

RECIPROCAL EXCHANGE OF LOGISTICS AGREEMENT: ROADMAP TO INDIA'S STRATEGIC ACCESS IN THE ARCTIC

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India and Russia maintain a rigorous framework of bilateral cooperation. The annual India–Russia summit held in December 2021 in New Delhi led to the signing and acknowledgement of multiple important agreements between the two countries.¹ Though several issues of mutual interest were discussed during the summit, agreement on an important Reciprocal Exchange of Logistics Agreement (RELOS) could not be reached.² RELOS remains to be a crucial agreement between India and Russia as both the countries plan to increase their bilateral investments in the Arctic region and Russian Far East.

The Reciprocal Exchange of Logistics Agreement is a long-awaited administrative agreement that would enable the militaries of both the countries to access logistics and support facilities at each other's bases and ports.³ It would facilitate the replenishment of fuel, rations, spare parts and berthing for troops, warships and aircrafts while operating away from home ports and bases during the war and peacetime missions. The agreement would enable maintenance facilities to warships and military aircraft at each other's bases. RELOS would further ensure smooth use of the host nation's existing logistics networks which would reduce the overall costs of the mission and provide a strategic edge to each other's military operations.

India has signed military logistics agreements with several countries in the past. This includes the India–US Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), India–Japan **Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA)** and **India–Australia** Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (MLSA), demonstrating all the Quad countries. Apart from this, India maintains such military logistics agreements with France, Singapore and South Korea. It is currently in the process of finalising such an agreement with the UK and Vietnam.⁴ Signing RELOS with Russia would add to greater strategic cooperation between the two countries.

India's interests in the Arctic region are increasing and it is keen to make investments particularly in the exploration of Russian oil, gas and other rare earth minerals in the near future. It is likely that these investments would increase further in future, therefore some kind of strategic security backing is required to safeguard India's investments in the Arctic. At present, India does not maintain any port facility or naval base in this region as a whole. An agreement such as RELOS would enable Indian Navy to have greater operational reach in the Arctic. It would provide logistics and other required facilities to Indian naval ships venturing through the region. Further, in case of any hostile situation arising in the region, RELOS would enable greater coordination between the Indian and Russian Navy to respond appropriately in the region. The major Russian naval ports are shown in Map 1.

Map 1. Major Russian Naval Ports

Source: Dang Wang et al., "[Development Situation and Future Demand for the Ports along the Northern Sea Route](#)", *Research in Transportation Business & Management*, Vol. 33, December 2019.

The Arctic sea-ice along the Russian coast is receding drastically. The Northern Sea Route is humming with shipping activity that is significantly increasing annually. India has openly called for supporting the Russian vision of developing the Northern Sea Route (NSR).⁵ From Vladivostok in the Far East to Murmansk in the west, Russia maintains a vast stretch of naval port infrastructure along the NSR. As the shipping activity in the NSR increases, Russia is also in the process of reviving its old naval bases of Soviet times and is simultaneously enhancing existing naval port infrastructure in the region. The signing of RELOS between India and Russia, would open India's access to Russian Arctic naval ports and military bases from Vladivostok to Murmansk and beyond. India, does not have its own full-fledged base or naval docking or refuelling facility in the Arctic, but through RELOS it would have access to all such facilities in the near future. As China's strategic reach and presence in the Arctic grows with its third heavy (nuclear powered) ice-breaker ship inline for entering into polar waters⁶ it becomes extremely important for India to have such an agreement as RELOS in conclusion with its traditional strategic partner, Russia.

India has signed logistics agreements with all its partner Quad countries. Though Russia is openly critical of the Quad and has maintained distance from the alliance, RELOS could strategically act as counterweight leverage to both India and Russia in the Indo-Pacific. The similar lines on which RELOS would enable the Indian Navy's reach in the Russian Far East and the Arctic region, it would also provide logistics support and easy access of required facilities to the Russian Navy via Indian naval ports and military bases located in the Indian Ocean. RELOS in a way, without involving Russia in the Quad, would facilitate and strengthen Russian naval presence in the Indo-Pacific to any future hostile scenarios in the region. Enhanced naval cooperation between India and Russia through RELOS would not only act as a counterweight to increasing US strategic posturing in the region, but for Russia, it will also balance the strategic power equation with its evolving partner China in the region. It can also be argued that India's approach to Indo-Pacific closely resembles to that of Russia's conceptual approach of Greater Eurasian Partnership (GEP) through which Russia aims to strengthen its geo-economic and geopolitical positioning from Lisbon to Vladivostok.⁷ Strengthening India–Russia partnership on framework such as RELOS could take Russian vision of GEP further from Vladivostok to Indian Ocean and the Indian vision till the Russian high north.

The bilateral relationship between India and Russia has grown and matured over time, and needs to be carried forward in existing and new areas of mutual interest. The Arctic offers tremendous opportunities for enhancing this cooperation at the helm of which RELOS could act as perfect leverage. India has very limited polar infrastructure and shipping capabilities to operate in the Arctic waters. Russia on the other hand is the only country in the world that maintains a strong dominance over Arctic shipping and other polar infrastructure capabilities required to operate in the region. Therefore, partnering with Russia via an agreement such as RELOS would offer tremendous support and opportunities to India in the Arctic. While India develops its polar-capable infrastructure to support its interest in the Arctic, RELOS would significantly enable India to undertake its Arctic operations with Russian assistance.

Also, the scale at which China is becoming increasingly assertive in the Arctic in terms of infrastructure development, shipping, energy and resource investments projects, and even in decision-making bodies like the Arctic Council, should be noted by India. Though the Indo-Pacific would continue to be a key area of India's maritime domains, India cannot ignore the physical and geopolitical transitions occurring in the Arctic. India's priorities in the Arctic are quite different and independent to other countries' (especially China's) emerging engagements in the region. India's primary engagements in the Arctic are focused on understanding scientific interconnections between Arctic sea ice melting and changes in Indian monsoon systems. India still cannot afford to lose the sight of geopolitical and geo-economic transitions emerging in the region, where states like China are pursuing dominant economic and strategic posturing in the

region. Therefore, RELOS would initially act as a support mechanism to Indian naval ships venturing into Arctic waters for routine voyages to mark their strategic reach and presence in the region.

Russia has called for rapidly developing Arctic infrastructure to enabling year-round shipping along the NSR⁸. Moscow has also agreed for supplying oil and gas to India at a “preferential pricing”⁹ and ship them via the northern Arctic route. India’s support to develop NSR and its call for turning it into an international trade artery show the country’s serious interests in the emerging connectivity routes of the region.¹⁰ Under India’s Act East Policy, India has promised a US\$ 1 billion Line of Credit for the development of Russian Far East.¹¹ Indian and Russian companies have identified energy, transport and logistics, maritime connectivity, diamond processing, forestry, pharmaceuticals and healthcare, tourism and humanitarian fields as key areas of future cooperation in the Russian Far East.¹² Calling Vladivostok a true *Sangam*, Prime Minister Modi has also called for developing Chennai–Vladivostok Maritime Corridor (CVMC) by connecting the ports of Chennai, Visakhapatnam and Kolkata to that with Vladivostok, Vostochny and Olga on the east coast of Russia.¹³ Once fully implemented, CVMC will enhance bilateral trade between the two countries to significant levels and it will also serve as an extension to NSR up till the Indian Ocean Region. Therefore, RELOS at the center of this would enhance strategic cooperation between India and Russia. It would act as an important existing mechanism to promote future manoeuvres of both the countries in the Arctic and the Indian Ocean Region in times to come.

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