

India and the EU in 2024: where to next?

Jan Luykx

In this multi-election-year both the Indian Government and the European Parliament will soon face their respective voters. Relations between the EU and India, two powerful actors on the world stage, will hardly be a theme of much importance in these elections. With the present geopolitical turmoil in the world as background, the question arises whether India and the EU should enhance their strategic cooperation to a more significant level. Russia's war on Ukraine is posing a real threat to peace and security for the rest of Europe and for the Eurasian continent. With China, Russia's partner against 'the West', extending its influence in many parts of the world, while the rest of the world is waiting, often with apprehension, the outcome of the US elections, insecurity and uncertainty have become dominant feelings in many capitals. In this context, should the EU-political level not take note of the potential benefits of closer relations with a more ambitious India?

STATE OF THE RELATIONSHIP

The EU and India celebrated 60 years of bilateral diplomatic relations in 2022. The cooperation agreement between the European Community and India dates back to 1994. In 2004 they decided to become strategic partners. The EU adopted a renewed strategy on India in 2018. In 2005 a first common roadmap to guide joint action was adopted. Political meetings take place regularly. The EU-leadership, Commission- and Council-president, and Indian leaders meet during the EU-India summits, the first of which took place in Lisbon in 2000.

Even though they were supposed to happen (take place) every year, as of yet 17 have taken place.

The first ever EU-India leaders' meeting took place in May 2021 in Porto in a hybrid format, with the participation of leaders of all 27 EU Member States and India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. In April 2022, during the first and only visit of Ursula von der Leyen to India as Commission-president, an EU-India Trade and Technology Council was established. It met for the first time in Brussels in May 2023.

As an outcome of these summits and other meetings, a great number of dialogues have been started between the Union and India, on the political and working level.

The EU and India thus cooperate in many diverse fields, including climate change, maritime security, digitalisation and health.

Nevertheless, the main focus of EU-India relations has been trade-related. This is hardly surprising considering that trade-policy is one of the few areas in which the EU can function as a State. Also, the EU is India's largest trading partner and India's second largest export destination. India is the EU's 10th largest trading partner; in 2021, it accounted for 2.1% of total EU trade in goods, which means that there is a scope for expansion. It should be noted though that the negotiations on a bilateral trade and investment agreement (BTIA) which began in 2007, stalled in 2013 and were resumed in June 2022, are still not making much headway.

There is however a wish, since many years, expressed through the joint declarations after EU-India-meetings, to broaden the scope of bilateral cooperation between the two. A second Joint Action Plan was established in July 2020, running until 2025. It lists a total of no less than 114 action points.

As can clearly be seen from all this, both the EU and India attach a lot of importance to this relationship. But is their approach to this relationship similar?

INDIAN APPROACH

Indian foreign policy has gone through a transformation this last decade. From being mostly reactive, it has become more geopolitically proactive in recent years. This change started when Prime Minister Modi came into office.

Confronted with new challenges in its South-Asian neighbourhood, due in the first place to the growing Chinese influence in the region and to Chinese military pressure in the Himalayan region, India has entered into strategic partnerships such as the one with the US, Japan and Australia (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or QUAD) in the Indo-Pacific region.

A second aspect of India's foreign policy that has become more prominent these last years is the importance of national self-interest.

Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar, in his recent book 'Why Bharat¹ Matters',² describes Indian foreign policy very much along 'realistic' lines and puts national self-interest at its centre: 'At the end of the day, foreign policy is very much about clinically assessing the global landscape and calculating one's prospects' (p6). This implies that India will not refrain from buying cheap oil from Russia, as this benefits the Indian economy. India also sees no interest in driving Russia, with which it has historically good relations, further into the arms of its main rival, China.

Furthermore, Prime Minister Modi himself plays an active role in international affairs, bilaterally and multilaterally,

thereby enhancing India's relevance on the global scale. The latest example of this is India's G20 Chairmanship in 2023. This dynamic approach can also be seen in the way India has taken it upon itself to be the spokesperson for the Global South.

In line with its vision of a multipolar world India also attaches a lot of importance to its membership of BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

The present Indian government sees the relationship with the EU as part of its interaction with 'the West'. Indeed, the main passage on relations with the EU can be found in the subchapter 'Resetting with the West' of Jaishankar's book. The message is that the Indian government is keen to enhance the interaction with the West, after all 'the fact remains that those Asian nations have progressed fastest who have done so in partnership with the West' (p97). Also 'developing affinities with the West will definitely pay well in the era of knowledge economy' (p98). In the next paragraph the Foreign Minister states: 'The attention that the Modi government has devoted to building ties with Europe is a significant departure from the passivity of the preceding decades.'

Admitting that 'Indian diplomacy mostly concentrated on larger states' he adds 'but there is now a more sustained focus on the EU as a collective body' (p99). However, one can't help but notice a strong tendency to see the relationship with the EU through the lens of India's bonds with the individual member states. Indeed, in a recent speech the FM stated that PM Modi, since he became head of government, visited Europe 27 times, and that he received 37 visiting Heads of State or Government from EU-countries. It should be noted however that the Prime Minister visited Brussels only once, in 2016.

A very interesting recent publication (The making of a global Bharat) from the Observer Research Foundation, an Indian independent think tank that organises the yearly Raisina dialogue in cooperation with the Indian Foreign Ministry, 'celebrates India's global engagements and explores the core elements of this new foreign policy

vision shaped over the past 10 years.’ In its 14 essays the references to the EU are rare and far between: it seems to have no place and no mention is made of any geopolitical role for the Union.³

Prime Minister Modi, in his Raisina dialogue speech of 2017, stated “with Europe, we have a vision of strong partnership in India’s development, especially in knowledge industry and smart urbanisation”.⁴ More than anything else, here lies the main interest for India with the EU.

THE EU APPROACH IN RECENT YEARS

For the EU India is, and should be, an important country if only for purely factual reasons: it is now the most populous country in the world, it is the fifth-largest economy and set to become the third largest in the 2030s. At the heart of the crucial Indo-Pacific region, as indicated before, India’s importance is also growing at the geopolitical level. Its role as a spokesman for the Global South further increases its political relevance.

The EU and its Member States are aware of this reality. The individual EU member States attach a lot of importance to their bilateral relationship with New Delhi and are interacting with the Indian government at the highest level. However, visits of the leaders of the EU institutions to India are rare. One fails to see a real political interest in India from the Commission President and from the President of the European Council. The first visit of the Commission-president Von der Leyen took place only in 2022, and that too in the context of the G20 summit that took place in Delhi. The same can be said for the President of the European Council.

Over the years the EU has published several declarations stressing the importance of its relations with India. These statements were also repeated in the outcomes of the EU-India summits. Concrete implementation of plans to cooperate in a great number of fields was actually undertaken, as described earlier. There is an EU-wish to take this relationship further.

A significant example of the latter was the launch, in 2022 of the India-EU Trade and Technology Council. This is only the second such TTC that the EU has established, the other being the one with the USA.

The TTC is called a “strategic coordination mechanism”.⁵ Its aim “is to tackle the nexus of trade, trusted technology and security, and thus deepen cooperation in these fields between the EU and India”. Further in the same text it is called “a key step towards a strengthened strategic partnership”. The first meeting of this TTC took place one year later, in Brussels. A joint statement was released on May 16th about its results. It states that the TTC is a “key coordination platform to address key trade, trusted technology and security challenges,...” Three working groups are announced as well as a stock-taking meeting in early 2024. The focus of the TTC thus seems to be primarily trade and technology-related. It is difficult to get a sense of urgency while reading these statements - even though they mention the ‘challenging and volatile global political, economic and security landscape’ both partners are facing.⁶

The question is therefore whether the EU is institutionally capable of having a real strategic relationship with India that relates to the geopolitical situation of the moment? Defence and Security remain to a large extent a competence of the individual member states. Some of these, such as France, have already established a very strong cooperation with India in these fields (and Germany seems to be interested in it as well).⁷ Furthermore, as the Ukraine-War has demonstrated, the EU member countries have, amongst themselves, very contrasting views on the relationship with Russia.

AFTER THE ELECTIONS

The result of the upcoming Indian elections seems to be predictable. The same cannot be said about the elections for the European Parliament. In terms of foreign and security policy one can thus expect continuity in New Delhi.



What impact the Ukraine-war will have on the outcome of the next European elections and the policy-choices of the next European Commission is as yet unpredictable.

However, notwithstanding the divergences that exist between the EU-member states about how to deal with the Ukraine war, it is clear that the EU has taken consciousness as a Union, of the importance of the challenges posed by the geopolitical environment in which it finds itself. The EU, faced with real threats on the `European continent, has become more defence and security-aware than ever before in its history. The appointment of a European Commissioner responsible for defence, such as proposed by Mrs Von der Leyen (at the 2024 Munich security conference), would be a concrete result of this new sentiment.

This dimension has until now been rather absent from the EU-India relationship. As is clear from the way EU and India perceive each other, there is a lack of interest from both sides to engage in this field.

There is however a basis for more mutual understanding between the EU and India. A certain parallelism exists between the EU's geopolitical waking-up as a result of Russia's war on Ukraine and the way India, driven by the growing Chinese threat at its borders and in its immediate neighbourhood, became a more active geopolitical actor in recent years.

For the EU, the geopolitical need to strengthen its relations with India should be obvious. India's international profile has been growing these last couple of years. The Ukraine-War and the challenge posed by the China-Russia combine, as well as the uncertainty about the outcome of the next US elections, should encourage the Union to go for a stronger defence and security role in general and for a real relationship with India in this area.

The leaderships of Commission and Council will have to recalibrate their approach to India if they want to change the present general lack of political focus and intensity in the relationship, in the first place by establishing more continuity in the relationship with India at the highest level. Furthermore, they will have to convince India that the EU is more than an organisation with which one mainly cooperates in domains such as trade, technology and others, while leaving overall geopolitical interaction to individual member countries or other organisations.

Jan Luykx is a Senior Associate Fellow in the Europe in the World Programme at Egmont Institute. He is a former Belgian diplomat and Chairman of the Belgian National Security Authority.

Endnotes

- 1 Bharat is the Sanskrit name for the Indian subcontinent. It is used in several Indian languages to as a name for India. Its use has become more popular in recent times as it is considered to be a more 'Indian' name for the country.
- 2 Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd, 2024
- 3 Harsh V.Pant and Sameer Patil, eds, *The making of a Global Bharat*, New Delhi ORF and Global Policy Journal, 2024
- 4 S. Jaishankar and Samir Saran Eds, *Raisina Chronicles: India's Global Public Square*, February 2024, Observer Research Foundation.
- 5 EU-Indian joint press release on launching the Trade and Technology Council, New Delhi, 25 April 2022
- 6 JS 16/05/2023
- 7 Interview with the German ambassador to India, Times of India, 4/3/24





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