow.

Keeping a steady course – both towards Russia and towards the West

The weakening of Indian experts’ opinion on Russian military hardware would have been a particularly important conclusion, as New Delhi remains one of Moscow’s most important clients in this regard. As long as war losses are attributed to human

by-92-percent-as-military-industrial-complex-fails/ (accessed: 1 Aug. 2025). D. Peri, ‘Six-Month Delay in Delivery of Two Stealth Frigates by Russia Due to War in Ukraine’, *The Hindu* (17 Aug. 2022), <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/six-month-delay-in-delivery-of-two-stealth-frigates-by-russia-due-to-war-in-ukraine/article65779161.ece> (accessed: 1 Aug. 2025). ‘Supply Chain of Certain Ammunition, Spares Impacted Because of Ukraine War: Army Chief’, *New India Express* (10 May 2022), <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2022/May/10/supply-chain-of-certain-ammunition-spares-impacted-because-of-ukraine-war-army-chief-2451910.html> (accessed: 1 Aug. 2025). D. Peri, ‘Army Aviation Augments Combat Power While Ageing Cheetah, Chetaks Await Replacement’, *The Hindu* (10 Aug. 2022), <https://defencenewsupdates.com/army-aviation-increases-combat-power-while-ageing-cheetah-and-chetaks-wait-to-be-replaced/> (accessed: 1 Aug. 2025).

³¹ Patil, ‘Russia–Ukraine Conflict’.

³² A.R. Duarah, ‘Russian Economy and the Ukraine Conflict’, MP IDSA (13 Feb. 2025), <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/issuebrief/russian-economy-and-the-ukraine-conflict> (accessed: 9 Oct. 2025).

³³ R. Singh, *Sanctions on Russia: A Study of Economic Coercion in the Contemporary World*, MP-IDSA Monograph Series, no. 82, (New Delhi, 2023), p. 118, <https://www.idsa.in/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/monograph82.pdf> (accessed: 10 Oct. 2025).

errors, one may argue that a particular Russian platform or weapon is not to blame. In simpler words, an Indian expert may hold a high opinion of a Russian military product but a low one of the Russian officers who failed to adequately use it on the Ukrainian battleground. A change in opinions about the hardware would thus have been a much more significant occurrence.

However, it must be stressed that as far as the texts here are concerned, in general, such a change did not seem to occur. While the above-quoted Vignesh and Sinh point out the vulnerabilities of the Russian Black Sea fleet, they do not express any low opinion of the Russian navy in a technological sense; rather, they argue that the Russian command was unable to use this navy properly. Thus, they do not openly argue for any reduction of Indian imports in this regard (at least not in the same commentary).³⁴ Another author observes that the Kinzhal, a missile used by the Russians against Ukraine several times, is not a truly hypersonic weapon – but also declares that its use on that frontline underlines the importance of such weapons, and argue that this is a new challenge for New Delhi to focus more on such a field.³⁵

Despite all the events in Ukraine, there are also numerous cases of Indian experts being clearly satisfied with aspects of their country's defence cooperation with Russia. The success of an Indo-Russian joint venture, the BrahMos missile, which will be exported to the Philippines, is obviously a reason to write about it in glowing terms, as N.Ch. Oak did.³⁶ Thus, the author does not argue that the joint project should be discontinued, even though there appears to be a risk that Western sanctions could hamper it.³⁷ Similarly, one would not expect the MP IDSA authors to write critically of the Russian S-400 system, despite the delays in its deliveries to India (and indeed, no such critical commentary has been identified for the sake of this study). The system just recently performed well during the May 2025 clashes between India and Pakistan and remains one of the brightest stars on the slowly darkening sky of the Russian military industry. Thus, as far as the sources in question are concerned, there does not seem to be a correlation between MP IDSA's opinions on the Russian armed forces and their opinions on Russian arms. Similarly, they appear to assume that purchasing Russian weaponry is worth the risk of incurring Western sanctions.

However, the narrow limits of this case study should not make us blind to the fact that the defence cooperation between India and Russia has indeed significantly

³⁴ Vignesh, Sinh, 'Attack on Sevastopol'.

³⁵ Amita, 'Hypersonic Weapons and Contemporary Conflicts', MP IDSA (3 Aug. 2025), <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/issuebrief/hypersonic-weapons-and-contemporary-conflicts> (accessed: 9 Oct. 2025).

³⁶ N.Ch. Oak, 'What BrahMos Deal With Philippines Means for Indo-Pacific', MP IDSA (23 Feb. 2022), <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/comments/what-brahmos-deal-with-philippines-means-for-indo-pacific> (accessed: 10 Oct. 2025).

³⁷ 'The US has sanctioned a Russian company that is party to the project', US Department of Treasury, Office of Foreign Assets Control, 'Sanctions List Search', 2025, <https://sanctionssearch.ofac.treas.gov/Details.aspx?id=16884> (accessed: 2 July 2025).

decreased over the past three and a half years. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has been a major factor here, due to already-mentioned issues like Russian losses on the Ukrainian frontline, longer-than-usual delays in deliveries, but also the crippling effect of sanctions on the Russian economy (for instance, the fact that Russian defence companies have been cut off from Western supplies of advanced semiconductors). The repercussions of the invasion thus likely accelerated the decline of the Russian military industry, leading to a further decrease in arms exports to India. Since February 2022, New Delhi has reportedly decided to halt imports of Ka-31 helicopters from Russia,³⁸ as well as rejected the offer of the Ka-226 helicopters,³⁹ and expressed little interest in the Su-57 fighter jets.⁴⁰ While at such occasions the Indian government usually does not publicly offer reasons of such decisions, one is left to assume that these are caused exactly by the deterioration of the quality of Russian equipment – a decline which the invasion has not only highlighted, but also quickened. Another explanation could be a fear of sanctions, or simply losing the fear of losing a chance to sign some contracts with Western companies. There is, thus, a serious limitation to this study: while it presents the views of the Indian defence experts as publicly presented by them in their professional capacity, these views do not always have to agree with the reality of the declining Indo-Russian arms trade.

And yet, some of the authors concerned here also perceive the ongoing conflict and its larger repercussions as opening new possibilities for their country to cooperate more with Russia. The best instance of this is the petroleum crude trade, which was already mentioned in the introduction to this article. India began to purchase Russian crude in large volumes as early as March 2022, and precisely because Rosneft needed new markets for its goods, having lost most of the Western markets. Thus, Rosneft offered its crude to India at a lower price, making New Delhi one of the beneficiaries of the West-Russia clash and, specifically, of the Western sanctions on Russia. This has become a subject of great interest in India, with a majority of commentators justifying New Delhi's decision on Russian crude imports, and some of them pushing back against Western criticism of the move. While this is an important issue, it appears marginally in IDSA commentaries, but this is because this particular think tank is focused on defence matters, rather than the energy industry.

However, some of the MP IDSA authors indeed argued for the retention, or even expansion, of India-Russia cooperation, even beyond the realm of defence. For instance, B. Sharma argued that “Exits by companies from the Russian oil and gas field as a result of Western sanctions present excellent opportunities for

³⁸ A. Bhaumik, ‘Amid Ukraine War, India Halts KA-31 Helicopter Deal with Russia’, *Deccan Herald* (19 May 2022), <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/amid-ukraine-war-india-halts-ka-31-helicopter-deal-with-russia-1110217.html> (accessed: 4 July 2025).

³⁹ Peri, ‘Army Aviation’.

⁴⁰ Daly, ‘Russian Arms Exports’.

India to make long-term investments in the Russian oil and gas field in the Far East region”.⁴¹

Among other opportunities, the same author also points out that the Indian shipbuilding industry could benefit from the challenges Russia is facing. “Presently, the Russian shipping industry is under severe pressure as a result of Western sanctions that has led to unavailability of critical component and technologies required for ship building and repair in Russia. [...] Such business opportunities need to be further explored by India”.⁴²

Elsewhere, the same author also noticed that Western countries ceased to cooperate with Russia in the Arctic but concluded that this stance makes “no sense” and thus clearly argues that New Delhi should cooperate with Moscow in this field. “Though the ongoing geopolitical realities with regard to Russia–Ukraine conflict cannot be ignored, termination of engagements at academic and scientific levels make no sense for a region as a whole that is on a cusp of bigger common threats of existential nature to mankind”.⁴³

MP IDSA’s another author, Anurag Bisen, appears to agree with the above sentiment.⁴⁴ Similarly, J. Wahlang argues that India should retain her engagement with SCO, a grouping that involves both Russia and China.⁴⁵

Thus, it must be stressed that despite the factors described in the earlier two sections, the MP IDSA experts do not argue that their country’s partnership with Russia should be discontinued. The same appears true for a majority of Indian authors of commentaries on foreign policy and defence matters. At the same time, they largely argue for retention, or often even expansion, of their country’s relations with the West.⁴⁶ This position was perhaps most succinctly expressed by MP IDSA’s R. Kumar on 8 February 2022, barely weeks before the full-scale invasion commenced. “For India, the Ukraine crisis is a challenging foreign policy issue. Moscow and Washington are New Delhi’s key strategic partners, and abandoning one is not sensible”.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Sharma, ‘India–Russia Relations’.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Sharma, ‘The Imperative of Reviving’.

⁴⁴ A. Bisen, ‘India’s G20 Presidency: Opportunity to Resume Engagement in the Arctic’, MP IDSA (17 Feb. 2023), <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/policybrief/indias-g20-presidency-opportunity-to-resume-engagement-in-the-arctic> (accessed: 10 Oct. 2025).

⁴⁵ J. Wahlang, ‘The 22 Summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation’, MP IDSA (22 Nov. 2022), <https://www.idsa.in/system/files/backgroundunder/b-22-summit-of-the-sco-j-wahlang.pdf> (accessed: 10 Oct. 2025).

⁴⁶ A. Bhada puts it this way: “the Russia–Ukraine crisis has given India the impetus to engage more proactively with European states”, id., ‘Prime Minister Modi’s Europe Visit: An Analysis’, MP IDSA (30 May 2022), <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/issuebrief/prime-minister-modis-europe-visit-an-analysis> (accessed: 10 Oct. 2025).

⁴⁷ R. Kumar, ‘Ukraine Crisis and US–Russia Face-off at UN Security Council’, MP IDSA (8 Feb. 2022), <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/comments/ukraine-crisis-and-us-russia-face-off-at-un-security-council>

Conclusion

The Russian invasion of Ukraine turned out to be a test not just for the Russian armed forces, but also a test for the New Delhi-Moscow partnership. The first test was more of a failure than a success, and yet the second test was passed successfully. The main conclusion of this case study is that the Indian authors generally argue for the retention of New Delhi's simultaneous partnership with both Russia and the West. This is despite the fact that some of them do not perceive the Russian military actions against Ukraine in a charitable way, and even though in some cases, their opinion of the strength of Russian armed forces has apparently declined. This first, general conclusion is, admittedly, not at all surprising to anyone who watches India's current foreign policy. However, the nuances unveiled over the course of this short study – the slight shifting of the tone on the Russian invasion and on commentaries on the Russian military, all of that in the publications of an Indian government think tank – might appear to be important findings. So does the fact that some of the authors concerned here used words like 'invasion' or 'annexation', which their own government always avoids while issuing statements on the Russian actions in Ukraine. However, a much broader study would be needed to establish whether similar shifts occurred in the publications of other Indian think tanks or, more generally, across the Indian strategic community – including in academic publications and in the commentaries of defence experts in the media.

One more limitation of this case study should be addressed. A question arises whether the opinion of the above authors may serve as a good indication of New Delhi's foreign policy course towards Russia, Ukraine, and the West (in the short-to medium-term). This appears to be a natural conclusion: on the one hand, we see that New Delhi is indeed striving to retain a partnership with Russia, and on the other hand, we see that Indian experts mostly advocate the same. However, such a correlation does not prove that the opinions of Indian experts will continue to coherently indicate the future course of New Delhi's actions towards Russia. A country may sometimes be forced to completely change its policy due to external factors. It may be argued that, even though both the Indian government and Indian experts appear to be in agreement on the benefits of their country reimagining in a simultaneous partnership with both the West and Russia, events in the near future may force New Delhi to change this course anyway. One may venture to further speculate that such events may include either increased Western pressure on India

(accessed: 10 Oct. 2025). As three of the four Quad members – Australia, Japan, and the US – immediately condemned the Russian of Ukraine, only the government of the fourth member, India, refrained from doing so. MP IDSA's N.Ch. Oak argued this was the right choice – as, indeed, most Indian experts have – inferring that this should allow New Delhi to retain a partnership with Moscow, since "Russia should take note of India's role as an independent player in the Quad", *id.*, 'Quad and the Ukrainian Crisis', MP IDSA (22 March 2022), <https://www.idsa.in/publisher/issuebrief/quad-and-the-ukrainian-crisis> (accessed: 10 Oct. 2025).

to reduce New Delhi's cooperation with Moscow (through means such as sanctions) or a theoretical collapse of the Russian industry, as a result of which India would not much more to import from the country, apart from natural resources such as petroleum crude. Yet, analysing the plethora of Indian opinions on the Russian invasion of Ukraine may still serve as a good indication of both the state of New Delhi's current foreign policy and the course the Indian government and the Indian strategic community would like to retain in the coming years.

Abstract

The Russian invasion of Ukraine turned out to be a test not just for the Russian armed forces but also for the New Delhi-Moscow partnership. The first test was more of a failure than a success, and yet the second test was passed successfully. Amongst MP IDSA's experts, Russia's image as a country with a powerful military suffered a considerable decline as a result of the conflict in Ukraine. Moscow's narrative of its operation being a 'special military operation' has suffered an even deeper decline in the same period. Some of the authors quoted here wrote openly not only about the high rate of Moscow's losses, of Russian forces' strategic and tactical blunders, but also of a Russian 'invasion' of Ukraine and 'annexation' of Crimea, as well as atrocities against civilians. All of this puts such commentaries in stark contrast to New Delhi's official statements. However, this does not mean that the authors in question openly call for their government to dismantle its partnership with Moscow. To the contrary, they often argue for its retention, or even its expansion into new fields. Yet, this does not necessarily indicate that New Delhi will retain such a course, since, as the events of the past three and a half years suggest, India may simply be forced to further limit its partnership with Moscow due to factors such as the declining Russian military industry or Western sanctions.

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Krzysztof Iwanek – PhD, assistant professor at the University of Białystok, expert at the Lodz University. Interested in Indian politics and history, author of two books on India. Writes for *The Diplomat*.
(krzysiwane@gmail.com)