



INDIA IN THE EUROPEAN UNION FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY. STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES, STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS AND POLITICAL AMBIGUITIES

Agnieszka Kuszewska-Bohnert¹

Jagiellonian University, Kraków

Abstract:

India has only recently begun to be regarded as an EU strategic partner in the Indo-Pacific region with regard to maritime security. This article examines the challenges of EU–India security interactions, referring to three interconnected dimensions that collectively explain their drivers and limitations. Strategically, India offers the EU extra-regional reach and support in managing China-related risks, as well as growing defence cooperation. However, structural constraints remain. Brussels and New Delhi have different security priorities, disagree on Russia, and lack a coherent treaty framework. Although their relationship is presented as that of “like-minded democracies”, it actually serves as an instrument of mutual leverage rather than providing coordinated support for democratic values and human rights. Nevertheless, recent developments reveal more substantive outcomes in terms of maritime cooperation and security dialogue.

Keywords: EU’s foreign and security policy, evolving global order, EU-India relations, India in EU’s security policy

Título en Español: *La India en la política exterior y de seguridad de la Unión Europea. Oportunidades estratégicas, limitaciones estructurales y ambigüedades políticas.*

Resumen:

La India recientemente ha comenzado a ser considerada por la UE como un socio estratégico en la región del Indopacífico para la seguridad marítima. Este artículo examina los retos de las interacciones entre la UE y la India en materia de seguridad, haciendo referencia a tres dimensiones interrelacionadas que, en conjunto, explican sus impulsores y limitaciones. Desde el punto de vista estratégico, la India ofrece a la UE un alcance extrarregional y apoyo en la gestión de los riesgos relacionados con China, así como una creciente cooperación en materia de defensa. Sin embargo, siguen existiendo limitaciones estructurales. Bruselas y Nueva Delhi tienen prioridades de seguridad diferentes, discrepan en cuanto a Rusia y carecen de un marco contractual coherente. Aunque la relación se enmarca como propia de «democracias afines», en realidad sirve como instrumento de influencia mutua en lugar de proporcionar un apoyo coordinado a los valores democráticos y los derechos humanos. No obstante, los últimos acontecimientos revelan resultados más sustantivos en términos de cooperación marítima y diálogo sobre seguridad.

Palabras Clave: *Política exterior y de seguridad de la UE, evolución del orden mundial, relaciones UE-India, la India en la política de seguridad de la UE.*

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¹ Professor Agnieszka Kuszewska-Bohnert holds the position of Associate Professor at the Faculty of International and Political Studies (Institute of the Middle and Far East) at Jagiellonian University in Kraków.

E-mail: <agnieszka.kuszewska@uj.edu.pl>

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1. Introduction

In the third decade of the 21st century, the international system is influenced by significant shifts driven by global strategic rivalries (United States-China), competition in the Indo-Pacific, growing role of assertive regional powers and multi-dimensional challenges to the post-Cold War norms and institutions. Many international actors, including the European Union (EU) are faced with a challenge of recalibration of their security policy due to rapid changes on regional and global strategic chessboard. For the EU the main security challenges as of late 2025 stem from three major sources: first, Russia seen as ongoing military threat; second, China, still regarded as a partner but also as a major systemic rival and competitor promoting its alternative version of global order – a perception reinforced by its continued alignment with Russia after Moscow’s full-fledged invasion of Ukraine in 2022²; and third, the evident deterioration of transatlantic alliance during Donald Trump’s second term. In such realities more EU’s attention is devoted to India, evolving into a pivotal actor with Global South leadership ambitions, seemingly EU’s natural ally in China’s neighbourhood. It needs to be highlighted that a huge part of these interactions focus on trade, technology resilient supply chains and a comprehensive Free Trade Agreement, which is being negotiated, could significantly cement geoeconomic alignment.³ However, the focus of this paper is explicitly security and foreign policy – a framework which has only recently brought more concrete deliverables and deserves a separate study.

Both actors, the EU and India, linked by a network of economic and political ties, are interested in further developing their relationship underpinned by a strategically crafted narrative of “like-mindedness”, even though they must confront a range of challenges and partly divergent perceptions of the main threats to international security. This article seeks to trace the dynamics of selected aspects of this cooperation from the perspective of the role and significance of India in the EU’s foreign and security policy.

1.1. Research questions and methodology

The EU recognises that it faces increasingly similar security challenges with the “like-minded” Indo-Pacific countries⁴ and assumes its growing engagement in the region and de-risking China a geopolitical necessity. It is therefore natural to assume that the global dynamic provides a significant incentive enhancing the EU’s strategic agency in the Indo-Pacific and India is regarded as strategically important partner in EU’s foreign and security policy. Both actors seek to diversify their strategic partnerships in a multi-polar international system and uphold what remains of the rules-based order. How to investigate these relations in current challenging international circumstances while taking into consideration their potential and constraints? To fulfil this task, conceptually, the analysis frames the dynamics of EU–India security interactions through three interrelated dimensions: strategic opportunities, structural constraints, and political ambiguities, which are unpacked and operationalised throughout the study. The research questions, explicitly tied to these discursive pillars and guiding this qualitative, structured case-study analysis in international relations, are as follows: (1) What are the underlying rationale and key milestones of the European Union’s recent Indo-Pacific strategy?

² European Council: “European Council Conclusions on China – 30 June 2023”, Council of the European Union, Brussels, 30 June 2023, at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/06/30/european-council-conclusions-on-china-30-june-2023/>.

³ García Bercero, Ignacio; Sapir, André (2025): “The Time Is Right to Make a European Union–India Trade Deal Happen”, Bruegel Policy Brief, n° 19/2025, Bruegel, Brussels, at <https://www.bruegel.org/policy-brief/time-right-make-european-union-india-trade-deal-happen>.

⁴ European Parliament: “European Parliament Resolution of 7 June 2022 on the EU and the Security Challenges in the Indo-Pacific”, European Parliament, Strasbourg 2022, at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0224_EN.html



(2) In what ways is India perceived and incorporated into EU foreign and security policy as a “strategic partner”? (3) What opportunities, constraints and ambiguities impact the depth of this relationship and why?

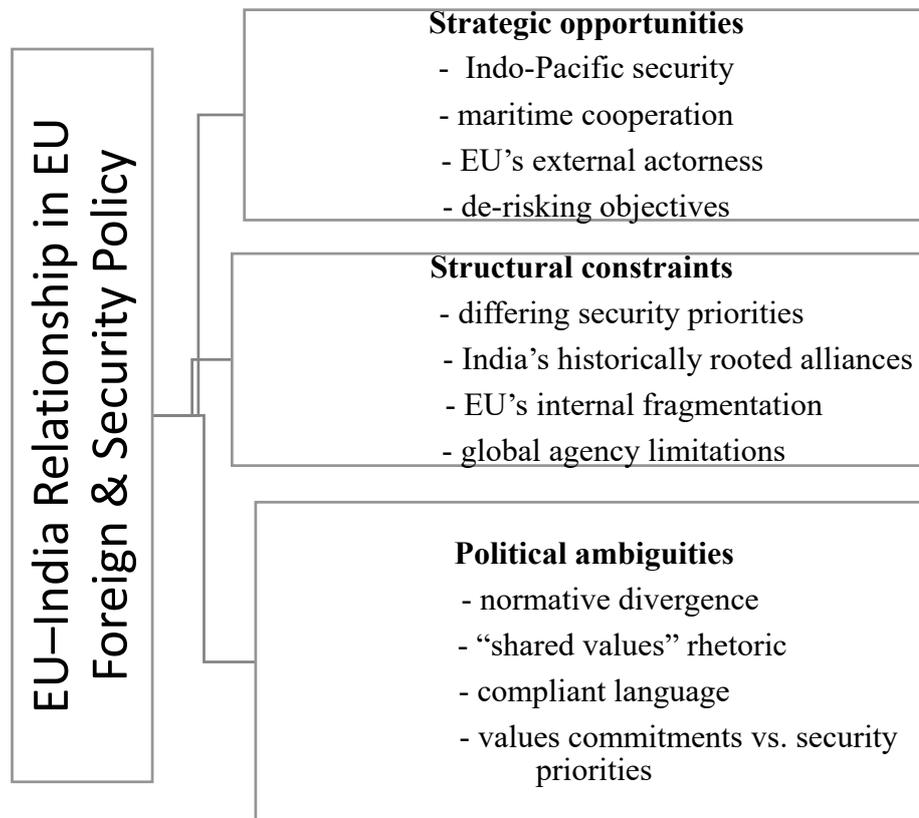
Multiple primary and secondary sources were used for the purpose of this security-focused study. The former include official EU–India joint communiqués, statements by the European External Action Service (EEAS) and India’s Ministry of External Affairs, European Council and Council of the EU conclusions, statements and speeches by the EU High Representative and other official statements on EU’s foreign and security policy, India, Indo-Pacific security, maritime deployments and defence cooperation. Among the latter are research publications such as peer-reviewed journal articles and monographs, expert assessments and policy briefs from reputable outlets and specialised European and Indian think tanks.

1.2 Research operationalisation

Three inter-related analytical pillars: strategic opportunities, structural constraints and political ambiguities are introduced and operationalised as research framework to study India’s position in the EU’s foreign and security policy.

- **Strategic opportunities** are potentially mutually-beneficial areas of convergence illustrated by EU’s multi-dimensional endeavours to strengthen its presence and role in the Indo-Pacific security dynamics and India’s ambitions to upgrade its position as a gateway to the Global South, both actors rebuffing China-US binary. They include overlapping priorities in maritime security, counter-terrorism and defence collaboration.
- **Structural constraints** are understood as core strategic friction points that arise from (1) historically inherited alliances and dependencies, (2) region-specific security concerns and priorities, and (3) EU’s internal fragmentation and India’s strategic self-image. These constraints determine foreign policy objectives, may undermine global agency and impact divergent threat perception by the EU and India, which drives certain frictions. They are exemplified by New Delhi’s continued security and energy cooperation with Moscow, and perceiving China as the primary security threat. The EU is constrained by normative concerns about India’s democratic trajectory and faces its own challenging decision-making process across 27 member states.
- **Political ambiguities** are defined as intentionally crafted discourses which are managed by the decision-makers in EU and India in a specific way: they downplay the differences by using shared terminology (“rules-based order”, “democratic values”, “strategic partners”) while softening disagreements on Russia or human rights. These discursive manoeuvrings de-prioritise and obscure inconsistencies that may otherwise produce tensions and focus on more transactional approach towards materialising strategic objectives.

Table 1 shows how the analytical pillars are operationalised and provides the basis for the more detailed discussion in the third section of this paper.

Table. 1 The operationalisation of analytic pillars

Source: Author's analysis

2. EU-India strategic partnership in the evolving global order

2.1. The EU's foreign and security policy and strategic partnerships

Evolving security challenges at regional and global level led the EU to develop its foreign and security policy. The EU conducts it mainly through the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and its defence and crisis-management arm, the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). It aims at strengthening the EU's security and defence by providing an action framework for developing a shared vision in security and defence.⁵ Developing partnerships with partners framed as "like-minded" is regarded as key aspect in strengthening the EU's strategic autonomy.

Strategic partnerships were adopted by the EU in early 21st century. They are framed as part of global strategy aimed to bolster the EU's actorness, enhance its role in shaping new international system and actively respond to the evolving security threats by developing multi-dimensional cooperation with partners along the globe. To what extent are such partnerships genuine tools to strengthen strategic agency of the EU? Thomas Renard argued that they are "a necessary (sub)strategy for the EU to cope successfully with the changing global order and to avoid global irrelevance."⁶ He assessed them as non-binding, reflecting political will, and flexible, often showing mutual aspirations rather than genuine commitment. Even though deliverability of strategic partnerships is limited by different factors stemming from diverse

⁵ European Parliament: "Fact Sheets on the European Union. Common Security and Defence Policy", European Parliament, Brussels, 2025, at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/erpl-app-public/factsheets/pdf/en/FTU_5.1.2.pdf.

⁶ Renard, Thomas (2011): "The treachery of strategies: A call for true EU strategic partnerships", Egmont Paper n° 45, Brussels, Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations. p. 1.



perception of direct security threats and lack of mutual defence obligations, they play an important role as EU's diplomatic tools to bolster cooperation with key global players, including ascending actors, such as India.

Global resurgence of *realpolitik* in the last decade, calls for multi-dimensional endeavours that would strengthen the EU's agency and to make security initiatives in Asia more operational, not only declarative. The urge was highlighted in the EU Global Strategy of June 2016 and the May 2018 European Council Conclusions on "Enhancing EU Security Cooperation in and with Asia" to underscore the Union's ambition to scale up its security engagement with Asia so as to complement its economic presence. It was the destabilisation of European peace and security by Russian aggression against Ukraine that had profound impact on the EU's actions. The objectives were manifested in the final version of the "Strategic Compass for Security and Defence" which was approved shortly after the invasion started. Its progress report published in 2024 highlighted continued multi-dimensional support to Ukraine the new and adapted CSDP missions/operations (e.g. Security and Defence Initiative in the Gulf of Guinea – joint activities with India). It framed Indo-Pacific as priority region; India was listed among the countries with shared interests (with Indonesia, Vietnam, Australia, Japan, and the Republic of Korea) with which the EU held "dedicated security and defence dialogues and consultations".

The "Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia and the Indo-Pacific" (ESIWA and its extension ESIWA+), is EU's flagship security initiative in Asia and Indo-Pacific. In the first EISWA phase (2020–2024), India was one of the six pilot countries (the others being Indonesia, Japan, RoK, Singapore and Vietnam) designated for tailored security cooperation in the following areas: countering terrorism/preventing violent extremism, cybersecurity, maritime security and crisis management/addressing hybrid threats. ESIWA+ (2024–2027) expands the initiative to nine Indo-Pacific partners (Japan, Republic of Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, Philippines, India) with India playing crucial role (*vide infra*).

2.2. EU-India: dynamics in the 21st century

The shift from mostly trade related interactions to more regular political cooperation between EU and India started in the mid-1990s, yet with very limited success. The EU's foreign policy was preoccupied with its neighbourhood, transatlantic relations and, more recently, the challenge posed by China.⁷ Persistent difficulties in trade negotiations and the dominance of economic priorities over security related issues, long constrained the EU-India relationship's evolution, obstructing any meaningful spillover into security and defence domains.⁸ With the entry into force of the Maastricht Treaty in 1993, which established the European Union, the organisation's interest in Asia gathered momentum, and cooperation with developing countries expanded under principles such as human rights, development support and democracy promotion.⁹ Changing global environment in the new millennium required major strategic and political adaptation from the actors aspiring to enhance their international agency in growingly multi-polar world. Despite geographic distance and strategic differences, shared interests and

⁷Keukeleire, Stephan and Tom Delreux (2022): *The Foreign Policy of the European Union*. 3rd ed. London/New York, Bloomsbury Academic.

⁸Blarel, Olivier: "Maritime Cooperation in Security and Defence", in Amaia Sánchez-Cacicedo (ed.) (2024): *EU-India Relations: Gaining Strategic Traction?* European Union Institute for Security Studies, Paris, pp. 34–40.

⁹European Institute for Asian Studies: "The European Union and India: Rhetoric or Meaningful Partnership? Event Report (EIAS Book Talk)", Brussels, 11 March 2016, at https://eias.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/EIAS_Event_Report_EU-India_Rhetoric_Meaningful_Partnership_11.03.2016.pdf.



concerns, combined with multiple challenges, make EU–India relations an interesting case to study, particularly given their trajectory over the past quarter-century.

The inaugural EU-India Summit in Lisbon (June 2000) marked a turning point in the evolution of EU-India, providing the foundation for the intensified cooperation of subsequent years. In the official document encapsulating India-EU relations, shared by India’s embassy in Brussels, New Delhi refers to it as “watershed in the evolution of the ties”,¹⁰ and it surely was a milestone in shaping EU-India rich institutional architecture. The European Security Strategy, EU’s first ESS (“A Secure Europe in a Better World”) was adopted by the European Council in Brussels on 12 December 2003. It emphasised the need for and international order based on effective multilateralism and called for developing strategic partnerships with key players including India.¹¹

The gradual diffusion of power toward Asia and the Global South, exemplified by the rise of China, compelled the EU to work on partnership-based mechanisms capable of managing great-power rivalries and increasing EU’s influence beyond its traditional transatlantic focus and traditional normative-economic angle. The EU and India have been linked by the Strategic Partnership since 2004 and their relations have been subjected to critical assessment. Researchers and analysts have long assumed the EU–India strategic cooperation as mostly aspirational and rather shallow and under-institutionalised, stalled by mismatched expectations.¹² India’s engagement with the EU was assessed as transactional, driven more by strategic and economic objectives than by an intrinsic commitment to normative convergence.¹³

By the end of 2010s renewed political will on both sides became more visible to treat each other as strategically relevant, not just commercially useful. From India’s perspective, regional security environment - shaped by its protracted conflict with Pakistan, which re-escalated after the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks, and by the operations of Pakistan-based groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed that have carried out major attacks in India, including in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir - renders international terrorism a central national security threat. The UN and U.S. proscription of these groups and leaders (e.g., Masood Azhar), together with state reporting on attacks, cross-border militancy and terror financing, corroborates this perception.¹⁴ The terrorist threat in both Europe and India has emerged as a crucial driver of cooperation in a core area of security, namely the fight against extremism and terrorism. In 2010, the first EU-India dedicated counter-terrorism declaration condemned all forms of terrorism and emphasized that international terrorism is one of the most serious threats to international peace and security.

On 20 November 2018, the European Commission and the High Representative issued a Joint Communication outlining the EU’s vision for a strategy to expand cooperation and partnership with India, which was planned as a roadmap for the 2020s. It was the first dedicated

¹⁰ “India–EU Bilateral Relations”, Embassy of India, Brussels, January 2025, at <https://indianembassybrussels.gov.in/pdf/230930%20Unclassified%20India-EU%20Bilateral%20Brief.pdf>.

¹¹ Council of the European Union: “A Secure Europe in a Better World: European Security Strategy”, Council of the European Union, Brussels, 12 December 2003, at

https://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/2004/10/11/1df262f2-260c-486f-b414-dbf8dc112b6b/publishable_en.pdf.

¹² Sachdeva, Gulshan: “India-EU economic ties: strengthening the core of the Strategic Partnership”, in Peral Luis & Sakhuja Vijay (eds.) (2012): *The EU-India partnership: time to go strategic?* European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), pp. 39–54.

¹³ Jaskólska, Aleksandra: “Transactionalism in India’s foreign policy, case study: India–European Union relations”, *Azja-Pacyfik*, n° 27 (2023) pp. 31–54, at <https://doi.org/10.15804/ap2023.1.02>

¹⁴ Ganguly, Sumit (2019): “India’s Completed Quest to Put Masood Azhar on the Global Terrorist List”, *FPRI Asia Program*, 7 May 2019, at <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/05/indias-completed-quest-to-put-masood-azhar-on-the-global-terrorist-list/>



EU strategy on India, calling for greater political, security and defence cooperation. Much was also devoted to traditional elements of cooperation: investment, trade, technological development and (underdeveloped) infrastructure. The document explicitly pointed out that India occupies a pivotal position in a complex geostrategic environment of a multipolar world, with an impact on EU's security strategy: "Situated at the centre of key Europe-Asian trade routes, and a factor of stability in a complex region, India's diplomatic and security posture towards its neighbours and major regional powers have important consequences for the EU". The EU confirmed its commitment to rules-based order and support for India's greater participation in global governance.¹⁵

Nonetheless, despite the need to develop relations consolidated on commonalities accompanied by an impressive agenda on paper that was produced, due to lack of adequate coordination and political prioritisation on both sides many did not translate into durable effects. It was reflected in some studies: Gauri Khandekar¹⁶ called EU-India relations "A Loveless Arranged Marriage" while critically assessing the "slow moving and fragmented" nature of the EU-India Strategic Partnership. Emilian Kavalski questioned the use of "strategic" and "partnership" in the context of EU-India interactions, explaining this underachievement by lack of trust and structural misalignments, in particular, normative divergence which keeps hindering closer ties as each side pursues different visions of global order.¹⁷

Despite its broadening scope, the India-EU relationship towards the end of the second decade of the 21st century remained anchored mainly in trade and economic ties, with newer strands on climate, energy, science and technology, migration, and mobility.¹⁸ Security cooperation was rather dialogical and consultative than based on mutual defence or binding security guarantees.¹⁹ Since 2020, both sides increasingly engage in security cooperation, including counter-terrorism, maritime security, and global governance. Undoubtedly, Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, marked the important moment in EU-India relations, with major disagreements on how to manage interactions with Moscow.

To illustrate the gradual evolution in bilateral interactions, table 2 presents selected key milestones in EU-India security-related relations since 2000, including summit-level declarations, strategic partnership documents and major defence and security dialogues.

¹⁵ European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy: "Elements for an EU Strategy on India", Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, Brussels, 20 November 2018, at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jc_elements_for_an_eu_strategy_on_india_-_final_adopted.pdf, p. 2, 9.

¹⁶ Khandekar, Gauri (2011): "The EU and India: A Loveless Arranged Marriage", FRIDE Policy Brief n° 90, August 2011, at https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/132670/PB_90_EU_and_India.pdf, p. 1.

¹⁷ Kavalski, Emilian (2015): "The EU-India Strategic Partnership: Neither Very Strategic, nor Much of a Partnership", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 29, n° 1 (2015), pp. 192-208, at <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2015.1007031>.

¹⁸ Jain, Rajendra K. (2020): "India and the European Union", *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, 30 June 2020, at <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1134>.

¹⁹ Jain, Rajendra K., Sachdeva, Gulshan: "India-EU strategic partnership: a new roadmap", *Asia Europe Journal*, Springer, Vol. 17, n° 3 (September 2019), pp. 309-325, at https://ideas.repec.org/a/kap/asiaeu/v17y2019i3d10.1007_s10308-019-00556-0.html.



Table 2 Selected milestones and decisions in EU-India foreign and security relations since 2000

Year; milestone	Decisions, actions
2000; 1 st EU-India Summit, Lisbon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance bilateral dialogue; • Hold regular EU-India Summit meetings; • Co-ordinate efforts to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms; • Initiate dialogue on preventing and combating terrorism; • Strengthen the High Level Economic and Commercial Dialogue on trade, economic and financial issues; • Enhance economic co-operation for development of infrastructure (telecommunications, energy and transport), in India; • Work jointly to promote and increase flows of goods and services, facilitate industry and business links.²⁰
2004; 5 th EU-India Summit, The Hague	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposal to upgrade EU’s relationship with India to a “Strategic Partnership”; • Counter-terrorism cooperation; • Pledge to enhance information-sharing, legal cooperation and capacity-building.
2005; 6 th EU-India Summit, New Delhi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The first EU-India Joint Action Plan; • Strengthen dialogue and consultation mechanisms; • Deepen political dialogue and cooperation²¹
2010: India-EU Joint Declaration on International Terrorism, Brussels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The first dedicated counter-terrorism declaration; • Enhance cooperation in counter-terrorism, including political dialogue, law enforcement collaboration, denying safe havens to terrorists.²²
2018; Elements for an EU strategy on India	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reinforce the EU–India strategic partnership; • Enhance engagement on securing sea lines of communication; • Cooperate on non-traditional threats (piracy/armed robbery, trafficking); • Coordinate maritime security and capacity-building in the Indian Ocean/East Africa with partners (e.g., South Africa); • Consider reciprocal military advisers (EU in New Delhi / India in Brussels); • Expand military-to-military ties (personnel exchanges, training; European Security and Defence College); • Share expertise on cybersecurity and hybrid threats.²³

²⁰ European Commission: “EU–India Summit: Joint Communiqué”, Lisbon, 28 June 2000, at ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/pres_00_229

²¹ Council of the European Union: “The India–EU Strategic Partnership: Joint Action Plan”, Brussels, 7 September 2005, at https://www.ceas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_action_plan_060905_en.pdf.

²² Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India: “India–EU Joint Declaration on International Terrorism”, Brussels, 10 December 2010, at https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/5247/IndiaEU_Joint_Declaration_on_International_Terrorism.

²³ European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy: “Elements for an EU Strategy on India”, Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, Brussels, 20 November 2018, at https://www.ceas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jc_elements_for_an_eu_strategy_on_india_-_final_adopted.pdf



2020 15 th EU-India Summit (virtual)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pursue measurable outcomes in key shared areas; • Institutionalise regular security consultations; • Launch a dedicated maritime security dialogue; • Intensify cooperation between EU Naval Force Atalanta²⁴ and the Indian Navy; • Promote an open, secure, and stable cyberspace.²⁵
2021, January; 1 st India-EU Maritime Security Dialogue (virtual)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutionalise operational cooperation at sea; • Improve interoperability and information-sharing to secure sea lanes.
2021, June; naval exercise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The first joint naval exercise in the Gulf of Aden (EU Naval Force Atalanta and Indian Navy conducting anti-piracy drills).
2021; Leaders' Meeting, Porto	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EU-India Connectivity Partnership (focusing on digital, transport, energy connectivity); • Resumption of FTA negotiations and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.²⁶
2022; 1 st Security and Defence Consultations, Brussels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New “2+2”-style dialogue with senior officials from both sides; • Strengthen India–EU cooperation on maritime security; • Advance joint development and co-production of defence systems.
2024; 14th India–EU Counter-Terrorism Dialogue, New Delhi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signing of a working arrangement between Europol and India’s Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI): the first formal law-enforcement cooperation arrangement of this kind between the EU and India.²⁷
2025, June; first EU–India Strategic Dialogue at foreign-minister level, Brussels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launch of a regular Strategic Dialogue; • Focus on foreign, security and defence policy, including Indo-Pacific, counter-terrorism, cyber, space and hybrid threats; • Negotiating EU–India Security and Defence Partnership; • Agreement to establish EU–India Dialogue on Space; • Support for India’s counter-terrorism.²⁸
2025, June; EU–India naval exercise, Indian Ocean	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expanded naval drill (counter-piracy, tactical manoeuvres and secure communications);

²⁴ EU Naval Force (EU NAVFOR) Operation ATALANTA, the first European maritime Common Security Defence Policy (CSDP) operation was launched on 8 December 2008, to tackle the Somali Piracy crisis, in support of UN Security Council Resolution 1816 (2008), European External Action Service, 2018.

²⁵ European External Action Service: “EU–India Strategic Partnership: A Roadmap to 2025”, European External Action Service, Brussels 2020 at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-india-strategic-partnership-roadmap-2025_en

²⁶ Council of the European Union: “EU–India Leaders’ Meeting Joint Statement”, 8 May 2021, at www.consilium.europa.eu/media/49523/eu-india-leaders-meeting-joint-statement-080521.pdf.

²⁷ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India: “Joint Press Release: 14th Meeting of India–EU Joint Working Group on Counter Terrorism”, New Delhi, 9 May 2024, at https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37804/Joint_Press_Release_14th_Meeting_of_IndiaEU_Joint_Working_Group_on_Counter_Terrorism.

²⁸ European External Action Service: “India: High Representative/Vice-President Kaja Kallas holds first EU-India Strategic Dialogue with Minister of External Affairs Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, Brussels, 10 June 2025.” Press release, Brussels, 10 June 2025, at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/india-high-representativevice-president-kaja-kallas-holds-first-eu-india-strategic-dialogue-minister_en.



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Operationalisation of the Roadmap 2025 and Indo-Pacific Strategy.²⁹
2025, September; New Joint Communication on New EU–India Strategic Agenda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Address competing development models and connectivity politics (allusion to China); Pursue creation of an EU-India Security and Defence Partnership; Boost defence industrial cooperation; Work out arrangements for possible Indian participation in CSDP missions; Deepen cooperation in support of regional maritime security frameworks.³⁰
2025, October; Joint training on drone threats, Haryana	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Counter-terrorism capacity-building on counter-drone measures; Protection of critical infrastructure and soft targets from drone attack.

Source: Compiled by author from official EU and Indian official government documents. Full citations in bibliography.

3. India’s position in the EU’s foreign and security policy: three pillars of analysis

3.1. Strategic opportunities

India’s position in the EU’s strategic thinking has recently enhanced. Both actors have vital interests in Indo-Pacific security and develop collaboration in this field. The European Parliament’s resolution of 7 June 2022 urged a further strengthening of the EU–India strategic partnership, welcomed the launch of the maritime security dialogue, and called for deeper operational naval cooperation, including joint exercises, port calls and protection of key sea lines of communication, also in the framework of the EU–India Connectivity Partnership. It underscored India’s role as a key maritime security partner and the importance of joint efforts for the stabilisation of Central and South Asia. Expanding maritime cooperation culminated in the first-ever India–EU (EUNAVFOR Atalanta³¹ and the Indian Navy) joint naval exercise, conducted in the Gulf of Aden on 18–19 June 2021. In October 2023, the EU and India conducted naval exercise off the coast of Guinea. These developments were a watershed in a relationship that, until quite recently, paid limited attention to traditional security, despite the formal establishment of a Strategic Partnership in 2004.

On 10 June 2025, the first EU–India Strategic Dialogue (foreign-minister level) was held in Brussels. It was co-by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Kaja Kallas and India’s Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar. New Delhi confirmed its interest in negotiating the EU–India Security and Defence Partnership. Both sides agreed to establish a comprehensive EU–India Dialogue on Space. The EU also signalled its readiness to welcome India’s participation in civilian and military missions under the Common Security and

²⁹ European Union Naval Force: “EUNAVFOR ATALANTA and Indian Navy conduct a naval exercise in the Indian Ocean”, Press Release, 5 June 2025, at <https://eunavfor.eu/news/eunavfor-atalanta-and-indian-navy-conduct-naval-exercise-indian-ocean>

³⁰ European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy: “Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council on a New Strategic EU-India Agenda”, Brussels, 17 September 2025, at

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025/documents/JOIN_2025_50_1_EN_ACT_part1_v9.pdf

³¹ EU crisis-management operation under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP): naval operation against piracy and armed robbery at sea in the Western Indian Ocean.



Defence Policy.³² The same month as the follow-on from the 2021 Gulf of Aden drill EUNAVFOR Atalanta and the Indian Navy conducted another joint exercise in the Indian Ocean. It was regarded as “a huge milestone” as for the first time Atalanta and India conducted such complex exercises at sea. In the September 2025 Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council on a New Strategic EU–India Agenda, EU and India were framed as natural strategic partners in the new global order.

In the second phase of the EU project ‘Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia and the Indo-Pacific’ (ESIWA+, 2024–2027) India is explicitly described as a key pilot country for deepening security and defence cooperation. The joint EU–India first-of-its-kind counterterrorism training on unmanned aerial systems (UAS) threats took place 13-15 October 2025 in Haryana, bringing together National Security Guard (NSG) officers and experts from the EU’s High Risk Security Network. The aim was to protect critical infrastructure and soft targets against emerging drone-related threats. The training was facilitated by ESIVA+.³³ The 15th meeting of the EU-India Joint Working Group on Counter Terrorism took place in Brussels on 9 September 2025.

These post-2021 developments inspire to assume that this partnership is shifting from declaratory rhetoric and trade-centred engagement to more operational, security cooperation. Advancing security cooperation may successfully contribute to bolstering EU’s external actorness, which is particularly important during the era of tension prone transatlantic alliance during largely frail and unpredictable second Donald Trump administration in the United States. This dynamic combined with de-risking objectives vis-à-vis China, which have become the organising principle of EU’s China policy since 2023, seems to be a noteworthy motivation for enhancing the EU role in Indo-Pacific. Since 2020 India-China border clashes, Indian approach is framed more as a managed rivalry, security-driven, focused on reducing Chinese leverage while building domestic capacity. Both EU and India avoid Cold-War style block confrontation with Beijing. The 2025 Joint Communication on a New Strategic EU-India Agenda describes both actors as “indispensable partners” in de-risking and building resilient, trustworthy supply chains. The approach remains largely trade-focused, yet its China-balancing logic allows it to be understood as part of a broader multi-sector security strategy, in which the EU uses Global Gateway to step up investment in India.³⁴

3.2 Structural constraints

EU’s internal fragmentation and fractured actorness with 27 member states is a major structural constraint to enhancing EU’s agency in security and defence policy. They exhibit varying levels of strategic agency and have different perception threats, for example for the NATO eastern flank (Poland, Baltic states) Russia is an existential threat, whereas southern countries view the instability in the Middle East with much greater concern.³⁵ Most EU foreign, security and

³² European Parliament: “Joint Communication on a New Strategic EU–India Agenda”, Legislative Train Schedule, European Parliament, updated 24 October 2025, at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-europe-as-a-stronger-global-actor/file-eu-india-agenda>.

³³ European External Action Service: “European Union and India carry out joint counterterrorism training to strengthen defences against drones”, Statement/Declaration, Delegation of the European Union to India and Bhutan, New Delhi, 15 October 2025, at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/india/european-union-and-india-carry-out-joint-counterterrorism-training-strengthen-defences-against_en

³⁴ European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy: “Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council on a New Strategic EU-India Agenda”, Brussels, 17 September 2025, at

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2025/documents/JOIN_2025_50_1_EN_ACT_part1_v9.pdf, p. 4.

³⁵ Brattberg, Erik (2025): “The Impact of Evolving Threat Perceptions on the Transatlantic Alliance”, The Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, Insights, 6 November 2025, at



defence decisions require unanimity in the Council of Ministers, individual states have sometimes withheld support in the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) to gain concessions on other issues. These factors constrain the EU's global agency in foreign and security policy. Some EU members support Qualified Majority Voting in certain cases to bolster the EU's ability to act,³⁶ which seems to be an appropriate solution. Christoph P. Mohr accurately argues that the EU "can only assert itself as a global pole if it transforms its economic scale into strategic influence via deeper integration, investment in innovation and defense, and a coherent foreign policy that effectively leverages its power and global partnerships".³⁷

The European Commission's de-risking approach towards China, adopted in June 2023, is being undermined by the diverging interests of member states. Sometimes national interests (i.e. fears of retaliation against the German car industry) override a stricter, EU-wide de-risking approach, which ultimately contributes to EU's global agency limitations. Moreover, foreign actors such as China or Russia, can exploit divergent interests within the EU to drive wedges among the member states. Certain initiatives, such as the EU–Central Asia ministerial meeting in October 2023 and the conclusion of a strategic partnership with Japan in April 2024 signal attempts at diversification, yet these initiatives remain overshadowed by the overarching geopolitical weight of the EU's China policy.³⁸ It has the impact on deepening relations with India, which are still to a large extent framed and conditioned by the primacy of EU-China relations and China threat perception.

Another key aspect is the significance of EU's most powerful actors in India's foreign policy and preference for bilateralism. New Delhi is engaged in cooperation with key member states such as France and Germany, while EU-level positions remain less visible or coherent. Ambiguity over whether the true partner is "the EU" or selected major European economies undercuts the strategic label. France, Germany or Italy (with sizeable armies and defence industries) deal with India through other forums, such as G7, which enhances the chance for bilateral deals. In such settings, bilateral interactions are often clearer and easier to pursue. Let us look at Germany: in 2023, German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius visited India to upgrade previously limited defence ties and to frame India as a strategic partner comparable to Australia or Japan. In March 2024, German ambassador Philipp Ackermann confirmed a "clear political will" in Berlin to deepen defence cooperation with India, describing a "huge paradigm shift" towards more military visits, joint exercises, arms sales, co-production of advanced hardware and cyber cooperation. Shortly later, the Indian Ministry of Defence approved the construction of six submarines in cooperation with Germany: Berlin aims to position itself as a key partner in the Indian defence sector.³⁹ The 2024 German government's "Focus on India" strategy

<https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/insights-papers/impact-evolving-threat-perceptions-transatlantic-alliance>.

³⁶ von Ondarza, Nicolai; Stürzer, Isabella: "The State of Consensus in the EU: What Is the Way Forward in the Debate about Expanding Qualified Majority Decisions?", Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin, 19 April 2024, at <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2024C16/>

³⁷ Sullivan Arthur: "India-Germany submarine deal: What does it mean for Russia?", *DW*, 2 April 2025, at <https://www.dw.com/en/will-germany-india-submarine-deal-have-an-impact-on-russia-v2/a-71454656>.

³⁸ Becker, Max; Bendiek, Annegret; Kempin, Ronja (2025): "Strengthening Europe's Capacity to Act in Foreign and Security Policy: Securitisation Cannot Solve the EU's Decision-making Trap", Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Berlin, 17 April 2025, at www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/strengthening-europes-capacity-to-act-in-foreign-and-security-policy.

³⁹ Kuszewska-Bohnert, Agnieszka: "Security, democratic values, (green) economy. Exploring the paradigm shift in Germany's policy towards India", *Polish Political Science Review*, Vol. 13, n° 1 (June 2025), at reference-global.com/article/10.2478/ppsr-2025-0004, pp. 57–58.



formally described India as a rapidly emerging central shaper of international politics and the global economic order⁴⁰, providing a political scaffolding for upgraded relations.

India's historically rooted alliances like that with Russia is a key element of frictions. India and Russia continue to cooperate in different regional forums which was highlighted during India's G20/SCO presidencies in 2023 and Russia's BRICS chairmanship in 2024. Yet, Russian dominance in arms supplies to India is decreasing. According to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) fact sheet for 2020–24 Moscow remains India's largest single arms supplier (36% of India's imports), but its dominance has markedly declined from 72% in 2010–14 and 55% in 2015–19, as India (the world's second largest arms importer as of 2025) both indigenises defence production and reorients new orders towards Western suppliers (France, Israel, USA).⁴¹ This declining interdependence is therefore structurally underpinned by India's diversification of suppliers and Moscow's shrinking export potential.

Differing security priorities and perceptions between the EU and India are notable. EU prioritises Russia, hybrid threats and migration. For India, key challenges are in South Asian security dynamics, with a focus on China and Pakistan (India uses multilateral and minilateral regional forums to hedge against Beijing and isolate Islamabad). Ties Moscow represent not only strategic multi-alignment but also allow to pursue its national interest by managing rising China and avoiding diplomatic isolation.⁴²

3.3. Political ambiguities

The “shared values” rhetoric stemming from a strategically cultivated narratives of “like-mindedness”, is prevalent in EU-India interactions. The European Union and India are framed as natural partners⁴³, two largest democracies in the world which are “intensifying their ties as part of a new strategic agenda to enhance prosperity, security and tackle major global challenges together”.⁴⁴ After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU repeatedly expressed regret over India's reluctance to clearly condemn Moscow's aggression and urged New Delhi, as the world's largest democracy, to revise its stance and speak out against Russia's revisionist policies.⁴⁵ Even though the differences in perceiving Russia's actions appear in official documents, the language is largely compliant, with dominant emphasis on harmony and partnership over disagreement. Referring to its longtime stance on values-based international order, the EU often refer to the like-minded partners in Asia-Pacific (such as Japan and Australia) and tries to frame ties with India as normative partnership; New Delhi meanwhile presents them rather as pragmatic engagement. India prioritises interest-based, *realpolitik* calculations over normative imperatives in its external relations.

⁴⁰ “Fokus auf Indien”, 2024, Auswärtiges Amt, Berlin, at <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/resource/blob/2680204/9fc49c0ef2df93f1ffb8ccad1b5f66b6/241016-fokus-indien-data.pdf>

⁴¹ George, et al.: “Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2024”, SIPRI Fact Sheet, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 2025, at https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/fs_2503_at_2024_0.pdf, pp. 6, 9.

⁴² Kapoor, Nivedita (2024): “Multilateral Cooperation in India–Russia Ties: A Decadal Review of BRICS and SCO”, Observer Research Foundation, Issue Brief n° 767, New Delhi, December 2024, at <https://www.orfonline.org/research/multilateral-cooperation-in-india-russia-ties-a-decadal-review-of-brics-and-sco>.

⁴³ In his statement at the 7th India–EU Summit in Helsinki on 13 October 2006, the former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh characterised the European Union as a “natural partner” for India, highlighting commitment to democracy, pluralism, and the rule of law, Singh, 2006.

⁴⁴ European External Action Service: Factsheet: EU–India Relations. Brussels, European Union External Action Service, Brussels 2024, at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/factsheet-eu-india-relations_en.

⁴⁵ European Parliament: “European Parliament Resolution of 7 June 2022 on the EU and the Security Challenges in the Indo-Pacific”, European Parliament, Strasbourg 2022, at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0224_EN.html



The normative divergence is particularly visible since Narendra Modi and his right-wing party, the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in 2014. India's ruling elites promote Hindu nationalism and the agenda of transforming multi-religious country into a "Hindu state", which leads to systemic persecution of minorities, human rights activists and dissidents. In Freedom Press Index, India holds 151 position, out of 180 countries.⁴⁶ Christophe Jaffrelot and Jasmine Zérinini point out that the official "like-minded democracies" EU-India narrative is undercut by divergences on human rights, civil society restrictions, Kashmir, and aspects of India's domestic politics.⁴⁷ Normative misalignment has limited the advancement of the partnership: Europe often assumes shared democratic values should be strategic scaffolding for any democracy in the world, but EU's normative agency is largely restricted to Europe,⁴⁸ with growing challenges personified by far-right, antidemocratic populism. Meanwhile, India's priorities diverge and its domestic dynamics and continued ties with Putin's regime clash with Brussels' expectations of India's "democratic identity".

The dilemma of values commitments vs. security priorities is likely to impact political ambiguities between the EU and India. To what extent can democracies abandon a values-based order that condemns aggression against sovereign states as a war crime? Should they discard the normative scaffolding of their domestic and foreign policies and instead emulate the hard-line, self-interested strategies of autocratic regimes? Or, maybe in the times of democratic backsliding it is better to prioritise security cooperation without any normative commitments? The way in which this tension between values and security is managed will be decisive for the future of EU-India interaction.

Meanwhile, the shift towards muting the human rights and democracy challenges in India seems to grow. In June 2025, two months after Pahalgam terrorist attack, the inaugural Security Dialogue the leaders focused on strategic and security issues, including terrorism in Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir⁴⁹ and the Indo-Pacific. They reiterated the importance of a free, open, and rules-based Indo-Pacific region and contended that "every nation, including India, has the right and responsibility to protect its citizens from acts of terror". The wording on Russia looked as if it was inserted out of obligation rather than conviction and represented a carefully calibrated compromise. The statement from a security-focused meeting noted only that both sides discussed Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and "reaffirmed the necessity of achieving a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in accordance with international law and the UN Charter," falling short of defining any values-driven, coherent line on sanctions, accountability, or longer-term policy towards Russia.⁵⁰ In its September 2025 Joint Communication on a New Strategic EU-India Agenda, India was framed as "the world's largest democracy and fastest-growing major economy, is a vital partner for the EU." Brussels underscored that India's rise as a global actor generates new prospects for strategic alignment

⁴⁶ RSF: World Press Freedom Index 2025: over half the world's population in red zones at <https://rsf.org/en/world-press-freedom-index-2025-over-half-worlds-population-red-zones>

⁴⁷ Jaffrelot, Christophe, Zérinini, Jasmine: "The Europe-India balance sheet: Trade, like-mindedness and strategic interests", Paris, Institut Montaigne, December 2021, at https://institutmontaigne.org/ressources/pdfs/publications/note_europe_india_balance_sheet-REPORT%20%281%29_0.pdf

⁴⁸ Kavalski, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

⁴⁹ On 5 August 2019, the BJP government abrogated the Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, revoked Kashmir's special status and split the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir into two Union Territories (1. Jammu and Kashmir; 2. Ladakh), effective 31 October 2019.

⁵⁰ European External Action Service: "India: High Representative/Vice-President Kaja Kallas holds first EU-India Strategic Dialogue with Minister of External Affairs Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, Brussels, 10 June 2025." Press release, Brussels, 10 June 2025, at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/india-high-representativevice-president-kaja-kallas-holds-first-eu-india-strategic-dialogue-minister_en.



and highlighted that India's and the EU's prosperity are mutually reinforcing.⁵¹ It pointed out that as major global players in the G20, the EU and India should strengthen cooperation to defend shared interests and "counterbalance unsustainable development models promoted by others",⁵² a scarcely camouflaged reference to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and other competing frameworks.

4. Conclusion

Since the early 2000s, India's role in the European Union's foreign and security policy has gradually expanded. From rather a strategically peripheral actor, India has become a crucial partner in shaping the new world order. It is reflected both by EU's efforts to strengthen its strategic agency (the Indo-Pacific Strategy) and India's Global South leadership ambitions. Security cooperation with India is perceived by Brussels as strategically and politically useful, but certain important constraints prevent it from turning into a full-fledged alliance. This article analysed India's role in EU's security policy by referring to three crucial analytical axes: strategic opportunities, structural constraints and political ambiguities. Strategic opportunities determine the interactions in recent years. India offers EU extra-regional reach, support in managing China-related risk and potentially growing defence cooperation. There is no doubt that external threats, particularly those posed by China and Russia, play a direct role in shaping the EU's security policy responses. Yet it remains essential to look more beyond China factor and implement a fully autonomous EU-India strategic vision, rather than interpreting New Delhi's importance mainly through the lens of security threats linked to Beijing and Moscow.

The structural constraints limit the collaboration as both actors differ in priorities, continue to manage much of their defence cooperation bilaterally and lack coherent bilateral treaty architecture that would serve as working deterrence tool. Politically, the EU-India relationship is intended to project their status and thus framed as "like-minded" actors praising rules-based order, but this overuse of normative rhetorics masks political ambiguities and obscures major disagreements over human rights approach and perception of relations with Russia. Nonetheless, it is possible to develop interactions in such challenging geostrategic circumstances, within parallel dialogues (i.e. security, counter-terrorism, trade and investment) and expect concrete deliverables in these fields. This pattern of interactions, built on certain common interests and selective cooperation, allows for adjustable interactions and minimises the risk of mutual disappointments, yet falls short of the formation of an actual, binding commitments-based security alliance in the foreseeable future. Bilateralism will remain in India's interactions with key partners in the EU, but recent initiatives increase the chance for the EU to gain greater recognition as a defence actor.

India and the EU increasingly converge around a shared commitment to strategic autonomy in a fragmented international order, even as they differ in historic experiences and strategic cultures: India's non-aligned, yet growingly multi-vectored Global South leadership and the EU's reassessment of its dependence on the United States. With the return of Donald Trump's nationalist "America First" policies in his second term since 2025, global order has been pushed into being more unpredictable, competitive and based on transactional interactions. Transatlantic alliance is no longer an uncontested pillar of rules-based trade and liberal system. In such circumstances, the EU-India partnership across multiple dimensions, especially security, gained unprecedented significance, even if both need time and resources to develop credible, autonomous security. Will it be turned into a new axis of stability? More robust partnership should be grounded in shared security goals, support for rules-based order and

⁵¹ European Commission & High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2025, *op. cit.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 12–13.



democracy, and should prioritise partnership and cooperative management over short-term advantages. Only then can it meaningfully uphold international stability and provide an essential counterweight to the power rivalry of self-interested autocracies aimed at asserting control and dominance over other actors.

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