

# TOGETHER IN AN UNCERTAIN WORLD

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: European Union (EU)

Last week saw the European Union releasing its strategy on India after 14 years. Launching the strategy document, the European Union (EU) Ambassador to India, Tomasz Kozlowski, underlined that “India is on the top of the agenda of the EU in the field of external relations... this strategy paper reflects that EU has taken India’s priorities very seriously. We are ready for a joint leap.” The 2004 EU-India declaration on building bilateral strategic partnership, which this road map replaces, has not had much of a success in reconfiguring the relationship as was expected.

The new document is sweeping in its scope and lays out a road map for strengthening the EU-India partnership, which has been adrift for a while in the absence of a clearly articulated strategy. The new strategy underscores a transformative shift in Brussels *vis-à-vis* India and talks of key focus areas such as the need to conclude a broader Strategic Partnership Agreement, intensifying dialogue on Afghanistan and Central Asia, strengthening technical cooperation on fighting terrorism, and countering radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorist financing. More significant from the perspective of the EU, which has been traditionally shy of using its hard power tools, is a recognition of the need to develop defence and security cooperation with India.

Despite sharing a congruence of values and democratic ideals, India and the EU have both struggled to build a partnership that can be instrumental in shaping the geopolitics and geoeconomics of the 21st century. Each complain of the other’s ignorance, and often arrogance, and both have their own litany of grievances.

But where India’s relations with individual EU nations have progressed dramatically over the last few years and the EU’s focus on India has grown, it has become imperative for the two to give each other a serious look. In this age when U.S. President Donald Trump is upending the global liberal order so dear to the Europeans, and China’s rise is challenging the very values which Brussels likes to showcase as the ones underpinning global stability, a substantive engagement with India is a natural corollary.

The Narendra Modi government too has shed India’s diffidence of the past in engaging with the West. New Delhi has found the bureaucratic maze of Brussels rather difficult to navigate and in the process ignored the EU as a collective. At times, India also objected to the high moralistic tone emanating from Brussels. Where individual nations of the EU started becoming more pragmatic in their engagement with India, Brussels continued to be big-brotherly in its attitude on political issues and ignorant of the geostrategic imperatives of Indian foreign and security policies.

The result was a limited partnership which largely remained confined to economics and trade. Even as the EU emerged as India’s largest trading partner and biggest foreign investor, the relationship remained devoid of any strategic content. Though the Modi government did initially make a push for reviving the talks on EU-India bilateral trade and investment agreement, nothing much of substance has happened on the bilateral front.

But as the wider EU political landscape evolves after Brexit, and India seeks to manage the turbulent geopolitics in Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific, both recognise the importance of engaging each other. There is a new push in Brussels to emerge as a geopolitical actor of some significance and India is a natural partner in many respects. There is widespread disappointment with the trajectory of China’s evolution and the Trump administration’s disdain for its Western

allies is highly disruptive. At a time when India's horizons are widening beyond South Asia and the Indian Ocean region, Brussels is also being forced to look beyond its periphery. The EU will be part of the International Solar Alliance, and has invited India to escort World Food Programme vessels to transport food to Somalia. The two have been coordinating closely on regional issues.

The new India strategy document unveiled by the EU, therefore, comes at an appropriate time when both have to seriously recalibrate their partnership. Merely reiterating that India and the EU are "natural partners" is not enough, and the areas outlined in the document, from security sector cooperation to countering terrorism and regional security, need to be focussed on. India needs resources and expertise from the EU for its various priority areas, such as cybersecurity, urbanisation, environmental regeneration, and skill development.

As the EU shifts its focus to India, New Delhi should heartily reciprocate this outreach. In the past, India had complained that Brussels does not take India seriously and that despite the two not having any ideological affinity, the EU-China relations carried greater traction. Now all that might change.

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