Q6(a)

Arms trade, economic ties and congruent geo-political interests are no longer the three pillars of India - Russia relationship in the emerging strategic context. Comment

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · PSIR GS 2 · 20 marks · Changing International Political Order

Changing International Political Order: Rise of super powers; strategic and ideological Bipolarity, arms race and Cold War; Nuclear threat; Non-aligned movement; Collapse of the Soviet Union; Unipolarity and American hegemony; relevance of non-alignment in the contemporary world.

Core demand of the question

- Comment on the statement that arms, economy, and geopolitics are no longer the three pillars of the India-Russia relationship
- Write at 20-mark length

Revision summary

The old model was Soviet and Russian arms, a small economy, and anti-unipolar geopolitics.

India now diversifies weapons; Russia is no longer the future monopoly supplier.

After 2022, oil dominates trade and brings sanctions risk.

Russia's closeness to China weakens its value as India's Asia balancer.

The three names remain; the balanced three-pillar picture does not.

Introduction

For decades India-Russia ties were described through defence supply, a thin but strategic economy, and a geopolitical fit against a common map of China and the West. The statement is partly right: the old balance among those three has broken. It is too strong if it means the relationship has no remaining structure.

Body

Arms

- The Soviet Union and then Russia were the main source of Indian combat aircraft, tanks, submarines, and later the S-400 system.
- That pillar is weaker. India now buys from France, the United States, Israel, and domestic lines. Spare-part risk after 2022 and CAATSA pressure on customers of Russian systems accelerated diversification.
- Joint projects such as BrahMos still exist. New big-ticket dependence is no longer the whole of Indian modernisation.
- Arms remain a pillar in the inventory of the services. They are no longer the future-monopoly pillar they were in the 1970s-1990s.

Economy

- Pre-2022 trade was small next to India-China or India-US trade. Energy, diamonds, and fertilisers mattered more than a full production partnership.
- After 2022, discounted Russian oil made energy a suddenly large economic fact. That is a new economic pillar, not the old industrial-cooperation dream.
- Payment systems, shipping insurance, and Western secondary-sanctions risk make this energy trade politically costly and operationally awkward.
- Investment, connectivity through INSTC, and the rupee-rouble experiments have not matched the oil spike.

Geopolitics

- Shared interest in a multipolar order, a UN Security Council relationship, and caution about a unipolar United States still exist.
- The China-Russia closeness after 2022 is the shock. A partner that is also Beijing's close strategic partner is a less simple geopolitical asset for New Delhi after Galwan.
- Russia remains useful on Afghanistan-era intelligence memory, Central Asia, and as a veto-wielding P5 member that India does not want as an enemy.
- Mearsheimer's great-power map now places Russia as a declining European war State more than as India's Asia balancer.

Comment

- **The three headings still name the files. Their relative weights have changed:** oil up, new arms down, geopolitics more contradictory.
- Keohane's view of lingering regimes fits the residual defence and nuclear-technical cooperation. Cox's view of a shifting world order fits Russia's turn toward China.
- The fair comment is that the classic equal three-pillar model is outdated. A thinner, energy-heavy, politically constrained partnership remains.

Flow diagram

Soviet era three files -> Arms diversified

Soviet era three files -> Economy now oil-heavy

Soviet era three files -> Geopolitics Russia-China bind

Arms diversified -> Thinner partnership

Economy now oil-heavy -> Thinner partnership

Geopolitics Russia-China bind -> Thinner partnership

Conclusion

Arms, economy, and geopolitics still describe India-Russia files, but they are not three equal pillars. Diversified arms, oil-heavy trade, and a Russia-China bind have rebuilt the relationship on a narrower and more awkward base.

Facts & figures

S-400

Russian long-range air defence bought by India, a late symbol of the arms pillar and of CAATSA risk.

BrahMos
India-Russia joint cruise-missile programme that still operates as a production link.

Oil after 2022
Sharp rise in Indian seaborne imports of Russian crude following the Ukraine war discounts.

INSTC
International North-South Transport Corridor idea linking India, Iran, and Russia; slower than the oil trade.

CAATSA
US sanctions law that threatens customers of specified Russian defence equipment.