

ENGAGING GERMANY

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Chancellor Angela Merkel's visit last week highlights expanding European interest in partnering Delhi as well as emerging concerns about India's economic and political trajectory. Germany, as the natural leader of Europe, is struggling to cope with deepening uncertainties – economic, political and security – in its own neighbourhood and the world. Berlin is under pressure to take larger responsibilities for regional stability and contribute more to the maintenance of the global order. Amidst the current unpredictability of the US security policies, President Donald Trump's attack on the world trading system, the rapid economic expansion of China into Europe, the increasing assertiveness of the Sino-Russian political axis, Berlin is looking to diversify its global partnerships beyond the Euro-Atlantic space. Delhi is inevitably at the top of its list of potential strategic partners.

Reflecting the new interest, the German Parliament passed a resolution on boosting ties with India days before Merkel arrived in Delhi. Addressing the Bundestag, the German foreign minister, Heiko Maas, said Germany must end its neglect of India. He warned that amidst the unfolding great power rivalry between the US, China and Russia, it would be unwise for Europe to put all its eggs in the China basket. Maas also called India a pillar of Asian stability and a country that shares European political values. As Germany seeks to bring India into its larger geopolitical calculus, Delhi too is ending its prolonged indifference to Europe as a strategic actor. The recent elevation of India's engagement with France is now being followed by a fresh look at strengthening ties with Germany. Engaging Germany is not just about bilateral relations with Berlin. It is about collaboration with the Germany-led European Union as a whole. The expansive range of agreements signed during Merkel's visit include trade and investment, mitigating climate change, the digital revolution, urban development, agriculture and human resource development. Unlike in the past, defence and security have acquired a prominent place in Indo-German discussions.

As Germany and Europe look to India, there are real concerns in Berlin and Brussels about India's economic slowdown and its discomfort with trade liberalisation. Both are rooted in Delhi's inability to undertake comprehensive economic reform. Europe, like the US and Japan, wants India to move purposefully on the economic front when its commercial ties with the US and China are under stress. Meanwhile, India's mounting tensions with Pakistan test the proposition that India is a source of regional stability. Delhi's lockdown of Kashmir and the concerns about the rights of minorities in India have begun to cast a shadow over the "shared political values" with India. Merkel's cautious public comment on the unsustainability of the current situation in Kashmir is a timely reminder that India's friends will find it hard to keep quiet if matters don't improve soon. Delhi's failure to calm things at home and in the region and show some decisive forward movement on the economic front could have serious consequences for India's near term prospects.

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