The RELOS Revelation: India’s Dual Engagement with Russia and Ukraine

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Russia’s Information Campaigns and the India-Ukraine Factor

On April 17, 2026, the Russian legal information portal published the Reciprocal Exchange of Logistics (RELOS) agreement that India and Russia signed in February 2025. The agreement has been operational since January 2026. This occurred against the backdrop of Ukrainian Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council Rustem Umerov meeting with India’s National Security Advisor Ajit Doval and India’s Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar on April 17, 2026.

This mix of events followed the March 26, 2026, media reports wherein Ukraine accused Russia of a disinformation campaign against Ukrainian citizens in India, falsely framing them as “terrorists.” Ukraine accused that the Russian campaign was “politically motivated” and “fabricated”, delegitimizing

Moscow's allegations. Experts view such events as likely to generate mutual distrust in India-Ukraine relations.

The recent revelation of the RELOS agreement, despite India's silence on it, was not coincidental. Russia may have deliberately disclosed it to signal the consolidation of India-Russia ties.

Russia's disclosure, followed by the media's inflated framing of the pact as stationing "3,000 troops, 5 warships and 10 aircraft in each other's territory," was supposedly intended to cast the RELOS agreement as a strategic breakthrough to balance any India-Ukrainian "security cooperation". Despite the agreement's mere continuity and technical formalization, Russian intentions were clear: discredit Ukrainian value to Indian policymakers and to operationalize its levers, such as Delhi's oil dependence on Moscow pegged at 2.2 million barrels per day, to magnify Moscow's significance at the expense of Kyiv's in Indian eyes.

India's Balancing Strategy: Managing Expectations and Leveraging Ties

What India has done in this sharpening strategic calculus is preserve its Ukrainian card by continuing high-tempo engagement despite Russia's information and signaling campaigns aimed at devaluing Kyiv. India has not compromised its relations with Kyiv, and past instances reinforce this.

During Modi's visit to Russia in July 2024, Moscow unveiled the draft of the RELOS agreement. The move was tactical in the lead-up to Modi's August 2024 meeting with President Zelensky. Again, when Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha visited India in March 2025, Russian media at the time reported a deal concluded by the Russian government with India's Ministry of Defense to procure 1,000 HP engines for T-72 main battle tanks.

India’s motivations, on the other hand, remain to continue striking a balance and maximizing its bargaining options vis-à-vis both Russia and Ukraine. Choosing one at the expense of the other is not a geopolitical choice New Delhi is comfortable practicing.

Currently, the Indian policymakers view Ukraine as an embattled and resilient small power capable of inflicting disproportionate costs on a much more powerful Russian army. This perception replaced the belief that Ukraine is following Washington’s template of challenging Russia. Ukraine’s battlefield performance, including the innovative use of cheap drone interceptors against Russian swarm drones, loitering munitions, and missile attacks, has increased the significance of Kyiv’s battlefield lessons for India. The reception to Ukrainian experiences may have magnified in India’s military establishment since India and Pakistan locked horns in a limited conflict last May.

During Operation Sindoor, India reportedly deployed costly S-400 batteries to intercept 200 Pakistani drones, including the Wing Loong and Ch-4 variants. Drawing on Ukrainian successes, India recalibrated and inducted five First Person View (FPV) drones after Ukraine’s successful Operation Spider’s Web (June 01, 2025), followed by plans to induct 30,000 drones for surveillance and anti-drone operations near the Pakistan and China borders.

On April 08, 2026, the Indian Army received “hundreds” of Kamikaze drones from a Gujarat-based firm, slated to operate in harsh, cold environments. These drones provide modest capabilities to strike mobile targets, supplement conventional forces, and rupture terrorist hideouts or consoles. The plausibility of the next variant, equipped with a longer range and greater payload capacity to target strategic and tactical assets, including military and civilian infrastructure, exists, emulating the successful performance of the Ukrainian Liutyi drone and hybrid missile-drone structures such as BARS

and Peklo.

On April 15, 2026, during the latest Russian offensive, Ukraine intercepted 309 of 324 drones launched at it. During Zelensky's Persian Gulf tour on March 28, 2026, media reports were mulling the possible swapping of Ukrainian counter-drone technology to intercept cheap Iranian-made Shahed drones in the Gulf for the Gulf's air defense system to manage Russian missile strikes in Ukraine.

The Gulf and Washington's global scrambling to substitute expensive Patriot missiles for cheaper alternatives made Ukrainian drone interceptors a financially viable option. This development is likely to have been featured during Jaishankar's and Doval's talks with Rustem on April 17.

A slew of offers is reportedly on the table as Zelensky's public proclamation of a "security cooperation" agreement with India gained momentum. The "STING" interceptor, developed by the Ukrainian Wild Hornets Group and reportedly effective against loitering munitions, is reportedly under discussion alongside the Ukrainian-based General Cherry-produced "Bullet" interceptor, which offers long range and endurance.

Jamming- and spoofing-proof OPTIX series drones are a significant offering likely to overcome Indian drones' susceptibility to radio-frequency distortion and GPS link degradation, a prime illustration of EW warfare activities that Islamabad demonstrated during Operation Sindoor. The Fibre-optic lines maintain a real-time connection between the operator and the drone, reducing the risk that enemy jammers will suppress the drone's engagement capability.

Besides Ukraine, the Russian deployment of Fibre-optic drones will also be closely observed by Indian policymakers. From March 26 to 29, 2026, the Russian offensive launched Fibre-optic FPV drones against Ukrainian vehicles near Bilenke as well as in Kostyantynivka. Russia deployed these drones at

scale for the first time against Ukrainian operations in Kursk Oblast in August 2024.

In this mix of recent events, Russia has already shipped the fourth S-400 system to India this week. The package also includes 12 Pantsir air defense systems to guard the S-400 system and perform anti-drone operations. India has reportedly completed the inspection process and is expected to receive missiles expended during Operation Sindoor. There is also speculation of a privately led Maintenance, Repair, and Overhaul facility for S-400 systems through Transfer of Technology (ToT) to reduce external dependency.

India may aggressively pursue securing a ToT option, as New Delhi can leverage Ukrainian offsets against Russian systems. An inherent trade-off is likely to influence negotiations. Interceptor drones are likely a cheaper alternative than the Pantsir system for neutralizing drones and artillery. But the latter engages incoming missiles and aircraft that the former cannot. India is likely to secure the ToT concession by leveraging Ukrainian cards.

Despite Russian defense clout within the Indian military establishment, Indian and Ukrainian security convergences are increasingly palpable—a development that readily nudges Russia to compensate, including through asymmetrical options. Adaptability, scaled production, and cost-effectiveness are factors that still elude India's drone industry, giving the Ukrainian industry scope to chip in. As alluded by India's defense minister, Rajnath Singh, India covets a "completely self-reliant" drone ecosystem, with mission-critical capabilities such as "drone's mould, software, engines and batteries" all indigenously produced.

Both Kyiv and India lack indigenous capabilities to build engines and batteries. Kyiv recently signed a deal with Czech-based PBS Group to co-develop and co-produce engine capabilities in a joint venture model with Ukrainian Ivchenko-

Progress. Indian planners may envisage a similar model of cooperation to indigenize drone engine capability.

Path Ahead

In recent days, India's reliance on Russia is widening. Trump's oil sanctions waivers until May 16, 2026, and the recently announced India-Russia mega Urea plant deal have increased Moscow's sway over India. Despite Moscow's clout, Ukraine's shine has not faded. The Ukrainian option allows India to counter Moscow's overwhelming leverage by signaling its interest in Kyiv's defense technology collaboration and battlefield operations.

India has also kept both sides engaged despite attempts to disrupt India's balancing act. India may have been able to alleviate Ukrainian grievances against Russia's attempt to dislodge, or "drive a wedge" between the two, by concluding security cooperation and discussing Kyiv's offerings on drone interception capabilities.

India maintained silence on the signing and operationalization of the RELOS agreement with Russia to manage Ukraine's reaction. But it also utilized the RELOS agreement to revive dormant military exercises and HADR drills between Moscow and Delhi after a two-year postponement since 2022.

Going forward, India may leverage the new security cooperation agreement to institutionalize exchanges and dialogues to learn from and absorb Ukrainian experiences. India will, in parallel, draw on and engage with the Russian military leadership, which is fully compatible with India's diversified foreign policy posture. Russian adaptations, such as the use of Fibre-optic drones that eroded Ukrainian advantages, are much more likely to percolate and be adopted in the Indian defense ecosystem.

So far, however, there are no visible linkages between Russian or Ukrainian companies and India in terms of collaboration or

the exchange of drone-related technologies, but convergences are emerging. Since India has a comparative advantage in producing fibre lines, some analysts have pitched India as a potential partner for Ukraine amid export restrictions from China, particularly for quadcopter-style Mavic drones in May 2025.

In the future, India will thus continue to rely on a multi-alignment strategy to manage expectations and gain from conflicting sides in a security competition.