

## **Europe and India in the Asian Century**

**Article by Jagannath Panda, Roderick Kefferpütz**

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In a world increasingly divided by rising tensions between the US and China, what of relations between India and Europe? From their democratic traditions to shared interests in technological development, Europe and India have much in common and to gain from cooperation. We spoke with Jagannath Panda on India's role in the hegemonic conflict between the US and China, its position on the upcoming climate change negotiations, and the role of democracy in its outlook on the world.

**Roderick Kefferpütz: During the Cold War, India was part of the non-aligned movement, refusing to formally align itself with or against any major power bloc. Today, tensions are growing between the US and China. Where does India stand?**

**Jagannath Panda:** Let's be clear: China is the biggest national security threat to India at this moment. We have a long-standing border dispute with China and fought a war in 1962. There have always been ups and downs in our relations with China, but under Xi Jinping's presidency the situation has become more worrisome. Tensions have mounted, with China increasing its troops along the border, and India is vigilant about this threat. China's rising military and economic power gives more global influence abroad and affects India's strategic interests in its neighbourhood.

Though India prefers not to indulge itself in a US-China power struggle, Delhi's choices are still very much drawn within it. India's strategic interests in world politics are more aligned with the United States hence the strong interest in strengthening its relationships with the United States as a natural partner. In October 2020, both states concluded the fourth in a series of military pacts, highlighting their growing security partnership in the Indo-Pacific. While India is not likely to take a direct stance in the US-China hegemonic struggle in the near future, New Delhi has growing ties with the US and has come to recognise the threat posed by China to its strategic security.

**Would India be interested in closer alignment with other democracies?**

Indian foreign policy is multivariate, engaging with all countries and regions. It is not about putting all your eggs in one basket and aligning with one power against another. Instead, India espouses the notion of "inclusivity" across all spectrums. Unlike a majority of the strategic partners of the United States, India does not envision an anti-China arrangement. Of course, China is a threat but that makes engagement more necessary and it does not mean that we cannot simultaneously cooperate on other issues. We have strong ties with China on economic cooperation in multilateral domains. This partnership, however, has taken a backseat considering China's conduct towards India and the recent border incidents.

In this context, India has improved its ties with like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific region, such as the US, Japan and Australia going as far as concluding a number of mini-lateral and trilateral arrangements with these partners. Cooperation in the maritime domain and maintaining a “free and open Indo-Pacific” have emerged as central aspects of India’s engagement in the Indo-Pacific. Moving forward, these partnerships will imbibe a post-Covid-19 outlook with a focus on strategic integration, infrastructure cooperation, information technology collaboration, and enhancing institutional inclusiveness. Nevertheless, India would not like to build an alliance at the cost of China. India holds a pragmatic interest in maintaining a diplomatic relationship with China – albeit with power parity and equilibrium.

**China is increasingly active in Central Asia and South-East Asia. Is India also increasing its ties across the regions?**

You cannot compare India’s influence and capacity to China’s; we are not at the same level. China’s economy is roughly four times ours. Their massive economic power alone provides greater geopolitical influence. New Delhi must play a different game which is why it has opted for a “good-will strategy”. India, unlike China, is not building a Communist empire. Rather, Delhi is building partnerships to protect its national interests against hegemonistic tendencies.

India does not intend to compete with China’s Belt and Road Initiative. We engage on a soft power connection, promoting good relations and highlighting our democratic character. The strategic dialogue between the United States, Japan, Australia and India and its potential institutionalisation, is an endeavour in this direction. India’s soft engagement in the Indian Ocean is also driven through a security lens. Located at the centre of the Indian Ocean Region, India is a key part of the maritime region that has become one its topmost foreign policy priorities. Initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative<sup>1</sup> have become a significant forum through which China’s mounting presences and assertive military-maritime posturing can be balanced. India is also actively involved in the institutions and mechanisms like the Indian Ocean Rim Association<sup>2</sup> and the Quad Plus<sup>3</sup> framework on a broader scale. New Delhi’s Covid-19 vaccine diplomacy vis-à-vis South Asia and other Indian Ocean states is an extension of such a soft power approach.

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**India and China are both carbon-heavy economies but that have historically low carbon emissions and low per capita emissions. To what extent do India and China cooperate on climate change?**

India has always supported the international climate negotiations and indeed, has stood alongside China on the issue of climate change. On many occasions, we have partnered with countries such as South Africa and China. However, given the way that China has

developed under Xi Jinping and its attempted nexus with the United States on climate issues, India has been forced to review its collaboration with China. So New Delhi has decided to also go its own way when it comes to climate protection and it is doing so very successfully. We are one of the very few countries that are meeting the Paris agreement and overachieving its nationally determined contribution target.

**India is meeting its Paris obligations but has provided mixed signals on how it will move on with its energy transition. It's pushing towards a higher share of renewables, but it also keeps planning for more coal capacity. What interests does India have in the climate negotiations?**

India has one of the most ambitious renewable energy programmes. Yet, it continues to push for coal-fired plants, which are projected to play a vital role in the country's pandemic recovery package. This is something countries often question India on; however, it is important to remember that the Indian coal industry employs millions of people and is a major source of revenue. Coal still powers almost 70 per cent of India's electricity.

Weaning off coal dependency will therefore need to be a gradual and strategically planned process. This is something the government is building on. Recently, India set up an implementation committee for Paris Agreement with representatives from fourteen Indian ministries whose main directive will be the reduction in coal use. This, coupled with India's on-track position to meet the Paris pledge, shows not only New Delhi's active focus on the environment but also the crucial place it holds in climate negotiations. Setting up a coalition on solar energy and disaster-resilient infrastructure show that India is not only focusing on domestic environmental improvement but also taking a leadership role amongst economies worldwide to further the successful implementation of the Paris Agreement. India is performing even better than its developed counterparts like China and the USA. A new index by climate analysts from international climate think tanks Germanwatch, New Climate Institute and Climate Action Network place India 10th, China 33rd and the US last in their assessment of 61 large world economies vis-a-vis their Paris pledge completion track.

**India's relationship with China, based on conflict and cooperation, has similarities to the European Union. Of course, the EU is firmly rooted in the transatlantic alliance, but it is also economically heavily invested in China and not keen on joining Washington in an alliance against Beijing. To what extent could Europe and India build on such similarities?**

Europe has been re-discovered as an important region for Indian foreign policy. In the past, we did not really pay much attention to Europe as geographically this region is far away and India has traditionally emphasised its immediate neighbourhood. In addition, there's a big gap between the way Europe and India thinks. However, the rise of China has brought India and Europe closer together. Europe has experienced deteriorating ties with China over the pandemic. Beijing's "wolf warrior" and "charm offensive" diplomacy has added to Sino-EU tensions. Beijing is recognised as a "systemic rival" in Europe and Chinese aggression in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the South and East China Seas has only brought about an emerging consensus in Europe.

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India-EU interests are now more aligned. Europe has realised that India is arising economic power that stands for liberal democratic principles such as transparency and the rule of law. India in turn sees Europe as an important part in its power-building exercise. So there's a great willingness on both sides for greater engagement. India has been focusing on France and Germany on defence and security issues. The India-France-Australia trilateral is one recent mechanism to emerge from India's budding synergy with Europe.

Technological governance can also emerge as a key area for India's collaboration with the EU. With China currently writing the rules by which the future of the internet and technology will be governed, India and the EU are fostering deeper cooperation in innovation and research of cutting-edge, sustainable digital infrastructure, which can further translate to cooperation in formulating global tech governance norms.

**A range of European countries have adopted Indo-Pacific strategies. How does India see that increased European interest and engagement in the Indo-Pacific?**

India welcomes these initiatives. The Indo-Pacific strategies of France, the Netherlands or Germany are in New Delhi's interests, because they allow India to engage with these countries in one of the most important geopolitical regions of the 21st century. This strengthens the democratic spirit in the region. India's synergy with the EU is also critically driven by France, Germany and the Netherlands' new Indo-Pacific policies (or outlooks) that demonstrate the EU's emerging focus on the region. New Delhi sees the EU (as well as the UK for that matter) as a key middle power partner. Their shared focus on sustaining a rules-based, liberal institutional regional and global order makes them like-minded partners and gives them a foundation to drive their partnership further.

**You mentioned that India can't counter China's Belt and Road strategy, but perhaps it could join the EU in its Connectivity Strategy that is investing in infrastructure and networks in the region. What do you think?**

They have convergence vis-à-vis their shared rules-based, sustainable and mutually beneficial conception of connectivity. The EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy is a fresh and promising avenue to promote not just economic but also a political partnership between the EU and India. Much like Japan's partnership for quality infrastructure – of which India is a vital partner – the EU-Asia connectivity outlook was not designed to compete with China. Furthermore, the strategy is not limited to physical infrastructure connectivity; digital, services, research and innovation are sectors that also figure prominently. Programmes such as Erasmus+ have already been expanded to India to promote academic collaborations. While individually neither can match China's funding patterns, together EU and India can provide alternatives to the Belt and Road initiative for small Asian and European economies.

**In the EU there is a lot of talk of “strategic autonomy” although the EU is militarily dependent on the US. What does the future of Europe in the world look like from an Indian perspective?**

The EU's place in the world has long been established; it is the single most important

trading bloc that has shaped the politics and policies of one of the world's most important continents for years. However, with the "Asian Century" in place, the emergence of Asia as a pivotal –if not most crucial – geography has put Asia in tandem with Europe. Furthermore, due to a surge in the power of Asian economies like India, Japan, China and South Korea, the playing field between Asia and the rest of the world has been further levelled. The creation of regional and trans-pacific trade pacts has further strengthened the Asian narrative. The most important step for the EU to take must be focused on determining a consensual policy on China, if not a unified EU policy on China. The development of a consensual EU policy on China and a coherent Indo-Pacific outlook could transform India-EU relations into a comprehensive strategic partnership for the new era.

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**As the world's largest democracy India certainly has a role to play in curbing the rise of authoritarianism. From the United States, President Biden has announced that he wants to convene a Summit for Democracy. How does India see such proposals?**

One of the key pillars of India's rise in global affairs has always been its democratic character. New Delhi supports democratic regimes across the world and is committed to promoting democracy. So in that context, India would strongly welcome Biden's proposition of a Summit for Democracy or Britain's proposition of a Democratic 10 Summit. However, details matter. India would want to know what exactly this summit or forum wants to achieve. If this will remain just a goodwill summit, then it will have limitations and would not benefit democratic countries, including India.

What we need is a forum that goes beyond a mere talking platform or making few headlines and rather finds a common approach of democratic nations on issues such as maritime rights, freedom of navigation, defending the rules-based order or democracy promotion in the Indo-Pacific. India would support such an approach and can take on a leadership role in this regard.

**Simultaneously, the Modi government has been under a lot of criticism with regards to democratic backsliding.**

In democratic countries, there are always vibrant debates and protests. That is what democracy entails. Only authoritarian countries don't have protests. The farmers' protest is a case in point that showcases India's democratic spirit. Of course, there are always issues between the ruling party and the opposition parties. That is just part and parcel of India's multiparty system. There is no democratic country in the world that does not have protests and whose governments do not face protest movements.

**But this isn't just about the farmers' protest, it's also about how democratic governments handle such protests. Democratic political leadership should be**

**about bridging divides and bringing people together and not driving them apart, by - for example - suggesting that protesters are Sikh separatists, arresting a 21-year-old environmentalist for sharing a protest toolkit promoted by Greta Thunberg, or asking Twitter to block hundreds of accounts.**

Well, India has always been in the limelight for ethnic to religious to caste-class politics. In a free and open society that allows absolute media freedom, small matters look bigger on a storyline. Nevertheless, the ruling party or the government of the day needs to handle protests in a democratic society with care. It is also an absolute responsibility of the opposition party to not colour or politicise such issues so that a healthy, democratic environment within the country can be sustained. Likewise, the media, intellectual classes and civil society all bear a responsibility to be vigilant and not indulging in politicising the matters. What you are asking concerns a political manifestation of farmers protests where a lack of responsibility is visible across the political spectrum and that is not a good thing for a democratic society like India. However, if history can be a lesson, incidents or protest movements like this only strengthen the political resilience within the country to challenge any facets of political authoritarianism - that has been one of the key pillars of India's democratic success.

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#### Footnotes

[1] Under the Australia-India Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, this initiative seeks to enhance maritime cooperation and foster collaborative solutions to regional challenges in this domain. See Australian High Commission Australia-India Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative Partnership: Grant Round 1. Available at < <https://india.highcommission.gov.au/ndli/IIPOIP1.html> > [Accessed 20 April 2021]

[2] An inter-governmental organisation made up of 23 member states and dialogue partners from the Indian Ocean region, working on regional cooperation and sustainable development. See < <https://www.iora.int/en>>.

[3] An informal framework for strategic dialogue initially convened by the US, Japan, India and Australia, and recently expanded to include Vietnam, South Korea and New Zealand.



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