

Are Russia and India Global Partners? The Brahmos Supersonic Missiles, The Russia-China Relationship

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Global Research, August 30, 2019

Region: [Asia, Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

The announcement that the Brahmos supersonic missiles jointly produced by Russia and India will soon be exported to third countries that are on friendly relations with both increases the odds that their historic Vietnamese partners might receive these game-changing weapons.

[“New Delhi’s Man In Moscow Is Right, Russia & India Are Global Partners”](#), and no sooner had the Indian Ambassador to Russia said that in a recent interview earlier this week than the announcement was made that the Brahmos supersonic missiles that they jointly produced will be [exported to third countries](#) that are on friendly relations with both of them. Although [Sputnik](#) reported at the beginning of the month that Thailand would probably be the first country apart from those two to take possession of these weapons, the outlet [also reported](#) a few months back that Southeast Asian nations such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore were interested in them too, as well as the Gulf countries (in clear reference to the GCC). There wouldn’t be anything controversial about any of those aforementioned nations receiving these game-changing arms, except perhaps the GCC ones that would obviously intend to use them against Iran in the event of a conflict (per Russia’s strategy of [“balancing” the Islamic Republic](#) all throughout the region), but it would be extremely significant if Moscow and New Delhi’s historic Vietnamese partners were to one day receive them as well.

That’s not too far-fetched of a prediction to make either after [rumors](#) have been floating around for the past couple of years that Hanoi is in the market for these missiles in order to defend its claims in the disputed waters of the South China Sea from Beijing. There’s a solid reasoning behind this possibility too, and it’s that a subsidiary of Russian state-owned oil company [Rosneft is drilling in the Lan Do oilfield](#) that narrowly sits within the southwestern border of China’s nine-dash line but is apparently regarded by the company as being under Vietnam’s de-facto sovereignty, which thus gives Russia a natural interest in arming Vietnam in order to secure this “national champion’s” energy deposits by proxy. The precedent established by Russian Ambassador to India Nikolai Kudashev’s claim earlier this week that India’s unilateral moves in disputed Kashmir are an [“internal matter”](#) suggests that it would also regard Vietnam’s sale of oil blocks in the disputed waters of the South China Sea as similarly being an “internal matter” in the interests of consistency.

It’s important to point out that Russia’s stalwart defense of India’s actions in Kashmir represented the first time that it [openly contradicted China’s official position](#) on a significant international issue since the end of the Old Cold War and showed the world that Moscow will

at the very least diplomatically “balance” Beijing in South Asia in the [New Cold War](#) in order to defend its national interests in the region.

Russia’s lucrative ([but declining](#)) arms trade and nuclear energy cooperation with India greatly help support the state budget during this difficult period of international sanctions and the [two systemic transitions](#) that the country is currently undergoing in the political and economic spheres, so it would have been unthinkable for Moscow to take Beijing’s side over New Delhi’s on that issue. Furthermore, Russia has a grand strategic interest in positioning itself as the leader of a new Non-Aligned Movement ([Neo-NAM](#)) that presents a much-needed “third way” between China and the West like Valdai Club programme director Oleg Barabanov proposed earlier this year in his policy paper about [“China’s Road to Global Leadership: Prospects and Challenges for Russia”](#).

It’s with this [“balancing”](#) intent in mind, coupled with the possibility that Russia’s Western partners might even tacitly encourage its leadership of the Neo-NAM as part of a [“New Detente”](#) between the two, that it wouldn’t be unexpected at all if Moscow agreed to sell Brahmos missiles to Hanoi in order to safeguard Rosneft’s investments in the disputed waters of the South China Sea de-facto controlled by Vietnam. Not only would the arms sales and energy extraction themselves be profitable enough (with the latter’s exports likely going to India to further reinforce their strategic partnership and the developing trilateral arrangement between them and Vietnam), but it would be a massively strategic move for “balancing” China in the region due to the game-changing effect that these weapons’ deployment could have for boosting Vietnam’s naval defenses. Consequently, that development could improve Russia’s relevance in the Southeast Asian region by serving as proof that it can indeed function as a credible “third way” between the West and China for the countries caught in their competition, thus inspiring them to prioritize the comprehensive betterment and diversification of ties.

Russia has successfully returned to the Mideast ever since its 2015 anti-terrorist operation in Syria, and it’s presently in the process of following in its Soviet predecessor’s footsteps in Africa after the recent completion of its [“African Transversal”](#) slicing through the continent, thus making Southeast Asia the only remaining part of the hemisphere that Moscow has yet to regain its former influence in. The pattern tying the Mideast, Africa, and possibly soon even Southeast Asia together is that Moscow is using its [“military diplomacy”](#) in creative ways to “balance” these regions via a formal intervention, the use of private military contractors, and the speculative sale of strategic weaponry, respectively. It therefore follows that selling Brahmos missiles to Vietnam would be a logical extension of this low-cost but highly effective strategy of restoring Russia’s regional influence, with the added benefit of also “balancing” China in the South China Sea, which could then [make Moscow a stakeholder in any forthcoming diplomatic solution there](#) and thus give it a prospective role in that process. There are veritably some risks to this strategy, but it nevertheless seems to be the one guiding Russia’s recent actions.

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This article was originally published on [OneWorld](#).

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