

US again throws India over the Russian oil barrel

Chidanand Rajghatta / TNN / Jun 02, 2026, 23:07 IST

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TOI correspondent from Washington: US Secretary of State Marco Rubio has renewed pressure on New Delhi's purchases of Russian oil, telling Congress on Tuesday that the Trump administration wants to end "as soon as possible" sanctions waivers and special arrangements that have allowed countries such as India to import Russian

oil

Rubio's remarks during a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing revive a familiar irritant in US.-India relations – one in which Washington's position has often appeared to shift according to its own economic and geopolitical needs.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Washington and its allies have alternated between condemning India's purchases of discounted Russian crude and quietly tolerating them. For much of the conflict, Western governments accepted a pragmatic reality: keeping Russian oil flowing to global markets through India helped prevent a spike in global energy prices. Analysts noted that the arrangement allowed Russian crude to remain in circulation while limiting Moscow's profits through discounts.

Now, however, the US appears eager to tighten the screws again. Washington has repeatedly claimed it has secured commitments from India to avoid additional purchases of Russian oil, even as New Delhi insists that energy procurement decisions are driven solely by national interest and energy security.

The back and forth has left Indian officials and analysts complaining that New Delhi is becoming a victim of Washington's mercurial priorities. When oil prices threatened to surge, Indian purchases were viewed as a stabilizing force. When sanctions enforcement became politically advantageous, the same purchases became a diplomatic irritant.

Last week Rubio himself argued that sanctions were "never aimed at India per se," underscoring the administration's attempt to balance pressure on Moscow with its broader strategic partnership with New Delhi.

The controversy raises a larger question: should the US have any say over where India buys its energy? From Washington's perspective, Russian oil revenues help finance Moscow's military activities, making energy purchases a subject of international pressure. US. officials argue that allies should not undermine sanctions designed to constrain Russia's war effort.

India counters that it is a sovereign nation of 1.4 billion people with immense energy needs and a responsibility to secure affordable supplies for its economy. Indian leaders

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have repeatedly invoked "strategic autonomy," arguing that no foreign power should dictate the country's commercial energy choices.

Complicating matters further is the China question. Critics in India note that China remains one of the largest buyers of Russian energy, yet Washington has generally been more cautious about imposing secondary sanctions – mainly because Beijing has the US by the scruff of its economic neck with controls over rare earths among other goods. The perception in New Delhi, which has little or no leverage over US, is that the rules are applied unevenly, with strategic calculations often outweighing principle.

For India, the issue has become about more than oil. It is increasingly viewed as a test of whether a rising power can maintain genuine strategic autonomy while deepening ties with Washington. As Rubio pushes for tighter restrictions, New Delhi is likely to respond with the same message it has delivered throughout the Ukraine conflict: India's energy policy will be decided in New Delhi, not Washington – at in terms of public posturing.

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