



India's Russian oil imports and China's Malacca dilemma: Energy competition, supply diversification and maritime vulnerability

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Abstract

The Russia–Ukraine conflict gave a major boost to international energy markets, forcing the major energy-consuming nations to reconsider their procurement plans. In the face of changing geopolitical circumstances, India has considerably stepped up import of cheap Russian crude oil to improve energy security, cut oil import cost and diversify its supplies. China, however, still grapples with the strategic "Malacca Dilemma": due to its dependence on the Strait of Malacca for a significant portion of its energy imports, China is still subject to the maritime risks of the region and possible disruptions. The discussion in this paper begins by studying the growing energy dependence of India on Russian oil, followed by a focus on China's maritime energy dependence and its strategy of 'interhemispheric balancing'. The study is a qualitative research utilising secondary data obtained from international organisations, government reports, and literature from academic publications of the two countries (Cote d'Ivoire and Ecuador) to compare the energy policies in both countries. The results suggest that India's energy import approach is making it more energy secure, but that while the practices are evolving, China's reliance continues to be on energy-vulnerable sea routes, highlighting deep-seated strategic issues. The paper then examines the significance for the geopolitics and securing the Indo-Pacific and the broader significance for the competition over energy in the region in future.

Keywords: India, Russia–Ukraine conflict, Russian crude oil, Malacca Dilemma, Indo-Pacific

Introduction

The global energy landscape has undergone a profound transformation since 2022 following the Russia–Ukraine conflict, which disrupted established trade patterns and prompted Western countries to impose extensive sanctions and price caps on Russian crude oil exports. These changes had major implications for the world's energy flows, pushing Russia to rethink its oil and gas markets to Europe and enticing Asian importers such as China to reconsider the way of their energy supply and demand. India is among those that have benefited from the change to the highest degree in terms of the rapid pace of buying Russian crude oil on a discount in order to meet its rising energy demand, lower import bills and enhance its energy security. In not many years, Russia became India's biggest supplier of seaborne crude oil, triggering a shift from the MDR to Russia. Within a short span, Russia was emerging as the largest supplier of seaborne crude oil to India, replacing the traditional suppliers from the MDR. The policy of "strategic autonomy" in foreign affairs, along with the shift to diversifying energy supply, has been possible due to this strategic adjustment (Cao, 2024) ^[1]. China has been grappling with an ongoing energy security crisis; however, due to its reliance on imported oil that it ships through the Strait of Malacca, a small water channel between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. Maritime security is a critical issue at the national level in China, often referred to as the "Malacca Dilemma", where Beijing is at risk should there be naval blockades, acts of piracy or geopolitical tensions during regional conflicts affecting its energy supply routes. Hence, China has made investments in alternative energy corridors, such as pipelines from Russia and Central Asia, the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, as well as enhancing its naval

force to protect important sea traffic. In this context, the different approaches taken by countries like India and China have increased in importance for the strategic dynamics of the Indo-Pacific area (Kumar & Bhattacharyya, 2025) ^[2]. The paper explores the implications of India's growing dependency on Russian crude oil for Asian energy geopolitics, analyses the energy security implications of India's diversified energy sourcing for its energy security resilience versus China, which is highly dependent on the sea route, and examines the significance of the Malacca Dilemma in the ongoing geopolitical Chinese energy security strategy toward powering up over the uncertain global energy environment.

This paper will investigate the changing nature of Energy security in Asia by looking at the role of the Strait of Malacca in China's energy import and India's escalating importation of Russian crude oil. They have seen the Russia–Ukraine standoff fundamentally transform global oil trade, presenting new prospective opportunities and strategic dilemmas for other major oil-importing nations. India has benefitted from cheap Russian crude to diversify its oil mix, boost its energy security, cut back import-dependent costs, while keeping its strategic autonomy policy. China, however, remains faced with the "Malacca Dilemma", as much of its oil imports pass through the world's most important maritime chokepoint, which means its energy supply is susceptible to geopolitical tensions, wars and crises in maritime areas. This study uses a comparative qualitative analysis that draws from secondary sources from government reports, international organisations and scholarly literature to consider the implications of these opposing energy strategies on geopolitics and maritime security in the region. The paper also examines the shrewd strategic policies of India and China in the Indo-Pacific in

the context of energy diversification, resiliency of the energy supply chain, and vulnerabilities of maritime economies. It suggests that the diversification of India's energy procurement coupled with its growing dependence on the sea — serves as a reminder of the importance of developing other energy corridors for China and India and building up strategic planning capabilities in this area, especially given the highly competitive Indian regional security landscape.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the impact of the Russia–Ukraine war and Western sanctions on global oil trade patterns and energy markets.
2. To analyze the factors driving India's increased imports of discounted Russian crude oil and their contribution to the country's energy security and supply diversification.
3. To evaluate China's "Malacca Dilemma" and assess how maritime vulnerabilities influence its energy security strategy and geopolitical decision-making.
4. To compare the energy security strategies of India and China with respect to supply diversification, maritime dependence, and strategic resilience in the Indo-Pacific region.
5. To assess the geopolitical and maritime security implications of India's Russian oil imports and China's energy vulnerabilities for regional stability and the evolving Indo-Pacific strategic order.

Global Energy Market after the Russia–Ukraine War

The war between Russia and Ukraine, which started in February 2022, has changed the global energy market for good as it upended a long-established trade pattern involving oil, forcing the United States, the European Union, the United Kingdom and like-minded nations to change their energy strategy to limit Moscow's finances. Consequently, Russia focused a larger supply of its oil exports on Asian markets, in this case India and China, and allowed for very attractive prices to keep the supply volume high. This switch in Russian oil exports for energy-exporting Asia changed the oil map of the world and increased Asian oil buyers' demand for energy at a proper price. Russia was able to tap into India as one of its biggest buyers as it sold the oil at prices that were much lower than those of traditional suppliers in the Middle East, drastically changing India's crude dependence curve (Mishra, 2026) ^[3]. China also increased its Russian oil imports, though it continued to have a large dependence on other Middle Eastern suppliers for its rising energy needs. But the introduction of cheaper energy on offer from Russia changed ordering patterns across Asia, spurring refiners to reduce their reliance on other suppliers and instead seek the lower price. At the same time, however, the war brought about a major shift in the world's tanker routes. As Russian oil was sent by shorter routes to Europe, both the volume and the length of the routes by sea that were being taken to Asia grew, with the oil coming through both the Suez Canal and around the African continent, adding not only increased shipping distance and increased freight rates but also insurance requirements. Alongside this, a shadow fleet consisting of outdated tankers came into existence to further enable Russia's oil exports beyond the confines of the normal Western insurance and shipping markets (Rastogi,

2014). These changes realigned the trade routes of the maritime world and influenced the position of critical sea lanes like the Suez Canal, Cape of Good Hope and Strait of Malacca. But the energy future has become more uncertain after 2022: diversified supplies, shifting geopolitics, shifting shipping routes, growing energy security fears, and the more we live by trillions of dollars of energy trade, the more these strategic and political interests encroach.

India's Russian Oil Import Strategy

Crude oil import policy in India has come a long way since last year's Russia-Ukraine war. Before the war, Russia was not a significant supplier of crude oil to India, whose biggest suppliers in crude oil imports were Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. But as the Western nations levied sanctions on Russia and imported crude became available at much lower rates, India quickly ramped up its import of Russian crude oil to make it India's biggest supplier of seaborne oil. This was mainly due to economic factors, which allowed Indian refiners to import oil at prices significantly cheaper than international benchmarks, resulting in a lower import bill, domestic inflationary pressures being eased, and thus improved competitiveness for Indian petroleum exports. The refinery operations and flexibility were optimised by the Indian refiners, such as Indian Oil Corp., Bharat Petroleum, Hindustan Petroleum and Reliance Industries, to refine higher quality Russian crude, which helped not only to enhance the refining margins but also export refined petroleum products to international markets. On the other side of the picture, India took measures to enhance its strategic petroleum reserves and diversify fuel sourcing from Middle Eastern, U.S., African and Latin American supply sources to substantially reduce risks of any single supplier of fuel. Energy diplomacy likewise had a pivotal role in maintaining these imports for India (Ruslan *et al.*, 2026) ^[5]. The gains to New Delhi have been an economic interest that included reduced energy bills, competitiveness in trade and investments and increased stability of domestic fuel supply, while maintaining strategic interest to maintain good relations with Russia. But there are some risks attached to the growing dependence on Russian crude for India. Restrictive secondary sanctions by Western countries could hinder financial transactions, shipping and procurement agreements. In addition, the introduction of caps for maritime insurance and a few Western insurers' withdrawal from Russian cargo have made dependence on alternative insurance companies and a "shadow fleet" of tankers more relevant, which has generated a host of shipping safety, transparency and compliance issues (Sahai, 2026) ^[6]. The problems underline the need for ongoing diversification of supplies, their financing aspects through adaptive investments in strategic stocks, as well as skilled diplomacy to ensure the long-term energy security of India in the volatile geopolitical scenario.

China's Malacca Dilemma

Given its geopolitical priorities and geographical location, as well as imports of crude oil, India has its own energy security strategy, and China has its own. India and China have different approaches to energy security, depending on their geopolitical agendas, geographic location, and imports of crude oil. Meanwhile, India has also been stepping up its imports of cheap Russian crude and still buys a significant quantity of crude oil from Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the United

Arab Emirates, resulting in a diversified import profile and minimising dependence on a single oil supplier. In contrast, China has increased its import of crude oil from crude oil-rich countries of the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia, Iraq and the United Arab Emirates, and further imports of Russian crude oil in order to enhance bilateral energy cooperation. While supply diversification is a key priority for both countries, strategies are significantly different in both. India's main importance is seaborne via the Indian Ocean, and its level of strategic petroleum stocks and increasing suppliers from around various regions. China, on one hand, counterbalances the imports via the rich marine route with a long-grounded pipeline highway for Russia, Central Asian states, and energy corridors through Myanmar and Pakistan to lighten the plight of excessive maritime transportation. The split between the two countries is also based on maritime vulnerability (Sharma & Lau, 2026) ^[7]. India also has an important geostrategically located location in the middle of the Indian Ocean, a strong naval presence in the region and the strategic deployment of the Andaman and Nicobar Command near the vital sea-lanes of communication (SLOC) through the Strait of Malacca to watch the SLOC. An important way to compare key energy security indicators is to see that China is dependent on the Malacca Strait and the Indo-Pacific energy corridor and, therefore, is highly vulnerable to geopolitical competition and risk in the South China Sea. Although both countries are very oil import-dependent, India is more diversified in its oil suppliers and less maritime vulnerable owing to its geographical location and sourcing strategy. China, despite its heavy reliance on storage capabilities and diversified pipeline facilities, still has large vulnerabilities with regard to geopolitical and maritime risks, as it is still dependent on a significant volume of shipping energy imports via sea lanes.

Comparative Analysis: India vs. China

India and China have different energy security strategies driven by their geopolitical agendas, geographical location and import of crude oil. India has stepped up its imports of low-cost Russian crude, and at existing levels continues to import massive quantities from Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), to build a diverse import basket and lessen reliance on any single supplier since 2022. Meanwhile, China has maintained its crude oil purchases from the Middle East countries, especially Saudi Arabia and Iraq, and made additional purchases from Russia to boost bilateral energy cooperation. While both countries acknowledge the merits of supply diversification, they have different perspectives on how to diversify. The Indian Ocean is the key trade route for the majority of India's seaborne imports, while strategic oil storage and diversified supplier networks are established in various regions. On the other hand, while China imports a great deal from sea routes, it also has a large amount of pipelines from Russia and Central Asia, and energy corridors through Myanmar and Pakistan to minimise its dependence on sea routes. Furthermore, the two countries differ in terms of maritime vulnerability (Thucker, 2025) ^[8]. India has a distinct strategic edge because of its location in the central part of the Indian Ocean, the strength of its Navy and its strategic location of the Andaman and Nicobar Command very close to the Strait of Malacca, to keep watch on the sea lines of communication. To the contrary, China is still suffering

from vulnerability in the Malacca Strait and overall Indo-Pacific ocean environment, where geopolitical competition and potential disruptions in the South China Sea threaten its energy security. These differences are also highlighted through the examination of selected comparisons of key energy security indicators. Despite being both crude oil-import-reliant nations, India shows a degree of supplier diversity with relatively lower maritime vulnerabilities, as it has the geographical advantages and can source flexibly. Although China has developed large strategic oil reserves and diverse oil pipelines, it still suffers from greatly enhanced geopolitical and maritime security threats as the majority of its oil imports continue to move through risky sea lanes. In general, India's procurement policy is diversity-centric and geopolitically located with maritime routes, which offer more resilience during a disruption in supply lines, opportunity, and dividend security to China by relying heavily on strategic maritime chokepoints, more likely to be disrupted by necessity.

Geopolitical Implications

The Russia-Ukraine war significantly impacted the geopolitical dynamics between the great European powers, especially India, China, Russia, and America. India's growing importation of Russian crude oil has solidified the historical bond built between India and Russia, which allows India to obtain cheap oil while keeping to its policy of strategic autonomy despite pressure from the West. In parallel, India's strategic ties with the United States have grown and strengthened with greater defence cooperation, technology transfer, and economic ties, showcasing India's ability to manage relations with competing global powers. China has also ramped up the engagement of its comprehensive strategic partnership with Russia, with an increased import of energy and pipeline connectivity, in addition to growing reliance on Russian markets in the economic field (Tol, 2023) ^[9]. The developments have kindled strategic tension in the Indo-Pacific with the prevailing fear of nonpoints of control of the seas, presence of navies in the region and energy security being major geopolitical issues today. China's aggressive naval posture in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean has prompted other surrounding countries to beef up maritime security and military ties. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), led by India, the United States, Japan and Australia, has become another platform for the free, open, and rules-based Indo-Pacific through increased awareness in maritime space, naval cooperation, response to disasters and protection of maritime transport corridors. For India, the QUAD is a step towards securing energy transit and stability in the Indian Ocean Region, complementing its goal of promoting greater energy security. India's involvement in the QUAD underscores its commitment to energy security, aiming to bolster the stability and security of the Indian Ocean Region. The Indian Ocean thus has been transformed into a theatre of geopolitical competition, highlighted by escalating naval and strategic port buildup by both India and China and a rise in their infrastructure investments in the region (Wachtmeister *et al.*, 2022) ^[10]. China's Belt and Road Initiative and the construction of ports like Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and Djibouti in Somalia have helped facilitate its spread in the region, while India has been trying to reinforce maritime ties with France, Australia and the USA to try to maintain strategic balance.

The dynamic geopolitical contours highlight the fact that energy security challenges are not a purely economic issue, but are interlaced with foreign policy, military and naval strategies, maritime security, and regional power competition and make the Indo-Pacific zone one of the most strategically relevant zones in the current international system.

Maritime Security and Strategic Competition

One major component of strategic rivalry in the Indo-Pacific has become maritime security, where vital shipping routes enable the transport of energy, commercial and military goods. The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is emerging as one of the markets whose global trade volumes are increasing and which has a significant share of oil deliveries from the Middle East to the economies of Asian countries. India has a strategic location in the IOR and has been stepping up its naval development, improving surveillance and port collaborations with neighbouring countries in the region, to safeguard sea lines of communications (SLOCs) and critical shipping lanes. However, China has vastly ramped up their naval deployment in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean, coming steadfastly to the support of its growing interests abroad and to be able to import its energy needs unabated (Sahai, 2026) ^[6]. The South China Sea has continued as a flashpoint on the territorial disputes and vast militarisation, concerns about freedom of navigation, and it is an area of strategic rivalry between China and other regional and extra-regional powers. As well as this, the Strait of Malacca is one of the world's main maritime choke points, which China uses for the majority of its imported oil and international trade. Energy security is extremely sensitive to conflict, piracy, terrorism or geopolitical events that may affect the region or the world. India and China, in turn, have stepped up their own naval modernisation programme with the building of aircraft carriers, submarines, up-to-date surveillance technologies, long-range missiles and maritime reconstruction (Zhang, 2011). In addition to shipping exercises and deepening defence cooperation with friendly nations, these developments have improved. The issue of freedom of navigation now plays an important role in security in the Indo-Pacific region, and it has been promoted by the United States, India, Japan, Australia, and some European countries, which have called for freedom of navigation in accordance with international maritime law. Other strategic choke points – such as the straits of Malacca, Bab el-Mandeb and the Suez Canal continue to be important for the uninterrupted flow of global energy supplies. Maritime security has thus morphed into a multi-faceted issue of military readiness, diplomacy, infrastructure creation, supply chain strength, and control and protection of maritime chokepoints, which are a growing part of today's Indo-Pacific geopolitical competition.

Policy Recommendations

As geopolitical and energy dynamics continue to shift, it is essential for countries such as India, China, and regional partners to adopt comprehensive strategies that enhance India's energy security, help mitigate vulnerabilities in energy supply, and foster maritime stability in the region. The continuity of diversification of the crude oil importers should continue to be a strategy for India, to reduce its reliance on any specific exporting country, and make it more resilient towards the same pillar's disruption. An

increase in strategic oil reserves will help reduce the impact of oil supply disruptions and price fluctuations: projects more energy reserves will bolster energy security at home and export competitiveness from the refinery sector through modernisation. India should also look into further strengthening naval security in the Indian Ocean by modernising the navy, increasing its surveillance capabilities and deepening cooperation with other countries in the Indian Ocean region, so as to protect the sea lines of communication critical for sea trade. The Strait of Malacca is one of the key interests of China to lessen its undue dependency. Beijing needs to speed up the development of other overland energy corridors like the China-Myanmar pipeline, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and pipelines between Russia and Central Asia. China, on the other hand, needs to strengthen its security of the oil supply chain by diversifying its oil suppliers, developing resilient maritime oil supply logistics, establishing strategic petroleum reserves and developing advanced port facilities. There should be more cooperation between Indo-Pacific nations to maintain uninterrupted maritime trade and secure energy markets. A more effective cooperation in the maritime arena could be achieved through joint naval manoeuvres, sharing of intelligence, capacity development and anti-piracy operations, to strengthen the security of major sea lanes and maritime chokepoints. Transparency of markets, diversifying supply chains and promoting infrastructure connectivity to increase energy resilience of the region should also be encouraged by regional institutions. Moreover, developing strong coordination processes regarding the crisis management of geopolitical crises, shipping disruptions, natural hazards and energy crises will enhance the preparedness of the region and economic disruptions. Overall, these include stable energy supply, diversified supply sources, energy security hands, and trade peace with regional cooperation, which will play a key role in maintaining energy security, protecting energy corridors, and energy peace in the ever-competitive Indo-Pacific geopolitical environment.

Conclusion

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has permanently changed Asian energy markets, changing global movement of oil and speeding up the realignment of energy strategies. The tensions over Russian crude and the sanctions imposed on it have generated new opportunities for the key importers from the West, such as India, to begin buying Russian crude for lower prices and finding new providers of energy. This pragmatic policy has given India an optimistic approach for its energy security, which has lowered India's import costs, raised the utilisation of Indian refineries, enhanced export competitiveness and strengthened the policy of strategic autonomy of India. India's resilience to external supply disruptions is enhanced by diversification of suppliers, expansion of the strategic petroleum reserve and having a robust refining capacity. However, China remains very vulnerable as regards its strategic dependence on the Strait of Malacca for the importation of a large share of oil supplies. Despite its vast investments in alternative pipelines, the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and building naval power, the Malacca Strait is still an important chokepoint for China's energy supply, and threatens to be caught up in geopolitical tensions, regional conflicts and disruptions. The

differing energy strategies have significant geopolitical implications in the fast-changing geo-economic dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region, where security, naval jingoism and control of strategic maritime lanes increasingly become linked. The strategic significance of the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea, and the important maritime chokepoints has made the region a more competitive space between regional and global powers and led to more cooperation in the region, including efforts under QUAD and other maritime security groups. Maintenance of secure and resilient energy supply chains will thus continue to be a major goal for Asian national security policies. It is recommended to study the long-term impact of the global transition to a low-carbon economy, uptake of renewable energy and the emerging technologies on regional security in energy. Further research can also be conducted on how artificial intelligence could be applied to energy logistics, the effect of climate change on energy supply in the maritime domain and the performance of alternative transport routes on the reduction of the strategic vulnerabilities. These studies will help enhance the understanding of energy resilience and maritime strategy in an ever-more unpredictable and competitive international playing field.

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