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A Long Time Coming

Europe and India have discovered a strategic partnership.

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The relationship between Europe and India is on the cusp of change. Later this month, in a [historic first](#), EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen will serve as guest of honor, a position reserved for India's top partners, at the country's Republic Day ceremony. At the subsequent EU-India summit, the two sides are likely to sign a long-elusive free trade agreement (FTA) and an expansive security and defense partnership. They are also expected to announce initiatives designed to boost skilled migration, and to foster cooperation between European and Indian industry to enhance economic security.

There are several other positive developments. German Chancellor Friedrich Merz just undertook [his first official visit](#) to India, also his first to a non-NATO ally. Accompanied by a substantial business delegation, he secured many agreements on defense industrial cooperation, semiconductors, and critical minerals. Recent German governments have made a point of sending top leadership to India before official visits to China, and Merz's visit continues that convention. French President Emmanuel Macron is due to follow in February to cement his own country's ties with New Delhi on [emerging technologies](#), thereby broadening an already substantial and critical strategic partnership. India's foreign minister, in a breakthrough for India's small-group diplomacy in Europe, just joined a Weimar Format meeting for the [first time](#). Lastly, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is set to visit the continent in spring for the next India-Nordic summit.

For [some observers](#) this momentum is the result of the rocky relationships that Europe and India have with the United States. In a world of fractured alliances and partnerships, Europe and India need each other like never before. But the groundwork for their current ties was laid over the last decade. Structural factors such as competition with China, and India's policy of diversification that led it to focus on ties with the West, have brought them closer and raised bilateral ambitions. The relationship is, however, not without divergences, particularly on approaches to Russia.

Based on interviews with policymakers in New Delhi, Paris, Berlin, The Hague, and Brussels, this piece will trace the evolution of the "India agenda" in European foreign policy and lay out Europe's position among New Delhi's foreign policy priorities.

The European Perspective

Long-term observers of European Asia policy attest that India's role and importance was not always recognized in many European capitals, with few exceptions such as Paris. For most European governments, India came second to China and ranked below other partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, such as that with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. A turning point came in 2019 when relations with China took a downturn. There has since been a remarkable shift in discourse with and foreign policy toward India. European national capitals and Brussels have discovered the strategic rationale for investing in ties with India, which is now seen as a growing power that will shape its region and global politics. The country also serves as an economic counterweight to China and a leading voice in the "Global South". New Delhi is indispensable for a Europe seeking to diversify, de-risk, and compete.

The shift toward India goes beyond summyry and pageants. It is reflected in European policy and organizational priorities. Germany's [Focus on India](#) strategy, the clearest articulation of India's importance for European foreign policy priorities, now serves as a template for several other EU member states reworking their approaches to New Delhi. And in key European foreign ministries, India desks have expanded. The need for more ambitious ties with the country is mentioned regularly in [political guidelines](#) and [coalition agreements](#). As one EU official stated in a private interview: "In member states and Brussels, the sense on the India partnership is if not now, when?" In a bloc in which foreign policy consensus is painfully hard to reach, one seems to be emerging around India.

But what drives this change in perceptions of and policy toward India?

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The China Factor

Shifting debates on China in Europe have had clear consequences for the continent's India policy. In the past, different approaches to and threat perceptions of China stymied Europe-India ties. European policymakers until recently did not see Beijing as a security challenge while New Delhi aligned itself with those in Washington, Tokyo, and Canberra who did.

Europe's approach now, however, frames China primarily as a challenge to economic and [conventional security](#), especially given Beijing's increasing closeness to Russia. At the same time, the "China shock" and its [debilitating consequences](#) for European industry, jobs, and competitiveness also dominate EU policy conversations. Most member-state governments are working on different degrees of [de-risking](#) and reducing Europe's dependence on China for critical inputs given the country's weaponization of supply chains.

A dense web of legislation and "trade defense instruments" is consequently wending its way through Brussels and national capitals. The EU's [economic security doctrine](#), the forthcoming Cybersecurity Act that restricts trade of connected vehicles and telecommunications equipment, and the German economic ministry's plan to reduce dependencies on critical raw materials all have obvious and significant consequences for policy toward China. The impetus for these moves comes from governments and European industry, including German companies that had [previously bet big on China](#) but now call for trade protection measures.

A common factor in these calls is the need to diversify Europe's partnerships. Top of the list of new partners is India, which is set to become the world's third-largest economy by 2030. As one European Parliament member noted in a closed-door event on EU-India ties in November 2025, "democracies are being tested, and supply chains are being reshaped." In this scenario, he added, "few partnerships are as important and necessary as India." Von der Leyen herself [repeatedly emphasized](#) during her 2025 visit to the country that it is a crucial partner for Europe on economic security. In private conversations, senior EU officials also noted that New Delhi and Brussels "share assessments" of the economic challenges that China poses, and they find India's attempts to de-risk and protect strategic sectors from overreliance on China "impressive".

While there is much to criticize on EU member states' policies toward China—Paris remains [keen](#) on limited economic engagement while [Berlin](#), distracted by domestic issues, is slow to responding to the challenges the country poses—a European consensus on India as an important alternative and an indispensable partner exists.

Senior European policymakers nevertheless recognize the limits of India's potential. They acknowledge that, even as supply chains shift to the country, many components for clean tech, semiconductors, and pharmaceuticals still come from China. The European "Commission is clear-eyed on the potential of India, even though it will not replace China fully," an EU official said for this piece. Given the complementarities between the European and Indian economies, he added that "it is in our interest to see India becoming a manufacturing powerhouse." European governments are consequently pushing industry representatives, especially in sectors such as semiconductors, to consider India as an alternative location for investment and production amid shifting global supply chains.

Another consequence of this convergence on China-related challenges is that it has allowed Europe and India to manage differences in other areas. The [EU's Strategy on India](#) notes that while the two sides "may not align on every issue", closer cooperation with New Delhi "is more important than ever". "Confronted by imperial ambitions and regional tensions", Europe and India are deeply interconnected.

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The US Push

Another key factor shaping Europe's views of India is US influence. The Biden administration, which gave relations with New Delhi a prominent role in the pursuit of a network of alliances and partnerships to compete with China, urged European partners do the same. "This was a bipartisan message we received from Democrats and Republicans alike," an EU official shared for this piece.

Cracks in the transatlantic alliance under the second Trump administration now provide an additional impetus for Europe to look for trusted allies and new partners, India among them. "The search for new partners has been the primary focus of our foreign policy for the last year," said another EU official interviewed, but rocky relations with Washington add to the urgency of developing a deeper partnership with India.

The View From India

New Delhi's reasoning for investing in the Europe-India partnership also stems from and is driven by broadly complementary and similar structural factors. Facing an assertive and aggressive China, India has long pursued the dual strategy of diversifying international partnerships while building domestic economic and technological capabilities. As part of this strategy, New Delhi has steadily increased outreach to Europe since 2014, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi assumed office. High-level visits, new strategic partnerships, more dialogue and consultation mechanisms, and investing in Europe's regions have all been parts of this outreach.

Indian interlocutors interviewed for this piece argued that their efforts started being reciprocated only after certain leadership changes in Europe. Germany, following the departure of former Chancellor Angela Merkel, is seen as one prominent example. But a shift in the European Commission is arguably the most important change. As an Indian official noted, "India had always reached out to the EU", but the ground "only really shifted under von der Leyen". Geopolitical changes also played a role. Some member states such as Lithuania started exploring ties with India once tensions with China skyrocketed. India responded by opening its first embassy in the Baltic states, a sign of growing links.

India does not issue foreign policy white papers, but Europe's importance to New Delhi is seen in the agreements that it has signed with European partners since 2014. All focus on one or more of four areas: technology and innovation, trade and investment, migration and mobility, or security and defense. Interestingly, these have also been important pillars in the more developed ties between India and the United States.

The Trump Factor

These areas are important elements of India's engagement with the broader West. For a strengthened manufacturing sector, access to critical and emerging technologies, and advanced defense industrial capabilities—all of which are key to India's economic and strategic development—New Delhi aims to avoid strategic dependencies on China. And, as Russia's utility on all these fronts is rapidly declining, New Delhi is moving to embrace strategic cooperation with the United States and, increasingly, Europe.

But over the last year, as ties with Washington have become tense, India's options have narrowed. The relationship now faces its most serious crisis in decades, leading New Delhi to focus on links to Europe. India's foreign minister, speaking at a meeting of the Weimar Triangle format in early January, noted that "among India's major relationships" its ties with Europe have "the most room to grow today". Europe is keen to seize on this window

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of opportunity. However, as shown above, India's investments in Europe and Europe's shift toward India pre-date these tensions and the relationship stands on its own merit. Additionally, some links remain too immature to replace the continuing collaboration between the United States and India, and areas of deep divergence, such as policy toward Russia, persist.

Burgeoning Indo-European Cooperation

Regardless of the direction in which the US-India relationship goes, four areas for Europe-India ties hold significant potential:

Security and Defense: Europe has benefitted more than the United States from diversification of India's traditional defense ties with Moscow. [SIPRI](#) calculates that the main suppliers of defense equipment to India between 2019 and 2023 were still led by Russia (36%), but France (33%) ranked second, far ahead of the United States (13%). India also deepened partnerships with [Germany](#), [Italy](#), and Sweden for advanced defense systems during those years, which increased Europe's total share of India's defense-related imports. In addition, as Europe rapidly expands investment in its own security and defense, Indian industry is keen to get a piece of that market by offering the mass production, scale, and investment that Europe needs. The European Commission and EU member states are already considering ways to streamline defense industrial cooperation with India, and [consultations on security and defense](#) among Indian and European counterparts at the level of [national security advisers](#), and foreign and defense ministers, have proliferated.

Technology: India is exploring bilateral partnerships on critical and emerging technologies with countries including France, Germany, and the United Kingdom by drawing on the model of the US-India TRUST initiative. This is in addition to the EU-India Trade and Technology Council, which has underperformed so far but may be subject to reform.

Trade and Economic Security: Trade and investment are the cornerstone of Europe-India ties. The EU is the second-largest destination for Indian exports, after the United States. For goods, the bloc is India's [largest trading partner](#). But the importance for New Delhi of concluding an FTA with Brussels has grown as trade relations with Washington suffer from its imposition of a 50% tariff rate and slow progress on a US trade deal. Some have argued that an Indo-European FTA would be narrower than similar deals Brussels has signed. However, European Commission officials and member-state governments look at an FTA with India as a political signal, tying the country closer to Europe geopolitically and economically. They also view a deal as an "enabler" of greater cooperation with India on other fronts, particularly economic security. Here, Brussels plans to broaden cooperation in critical sectors such as green technologies, solar energy, pharmaceuticals, semiconductors, advanced manufacturing, and biotechnology. The EU has proposed creating "Blue Valleys", platforms dedicated to these sectors that are designed to accelerate private-sector engagement.

New Stakeholders: As new restrictions on American H1B visas limit the ability of highly skilled Indian migrants and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) graduates to relocate to the United States, the EU and its member states plan to [significantly expand](#) efforts to attract such talent. Europe also aims to focus more on private-sector engagement, startups, industry forums, and "enablers" who can help sustain momentum in ties beyond summits.

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Challenges Ahead

Ties between Europe and India have been fundamentally transformed in the last decade, but the relationship still contends with significantly different perspectives, primarily those concerning Russia. Most European decision-makers today understand that India has a long history of ties with Russia, which will likely continue even if they are on a downward trajectory. Policymakers in New Delhi confirm this, noting that they find “senior European officials understand the context and history of India-Russia ties”. Still, problems persist, such as with India’s recent participation in the Russia-led [Zapad-25 military exercise](#) that simulated an attack on Europe. New Delhi’s involvement perplexed European partners, especially as it coincided with Brussels’ efforts to develop crucial India-related policy milestones, including those related to FTA negotiations. Certain Central and Eastern European countries were particularly displeased and threatened to withdraw their support for the talks. At the same time, the European reaction to the maneuvers took Indian policymakers aback. They pointed out that only a small contingent of 65 troops participated near Moscow, far from any European border. But the incident highlights the bigger issue of India’s underestimating the scale of the security challenge that Europe believes Russia poses, while Europeans struggle to understand the Indian decision-making process for policy toward Moscow.

A second and related impediment to closer Indo-European ties is the mutual lack of knowledge of the other party. Few European think tanks and universities offer programs on modern Indian politics or foreign policy. The same is true in India. In absence of the needed expertise, both sides tend to rely on outdated thinking and behavior, especially in moments of crisis.

Looking ahead, three factors will be crucial to sustain the current momentum in growing ties between Europe and India. First, both will need to devote high-level political attention if cooperation between them is to expand further. Second, the proliferation of bilateral and regional formats for dialogue must ensure results-oriented and not only process-focused outcomes. Finally, careful management of developments concerning other powers, whether a Sino-Indian tactical thaw or worsening tensions between Europe and Russia, will be required to prevent any setback to Indo-European relations. Instituting a no-surprise rule and communicating redlines and sensitivities will be key.

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