



India and the World

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EU and India cooperation to be reinvigorated as the world order is shaken

There was an unfamiliar sense of urgency surrounding the recent visit to New Delhi by the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen. The visit was unprecedented in the history of EU-India relations, as von der Leyen was accompanied by twenty-two EU commissioners. The uncertainties connected to rapidly changing US policies and approaches to current affairs formed the backdrop to the visit. Both Indian and European leaders sought to demonstrate the stability in their relationship at a time when other centres of power are considered increasingly unreliable. This signal was also conveyed by several EU Member State representatives during the Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi, March 17-19.

The visit to Delhi by the Head of the Commission and the College of Commissioners included a leaders' meeting between von der Leyen and PM Modi, discussions between portfolio commissioners and Indian ministers, and a second ministerial meeting of the EU-India Trade and Technology Council.

There was notable new language in the joint statement, as the two leaders stated their commitment to a "resilient multipolar global order" and suggested that the EU-India strategic partnership was needed now "more than ever". The war in Ukraine, and conflicts in the Middle East were discussed, as well as the Indo-Pacific and trilateral cooperation in Africa. The discussions confirmed Brussels' view of India as a central partner in connection to the Indo-Pacific and the wider Global South.

However, the main point on the agenda was to reinvigorate and provide a fresh sense of purpose and direction to the EU-India Strategic Partnership. EU-India cooperation has generally been characterised

by partial progress and unfulfilled potential, despite high-level political support. Yet although it has been pegged on an elusive Free Trade Agreement, the foundation is actually much broader now compared to two decades ago. Cooperation on connectivity, climate, technology, and security, in addition to economics and trade, provide for a multifaceted partnership.

Interestingly, there were optimistic – some may say overly optimistic – signals regarding the FTA negotiations coming out of the Leaders' meeting. It should be noted in this regard that India and the US have set a deadline for this fall on their own bilateral trade deal. The EU's and India's negotiation teams are now directed to pursue negotiations with the aim of concluding them within the year. Additionally and significantly, the EU now mentions India as a partner in economic security, as it focuses on reducing dependencies in other geographies, as well as ensuring predictability through trusted partnerships.

Closely connected to the discussions on trade is the EU-India Trade and Technology Council. The Council was initiated partly to fast forward those discussions that had stalled in the FTA negotiations. In the more ambitious partnership that is currently taking form between the EU and India, the TTC will be tasked to advance cooperation on economic security, supply chain resilience, market access, semiconductor ecosystems, AI, high-performance computing, 6G, digital public infrastructure, green and clean energy technologies, and recycling of batteries for EVs.

Another area which gains increased traction in a rejuvenated EU-India partnership is connectivity. There are clear converging interests between the EU and India with regards to working closely on connectivity, given the uncertain geopolitics of our time. The focus of the connectivity conversations is now partly redirected from the bilateral connectivity partnership that already exists towards the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). The IMEC was also discussed during Modi's visit to President Trump in Washington in February. Obviously, continued conflict in the Middle East makes prognostics on the operationalisation of IMEC risky, but the EU is set to invest in concrete projects through its Global Gateway initiative. IMEC, when functioning, is set to sharply reduce time of transport and connect manufacturers and consumers through digital and physical infrastructure.

The emphasis on trade and connectivity are also to be factored in, when understanding the direction of current discussions on cooperation on defence and security. Despite hesitation in strategic circles in some Member States due to the Russia factor, the EU has clearly stated it is exploring an expanded security and defence partnership with India, similar to those it already has with Japan and South Korea. While defence industry interest features strongly in the conversation, securing maritime trade routes and infrastructure associated with them is of joint interest. Hence, in addition to long standing topics of the EU-India security and defence conversation such as cyber security and measures against terrorism, new areas include securing undersea cables and critical infrastructure. These may be sectors of particular interest for Member States connected to the Baltic Sea and the North Atlantic.

Recent political signals surrounding the EU-India partnership reflect a mutual recognition of the real benefits that expanded and deepened cooperation could bring to both sides. How this momentum is translated into further action will become clearer as the EU-India strategic agenda is renewed and we approach the next summit, which may take place in the last quarter of this year.



Dr Henrik Chetan Aspengren
Senior Analyst and Project Lead, UI
Henrik.aspengren@ui.se
+46(0)708986797



Mihir Swarup Sharma
Director, ORF
mihir.swarup.sharma@orfonline.org