

## Modi III and the EU, after the Elections

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*The May elections in India and the June elections for the European Parliament have resulted in leadership continuity in Delhi and in EU-Brussels. Does this mean that Europe can expect 'more of the same' from the new Indian government and vice versa? Will the EU and India take the opportunity of this new start to re-engage in a more significant way than they have done during the last couple of years? Will they be able to identify common interests, and more importantly, act upon them?*

### CONTINUITY

Even though the results of both elections did hold some surprises, continuity can be expected as regards overall foreign and security policies.

The surprise in India was that the BJP lost its absolute majority in Parliament. For the first time since he became Prime Minister in 2014, Narendra Modi had to form a coalition government. Two regional parties have joined the BJP. The BJP does however remain by far the largest party in the Lok Sabha, the Lower House, with the largest number of seats.

The main ministers of the previous government have been retained, i.e. Subramaniam Jayshankar as foreign minister, Piyush Goyal as minister for trade, Nirmala Sitharaman as Minister of finance, Rajnath Singh for defence.

One can thus expect a large degree of continuity, especially in the field of foreign and security policy.

Strategic Autonomy, with at its core India's interests as a developing economy and an upcoming global power, will remain New Delhi's main guideline.

The results for the European Parliament did lead to the unexpected French elections, but they confirmed a solid majority for the pro-European parties. Ursula Von der Leyen received much more support from the EP than in 2019, to continue as President of the Commission. She will be flanked by a new President of the European Council, Antonio Costa, and by a new Foreign Policy chief, former Estonian PM Kaja Kallas.

On the face of it there is no reason to expect any significant changes in the present state of the foreign and security relationship between India and the EU. While the latter has been in a rather dormant state for the last three months, the third Modi Government has had a very active agenda over the same period of time. What can the EU learn from those visits and meetings that could be useful for its own interaction with New Delhi?

### INDIAN FOREIGN POLICY, A SUMMER OF CONTRASTS (JUNE TO AUGUST)

The new Indian government became internationally active very soon after the recent elections, with foreign visits that have presented an interesting picture of contrasts.

Prime Minister Modi was present at the G7 summit in Italy, just days after having been sworn in on June 9<sup>th</sup>. The timing of this visit was due more to the planning of the G7 summits than to the wish of PM Modi to meet the Western leaders as his first foreign activity. Then

again, Modi was the only Head of Government not to attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit of Astana that took place soon afterwards (July 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup>). This fact has been interpreted by some as an indication that India is distancing itself somewhat from this forum – mainly because of the strained relations with China (Cfr Prof Rajan Kumar, JNU, in the Financial Express of July 3<sup>rd</sup>). In ‘The Print’ of August 2<sup>nd</sup> (Chinese Assessment of Modi’s Russia – The Print, August 2<sup>nd</sup>) Antara Gosal Singh writes that ‘Chinese observers were rather aggravated’ with Modi’s absence. (...). Foreign Minister Jaishankar represented India at this meeting.

His first bilateral visit after retaking office was to Moscow (July 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup>). This represents a break with the past. Under Modi I and II, the Prime Minister would first visit some of India’s neighbours. There might have been good reasons for not doing it this time. Now former Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina, visited New Delhi herself, shortly after the start of the new Indian government. In Nepal a new coalition-government took office in July, headed by communist prime Minister Oli. Relations with the Maldives have been tense since Mohamed Muizzu became president in 2023 on an anti-India platform. Sri Lanka is preparing for important presidential elections on September 21<sup>st</sup>.

The reasons for the Moscow visit are multiple and well known. The Russia-India relationship is one built on historical ties and on domains of mutual interest: India buys Russian oil and military hardware, while Russia needs to sell its oil and can show that it is not isolated in the world. One should not forget how dependent India is, and will remain for many years, on Russia for its armament. The Indian economy has greatly benefited from cheap Russian oil. The ever-closer embrace of Russia by China, as a result of the Ukraine-war, was another major incentive for Modi to go to Moscow.

Nevertheless, the timing of the PM’s visit to Moscow came as a surprise to many in Europe and the US. For those less well versed in the details of India’s Russia-policy and its general policy of strategic autonomy, a visit to Putin that coincided with the NATO summit in Washington,

and unfortunately for PM Modi, with the horrible Russian attack on a children’s hospital in Kiev, came across as an incomprehensible sign of support for Russia’s leader. And as the NATO-summit was to a large degree dedicated to the Ukraine-war and to the defence of the Alliance and its member states against possible Russian aggression, a stark contrast was thus visible to the whole world.

The real question is then not so much one of “why?” as one of “why precisely then?”. What was the reasoning in Delhi to go to Moscow precisely on those dates? While there is no point in questioning the reality of the links that exist between India and Russia, one should rather ask what the logic is behind the timing of the Moscow visit. Was it a miscalculation or was it a conscious decision, knowing that it would please Putin and that it would attract negative attention in the West?

Was it meant in any way to placate the many anti-NATO and anti-Western voices within the Indian foreign policy community? Was it an extra signal of Delhi to show Moscow, and Beijing, how important this relationship is for India? Did India want to show ‘the West’, in the name of strategic autonomy, that it will do what it feels is necessary for its own interests?

Whatever the answer to these questions may be, the Moscow visit was soon followed by ‘balancing’ activities from both India and ‘the West’. A few weeks later Foreign Minister Jaishankar participated in the QUAD Foreign Affairs ministerial (Tokyo, July 29<sup>th</sup>). At this occasion the QUAD-countries reaffirmed the importance of this forum, its objectives, and the trust of the four member states in the objectives of this partnership and in each other. Coming soon after the Washington NATO-summit this is significant as the latter emphasized that ‘the NATO-Indo-Pacific Partnership stands united in supporting Ukraine in the war with Putin’. Three of the 4 QUAD-members, host nation US, Australia, and Japan were present at the summit.

Furthermore, the QUAD-Joint Statement of July 29<sup>th</sup> includes several passages of importance to India, such as the strong condemnation of terrorism, with an explicit

reference to the Mumbai attacks of 2017, and the need to strengthen cooperation in the Indian Ocean.

Furthermore, in what could be seen as an attempt to rebalance the perception created by the Moscow visit, PM Modi went for an official visit to Poland (August 21<sup>st</sup>) - the last one took place in 1979. This was followed on August 23<sup>rd</sup> by a visit to Kiev, the first ever of an Indian Prime Minister to independent Ukraine. Indian commentators such as Raja Mohan (in the Indian Express of August 23<sup>rd</sup>) see these two visits more in line with the intention of the Modi government to develop India's relationship with Europe, whereby the novelty lies in the fact that New Delhi is now also expanding its relations with Central Europe. While not being seen by New Delhi as something that should or will upset Moscow, these visits are interpreted as a way for India to 'disentangle' (India Express editorial of August 22<sup>nd</sup>) itself of the Russian view of Central Europe. In other words, this is seen as another example of Modi's implementation of strategic autonomy. This can nevertheless be seen as an implicit distancing from Moscow. While it is said that India, as an upcoming power, does have the agency to do as it wishes, Raja Mohan states: 'As Russia's engagement with China does not impact its relationship with India, India's engagement with Ukraine will not change its equations with Russia'.

A role for India in resolving the Ukrainian war could be possible, as the public statements made by Prime Minister Modi on this subject seem to indicate: 'I want to assure you that India is ready to play an active role in any effort towards peace. If I can play any role in this personally, I will do that' - (PM Modi in Kiev, Indian Express August 24<sup>th</sup>). There are however no indications that India would itself take the initiative to get Kiev and Moscow at the negotiation table.

As another recent example of the further development of India's interaction with the West, and happening at the same time as the Warsaw and Kiev visits, the Indian Minister of Defence, Rajnath Singh, was in the US for 4 days. He signed two important agreements with the Americans, one of which is about the sending of Indian

liaison officers to key strategic US commands. Several military co-production projects were also agreed upon.

## A FUTURE FOR THE EU-INDIA STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

If anything, this summer has shown that India's practice of Strategic Autonomy has led to a very 'diverse' agenda of visits. The centrality of India's interests is key to all of them. Given this fact, how can the EU engage with India in a more meaningful way?

The EU and India have been so-called strategic partners since 2005. In 2020 a rather detailed 'Road map to 2025' was adopted i.a. to 'strengthen' this partnership. As far as one can see, in recent years this strategic partnership has hardly been followed up on the political level. Ambitious statements have been published after each high-level meeting, but the concrete implementation of many proposals is lagging.

The Modi governments have, since 2014, pursued a foreign policy of cooperation with the West, while at the same time maintaining close relations with Russia. The invasion of Ukraine by Russia, and the ever-greater dependence of Moscow on Beijing, have definitely complicated matters for New Delhi. The Ukraine war has also negatively impacted the economies of India's South Asian neighbours, leading to political turmoil in those countries. The Russia-China alliance is partly built upon a common enmity with 'the West'. This is a sentiment that is not shared by India. On the contrary, in recent years the Modi-governments have increased India's interest in and interaction with Europe and the EU, whereby Delhi's main focus is still directed more towards the capitals of individual member states than to the Union.

The element that traditionally is of importance in the relationship between the EU and India is trade, and here things are hardly moving ahead.

The trade negotiations seem to be dragging on and on. It is time for Brussels and Delhi to take some brave decisions and to drop some of the persistent red lines.

Considering the fact that the main criteria for action in New Delhi's policy of strategic autonomy are India's interests, the EU should start by focussing on subjects of common strategic interest to both the Union and India, rather than going for all-encompassing programmes.

Subjects of common strategic interest to both Brussels and New Delhi are the geopolitical consequences of the Ukraine war, the increasing importance of Africa, and the security challenges in the Western Indian Ocean, which is of major importance for the trade flows between India and the West. A common feature in some of these subjects is the ever-increasing global influence of China. The longer the Ukraine war lasts, the more Russia will become dependent upon China - something Delhi is fearful of. The Chinese presence in Africa is increasing. The enmity that now exists between the West and Russia does not have to be an obstacle for closer cooperation between Brussels and New Delhi. Assuming that the EU accepts and understands the realities and the nature of the Indo-Russian relationship, as well as its limitations, it should find a way of engaging with India in those other areas of common security interest. The EU could even encourage India to take a more proactive role in ending the Ukraine-war, being close to Moscow, as the negative effects of this conflict are having consequences too for the India-Russia relationship.

The new European Commission will start its mandate in November, close to the next US presidential elections. The present lame-duck period will give the Commission services the time to prepare the new team for what is to come. They should be in the process of preparing the files for the new Commissioners. These should contain some good advice, based on past experience and on recent developments, as to how the EU can reinvigorate this relationship with India. Mrs Von Der Leyen did announce in the European Parliament that a new strategic EU-India Agenda would be proposed. Let it be a real strategic agenda.

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