

A 'ZEITENWENDE' IN THE INDIA-GERMANY RELATIONSHIP

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'While economics comprises the bulk of the partnership, it is refreshing to witness relations steadily evolve into a more wholesome partnership' | Photo Credit: R.V. MOORTHY

It is no secret that India's relationship with Germany has traditionally lagged behind its relations with its other European partners such as France. Benign mutual neglect coupled with Germany's primary focus on China are factors, but this appears to be changing rapidly.

Chancellor Scholz's two-day visit to India, that began on February 25, 2023, significantly coincided with the first anniversary of Russia's war on Ukraine, which has been, in Mr. Scholz's own words, a *Zeitenwende* or turning point.

Indeed, the Russian invasion has been a watershed moment in Germany's security policy, resulting in the abandonment of decades of post-war pacifism towards strategic matters. This is evident in Germany's pledge to boost defence spending to 2% of GDP and provide special funding to bolster the country's military.

Russia's war and China's assertive posturing have brought into question Germany's approach of *Wandel durch Handel* (change through trade), prompting a deep rethink of its energy and trade dependencies towards diversifying economic relations. As ties with Russia and China enter uncharted waters, Europe's increasing prioritisation of values-based partnerships with like-minded countries can advance India-German cooperation. In this context, the German government's coalition agreement in 2021 refers to relations with India among its top foreign policy priorities.

Mr. Scholz's visit has built on German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock's visit to India in December 2022, and the 6th India-Germany Inter-governmental Consultations, a biannual format of engagement that commenced in 2011, to expand cooperation in defence, trade, clean energy, migration, digital transformation, and the Indo-Pacific.

His visit assumes greater importance as India holds the G-20 presidency this year and seeks to avoid geopolitics hampering cooperation in the forum. Discussions on the Russia-Ukraine conflict and its global repercussions were centre stage as the war continues. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has reiterated India's commitment to contribute to any peace process.

In a departure from Germany's previous Asia policy that centred around China, Mr. Scholz first visited Japan after assuming office in 2021, and later invited Mr. Modi for the 6th Inter-Governmental Consultations to Berlin. This enhanced political outreach to Asia is part of Germany's overall strategy for the Indo-Pacific region which mentions India as a key partner. For Germany, the stability of supply chains and trade routes linking Asia to Europe assumes critical importance given its status as Europe's economic powerhouse and its reliance on exports. In an interview preceding his India visit, Mr. Scholz expressed Germany's intent to enhance its strategic involvement in the region through greater military deployment. Germany's symbolic gesture of sending its frigate Bayern to the Indo-Pacific in 2021, with a stopover in Mumbai (January 2022), was a demonstration of this. A recent agreement on India-Germany triangular cooperation involving development projects in third countries is also an important step in this direction.

As New Delhi attempts to diversify from its military dependence on Russia and Berlin reassesses its long-standing arms exports policy, Germany could become an important defence partner for India. The meetings included discussions around co-development of military hardware and tech transfers, and a deal worth \$5.2 billion where Germany would jointly build six conventional submarines in India could be underway. Besides, the first ever France-India-Germany military exercise drill is slated to take place in 2024 towards enhanced security and defence collaboration.

Yet, it is important for the two countries to set realistic expectations in the security realm. Despite their common concerns regarding stability in the Indo-Pacific, Germany does not share a border with China, India has territorial conflicts with the country. And despite the lack of German trust in China, Mr. Scholz's visit there in November 2022 demonstrated how intertwined German industry is with Chinese markets. But even while Mr. Scholz emphasises the difficulties in 'decoupling' from China, it is encouraging that Germany is drafting a new official China strategy amidst a wider national security strategy.

India and Germany also cooperate in multilateral forums, as part of the G-4 grouping pushing for United Nations Security Council reform, and as evident in Germany's invitation to Mr. Modi to attend last year's G-7 summit.

Germany is India's largest economic partner in the European Union (EU). Thus, trade naturally figured high on the agenda boosted by the relaunch of the India-EU free-trade agreement negotiations where the Chancellor, travelling with his high-powered business delegation, stated he would "get personally involved". Collaboration in clean energy and green technologies has emerged as the central pillar in the partnership, with the launch of a Green and Sustainable Development Partnership last year and cooperation in the area of green hydrogen. The subject of mobility and migration was also under focus given Germany's shortages of skilled manpower; where technically skilled Indians could help plug this gap.

While economics comprises the bulk of the partnership, it is refreshing to witness relations steadily evolve into a more wholesome partnership. Divergent positions on the war have not undermined India's regular political engagements with Europe and convergence in areas such as the Indo-Pacific that are cementing the strategic dimension of the partnership. An intensification of the Russia-China axis could further embolden this alignment.

Against the backdrop of volatile geopolitical shifts, emerging multipolarity, and Europe's enhanced courtship of India, India's ties with Germany could be vital in shaping a new global order.

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