



## INDIA-EU, TOWARDS A REVITALISED RELATIONSHIP?



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## INDIA-EU, TOWARDS A REVITALISED RELATIONSHIP?

With the start of the second presidential term of Donald Trump the world has entered a period of geopolitical uncertainty and confusion. The West no longer exists, the US has turned its back to its European allies and decided to trust Moscow rather than Brussels. The EU in particular, has been declared an enemy by Washington. In view of these developments the Union and its member states will have to come up with a strategy to protect their global interests. This involves reviewing existing relationships with other international partners and strengthening existing partnerships – especially the one with India.

Already from the moment she took office in December, Commission President Ursula Von Der Leyen made it clear that India was in her sights, possibly sensing the way the world was about to change. And indeed, her first bilateral visit after starting her new mandate as President of the European

Commission has been to India on February 27 and 28, accompanied by the almost complete college of EU-Commissioners -another first.

The importance of this visit can hardly be underestimated. The contrast with the last ten years couldn't be starker. In the world prior to January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2025, the EU and India saw each other as important partners, cooperating in a very large variety of domains, but much of the interaction between them took place on a bureaucratic level. While India made some efforts to engage with the Union on a political level, especially since 2016, the latter's political leadership has had a rather passive attitude in this relationship.

The same cannot be said of the EU-member states, whose heads of state and government, as well as ministers, have been going to New Delhi on a regular basis.

India tends to see the world in geopolitical terms as dominated by the US-China-Russia-triangle. It positions itself in relation to the evolution of the relative strengths of these three actors, as seen through the prism of its own interests. This foreign policy philosophy is called 'strategic autonomy' by New Delhi. Where does the EU fit into all this worldview? While the rationale for this enhanced EU-outreach to India is obvious from a European perspective, one has to ask the question whether New Delhi feels the same need for a closer relationship with the Union. Does India see the EU as a potential alternative global partner in this new transactional Trump-world – in a world where might-is-right?

### **INDIA-RUSSIA**

There are no reasons for the Russia-India relationship to change course. It is based for both sides on solid realities such as i.a. the Russian oil-exports to India and India's dependence on Russian military hardware. Prime Minister Modi's first bilateral visit, after starting his third mandate, was to Moscow. Minister of Trade Goyal met his Russian counterpart in the margins of a BRICS- meeting in July 2024 to discuss ways of increasing bilateral trade. India's national security advisor Doval met President Putin in September 2024. Minister of Defence Rajnath Singh visited Moscow in December 2024 for the 21st meeting of the India-Russia Inter-Governmental Commission on Military and Military Technical Cooperation.

On the contrary, the easing-up of US-Russia relations will take away some of the pressure on India regarding its purchase of Russian oil or its neutral position on the Ukraine war. It might also eventually reduce the Russian dependence on China – a factor that has always worried New Delhi.

### **INDIA-CHINA**

Relations between India and China started relaxing in the second half of 2024, after having been frozen by New Delhi for 4 years. While India has a solid trade deficit with China and clearly needs Chinese critical supplies for its manufacturing sector, a reality that was recognized by the Economic Survey 24-25 (published by the Indian Ministry of Finance), China seems to have decided in 2024 that it was better to scale down its aggressive military posture along the Line of Actual Control (in Ladakh and other place), maybe in view of a possible new Trumps-presidency. A relaxation of its relations with New Delhi might also reduce the Indian need for reassurance via its QUAD-partners – the US, Australia and Japan.

The unknown factor is of course what Trump intends to do about or with China.

### **INDIA-US**

For the moment New Delhi is trying to gauge how much Trump values the importance of India.

On the bilateral level the signs are reassuring for India. Foreign Minister Jaishankar, after attending the swearing-in ceremony of President Trump on January 20<sup>th</sup>, attended the QUAD-Foreign Ministers meeting the very next day and had a bilateral with Secretary of State Rubio. This was soon followed by a visit of Indian Prime Minister Modi to Washington on February 11 and 12 during which Trump "emphasised the importance of India increasing its procurement of American-made security equipment and moving toward a fair bilateral trading relationship". Both Modi and Trump emphasised their commitment to advance the "US-India strategic partnership and the Indo-Pacific Quad partnership, with India hosting Quad Leaders for the first time later this year", the concluding statement said.

It is as yet not clear how Washington will see the future of QUAD, the quadrilateral security dialogue that was revived in 2017 during the first presidency of Donald Trump. A QUAD-meeting of Foreign Affairs Ministers was held in Washington the day after President Trump's inauguration, and its closing statement repeats most of the earlier QUAD-announcements regarding the Indo-Pacific, such as the importance of upholding international law, democratic values, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. The next QUAD Leaders' Summit will take place in India.

The general view in New Delhi is that India has not much to fear from the new dispensation in Washington. While Delhi expects and has already felt US-pressure in the field of foreign trade and immigration, New Delhi feels that the geostrategic position of India is such that Washington will continue to see India as an important partner in the Indo-Pacific and a potential counterweight to China.

India on the other hand does need the US in the fields of foreign trade and technology, and the US is certainly willing to oblige.

## **INDIA-EU, WHAT NEXT?**

Taking these elements into account one can conclude that the global shifts, that are taking place presently, do not seem to present India with difficult choices. It finds itself to be in a relatively comfortable position.

The Commission proposal for the EU become a potential alternative global partner for India in this new transactional Trump-world – in a world where might-is-right- should certainly be of interest to India. For an enormous country dealing with complex developmental challenges constructive engagement with Europe will always be of value.

While it was clear for some time already that Mrs Von Der Leyen intended to pay more attention to India than she had done during the five previous years, the timing of the above-mentioned visit could not have come at a more symbolical time. The very recent breakdown of the transatlantic relationship has proven just how timely this outreach to India is. With the US-Russia-China-triangle in flux, the visit of the European Commission to India gained additional importance. The last few weeks have shown that the EU should strive for other significant allies in the world as it is now clearly in a geopolitically weaker position. The Commission President, referring to the new geopolitical realities, said she wanted to bring the EU-India partnership 'to the next level', with a special emphasis on defence and security cooperation.

The results of the visit of February 27-28 are wide-ranging and could indeed lead to a substantial deepening of the relationship. For starters the EU and India want to conclude the FTA-negotiations by the end of this year. Considering the complicated nature of these talks, this is a very ambitious goal. From India's point of view trade is still the main EU-India-topic. To avoid delays on the technical level the political leadership from both sides will however have to closely monitor the progress of these negotiations.

Furthermore, India has expressed 'interest in joining the projects under the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) as well as to engage in negotiations for a Security of Information Agreement (SoIA). The leaders also committed to explore a security and defence partnership'. (Cfr Leaders Statement following the visit..., 28/02). There is no doubt that the deepening of the relationship will mainly be the result of concrete progress in these areas. One has to wonder though why the Indian Minister of Defence, Rajnath Singh, was not involved in the programme of the Commission visit to Delhi.

The merits of a strong EU-India relationship are clear: they are the remaining two most powerful international actors striving for a rules-based international order. Also, both are looking for ways of dealing with the consequences of the new US-trade policies by looking for dynamic trade relations that are independent from the impact of the Trump-trade policies.

But, the proof of the pudding is in the eating... – both the EU and India will have to be able to prove that the many agreements and partnerships that already exist between them, and the ones they want to launch now, will also make a difference for both. Real results will have to be achieved if this partnership has to have more than only declaratory meaning.

A lot will now depend upon the forthcoming Commission-proposals for a new strategic agenda between India and the EU. The groundwork for these has been laid down during this Commission visit. This new agenda shall eventually be discussed and hopefully adopted at the next EU-India summit.

The Commission has rightly taken the initiative to reach out to India. Considering the challenges the EU is facing in the Trump II-era, it will be up to the Union to prove that it can indeed bring the EU-India relationship 'to the next level'.

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