



When old friends grow distant, find new ones: the European Commission flies to Delhi

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1. *Introduction* – The tides of geopolitics are often fickle, and it should come as no surprise that relations between countries can shift in response to their changing needs and strategies. Nevertheless, generations have now grown within the framework of the ideological divide between the US-led West and the Soviet Union, along with its satellite states. This divide, although it faded decades ago, still has a profound impact on how geopolitics is understood today, especially at the citizen level. The ideological divide that characterised the two poles of the Cold War also led to a general freezing of relations between countries along those lines, with very few differences and changes over time.

A defining moment in a shift of paradigm, at least for the foreseeable future, was brought about during the night of the 2024 American Presidential Election, when Donald Trump managed to regain control of the White House, which he had forfeited, albeit not without a fight, in 2020. His return to the Presidency has resulted in an almost complete reshaping of the US's foreign policies, primarily regarding its commitments towards Ukraine and its “European allies”. The new administration in Washington has expressed, since its campaign, a disdain for the European Union¹ and for what it sees as the over-extension of American commitments that strain the US budget in areas where it does not perceive its primary interests at stake. Furthermore, the protectionist trade policies² that have emerged are prompting European elites to reassess their stance and seek new opportunities in response to potential escalations from Washington.

This essay will analyse one of the moves, the most important and politically relevant, that the European Union has undertaken to strengthen alternative relations. Specifically, it will shed light on the recent visit of the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, to Delhi to meet with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The EU and India have long been partners, but Trump's election led them to engage at the highest political levels, thus making a strong statement about their willingness to alter the trajectory of their respective relations.

2. *A Passage to India* – Following the European elections in June 2024, the European Commission was established at the end of the year, coinciding almost exactly with the announcement of the American election results. Faced with the inevitable and announced hostility of the Trump administration, the elected President von der Leyen

¹ In this context, the leaked chat from *The Atlantic* provides an interesting insight into the private discussions regarding the European Union and its member states: Goldberg, Jeffrey & Shane Harris, *Here Are the Attack Plans That Trump's Advisers Shared on Signal*, in *The Atlantic*, 26/03/2025. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2025/03/signal-group-chat-attack-plans-hegseth-goldberg/682176/>.

² Politi, James & Kana Inagaki & Barbara Moens, *Donald Trump threatens to impose 25% tariffs on EU goods*, in *Financial Times*, 26/02/2025. <https://www.ft.com/content/2f0288f6-3f6a-4334-b666-3f0122981842>.

decided to embark on a historic visit to New Delhi for a meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi on February 27th and 28th³.

The importance of the visit cannot be understated and is relevant both for the timings in which it occurred, as well as for the scale of the delegation, as nearly the entire College of Commissioners accompanied von der Leyen⁴. This trip marked the first official visit of the College of Commissioners outside Europe since the College took office⁵, and came at a time of significant upheaval and profound transformations in Europe, marked by the ongoing war in Ukraine, tensions with the United States, and discussions about the need to rearm the continent that culminated in a historic resolution of the European Parliament to endorse the rearmament plan⁶. Even the organisation of works, which included a plenary session followed by bilateral discussions between individual Commissioners and their Indian counterparts, and a final joint press conference with Modi and von der Leyen, underscores furtherly the political importance of the occasion⁷.

The delegation was ambitious, and so were the commitments and plans that emerged from the discussions. The leaders jointly presented their plans to the public, starting with the reopening of negotiations for a long-awaited Free Trade Agreement (FTA) aimed at connecting their two economies. They also discussed the potential for enhanced collaboration in areas such as semiconductors, artificial intelligence, and maritime security and defence in the Indo-Pacific region⁸.

A key focus of the discussion was indeed the reopening of the negotiations for the FTA. In the words of President von der Leyen: “A free trade agreement between the EU and India would be the largest deal of its kind anywhere in the world. I am well aware it will not be easy. But I also know that timing and determination count, and that this partnership comes at the right moment for both of us”⁹. Her remarks reflect both a willingness to make a difference and the many obstacles that further negotiations will

³ Press Release, *College of Commissioners travels to New Delhi to boost EU-India relations*, European Commission Press Corner, 21/02/2025. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_569.

⁴ Rizzo, Rahcel & Srujan Palkar, *The European Commission is headed to India. Here's what to know about the landmark visit*, in *Atlantic Council*, 26/02/2025. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-european-commission-is-headed-to-india-heres-what-to-know-about-the-landmark-visit/>; Luykx, Jan, *India-EU, Towards a Revitalised Relationship?*, Egmont Institute, 12/03/2025. <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/india-eu-towards-a-revitalised-relationship/>.

⁵ Leaders' Statement: Visit of Ms. Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission and EU College of Commissioners to India, 28/02/2025. <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/39112/Leaders+Statement+Visit+of+Ms+Ursula+von+der+Leyen+President+of+the+European+Commission+and+EU+College+of+Commissioners+to+India+February+2728+2025>.

⁶ Press Release, *MEPs urge the EU to ensure its own security*, European Parliament Press Room, 12/03/2025. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20250310IPR27230/meps-urge-the-eu-to-ensure-its-own-security>.

⁷ Rossi, Emanuele, *Nuovo slancio tra Ue e India. La missione storica di von der Leyen da Modi*, in *Formiche.net*, 27/02/2025. <https://formiche.net/2025/02/von-der-leyen-modi-india-ue/#content>.

⁸ Shenoy, Vas, *Strategia e business. L'accordo storico tra Ue e India secondo Shenoy*, in *Formiche.net*, 28/02/2025. <https://formiche.net/2025/02/ue-india-accordi-business/#content>; Gijs, Camille & Jordyn Dahl & Mathieu Pollet, *EU and India to inch closer on trade, EVs and chips at upcoming meet*, in *Politico.eu*, 20/02/2025. <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-and-india-to-inch-closer-on-trade-evs-and-chips-at-upcoming-meet/>.

⁹ GOVOR, *Speech by President von der Leyen: 'The Consequential Partnership: Reimagining and Realigning EU and India Ties for Today's World'*, European Commission Press Corner, 28/02/2025. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/sl/speech_25_641.

encounter. Negotiations on trade liberalisation between Brussels and New Delhi have been notoriously difficult, and have been in the pipeline for seventeen years, halting more than once¹⁰. The last time the two sides had recommenced their talks in 2022, following von der Leyen's earlier visit to Delhi, driven by a mutual desire to counter China's expansion in the Indo-Pacific¹¹. However, with the EU and India having attempted to negotiate their FTA for the past few years without success, the next few months are poised to be critical in achieving some meaningful progress, and both parties are now motivated to finalise the FTA this year¹², particularly due to the risks posed by American tariffs on many industrial sectors. Due to the complex nature of these negotiations, achieving the goals that Europe and India aim for will require significant political oversight to prevent technical delays¹³. Therefore, it can be anticipated that high-profile political leaders will visit each other and share their views as the negotiations progress, in order to avoid reaching another impasse.

Secondly, the visit from the European Commission provided an opportunity for the two parties to plan the second meeting of the Trade and Technology Council (TTC). This Council was initially established to address the challenges posed by China's assertive trade practices, but it now also serves to protect against potential threats from American tariffs¹⁴, and has been articulated into three different working groups focusing on: Strategic Technologies, Digital Governance, and Digital Connectivity; Clean and Green Technologies; Trade, Investment and Resilient Value Chains. The joint statement issued at the conclusion of the meeting¹⁵ highlights the main vectors of focus of their work. Central to these efforts is the resilience of semiconductor supply chains, which aim to safeguard the digital networks of both partners. Additionally, there will be research cooperation under the Horizon Europe Programme, with a total of 60 million euros to be jointly invested in projects focused on converting waste into renewable hydrogen. The statement also emphasises the harmonization of standards for charging infrastructure for electric vehicles to facilitate mutual access to this expanding market. Furthermore, progress has been made on various market access issues, and both parties agreed to continue their engagement to address these concerns¹⁶.

Lastly, the analysis of the main topic of discussion would not be complete without mentioning another significant point between India and the EU from the recent visit of the Commission. Since December 2021, the European Global Gateway¹⁷ has been the

¹⁰ Rizzo, Rahcel & Srujan Palkar, *op. cit.*; Rizzi, Alessandro, *The Infinite Connection: How to Make the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor a Reality*, European Council on Foreign Relations, 23/04/2024. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-infinite-connection-how-to-make-the-india-middle-east-europe-economic-corridor-happen/>.

¹¹ Rossi, Emanuele, *op. cit.*; Körömi, Csongor, *EU, India agree to finalize free-trade pact this year, von der Leyen says*, in *Politico.eu*, 28/02/2025. <https://www.politico.eu/article/india-agrees-with-eu-to-finalize-free-trade-pact-this-year-von-der-leyen-says/>.

¹² Leaders' Statement: Visit of Ms. Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission and EU College of Commissioners to India, *cit.*

¹³ Luykx, Jan, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Gijs, Camille & Jordyn Dahl & Mathieu Pollet, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ Joint statement on the second meeting of the EU-India Trade and Technology Council, European Commission Press Corner, 28/02/2025. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_25_643

¹⁶ *Ibid.* Rizzo, Rahcel & Srujan Palkar, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ Global Gateway Strategy. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway_it.

EU's preferred instrument for enhancing its global connectivity and projecting its economic power abroad¹⁸. Among the various objectives and programmes that this initiative will fund, India remains a crucial element of the renewed activism for infrastructure that Europe aims to showcase through the Global Gateway, particularly with the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor¹⁹. The two leaders, President von der Leyen and Prime Minister Modi, reiterated their commitment to cooperate with the other actors involved²⁰.

3. *The way to India* – The India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC) represents a significant step in global infrastructure development, connecting India through the Middle East to key European ports in Greece, Italy and France. This ambitious project was officially announced in September 2023, following the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding during the G20 Summit in New Delhi among major global players, including the United States, the European Union, France, Germany, Italy, India, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia²¹. MEC is envisioned as two primary sections: an eastern maritime link that connects India to the Gulf and a northern corridor linking the Arabian Peninsula with Europe²².

It should not be surprising that, especially from the Indian perspective, the IMEC remains a project of primary importance. This is why it was presented in Delhi during a G20 summit, where Chinese leader Xi Jinping's absence was overshadowed by the announcement of a rival initiative to his Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)²³. In fact, the IMEC could be a transformative opportunity for India, serving as a genuine competitor and counterbalance to the BRI, which is beginning to show signs of diminished momentum. The project represents more than just economic aspirations; it aims to establish deeper strategic, diplomatic, and military connections through enhanced infrastructure and commercial ties²⁴.

However, President von der Leyen also decided to reiterate European commitments to the project and to provide full support for it to play its role in the Eastern Mediterranean, the last sector of the envisaged Programme²⁵. The Economic Corridor presents numerous benefits for the European Union, both structural and contingent. In light of the current war in Ukraine and tensions in the Red Sea, there is a pressing need to enhance Europe's economic and energy security via other routes that the IMEC could offer via the Middle East²⁶. Additionally, long-term strategies are involved, as the EU, mainly through the

¹⁸ Gili, Alessandro. *Imec: tra opportunità strategiche e complessità geopolitiche*, ISPI, 15/01/2024. <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/imec-tra-opportunita-strategiche-e-complessita-geopolitiche-163513>; Rizzi, Alessandro, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ Gili, Alessandro, *op. cit.*

²⁰ Leaders' Statement: Visit of Ms. Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission and EU College of Commissioners to India, *cit.*

²¹ Gili, Alessandro, *op. cit.*

²² Rizzi, Alessandro, *op. cit.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Shenoy, Vas, *op. cit.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Rizzi, Alessandro, *op. cit.*

engagement of its largest economies, views IMEC as vital for revitalising its economy in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The project aligns with the EU's Global Gateway Strategy, which represents a broader commitment to infrastructure development. This commitment is even more pertinent as European nations seek to reduce their reliance on Beijing²⁷. However, it is essential to note that, currently, the EU's trade with India accounts for only 2.1% of its total trade, while trade with China constitutes 16.2%²⁸.

Whatever the intentions of India and Europe may be, it is essential to acknowledge that they represent only two extremes along the broader economic Corridor. While it is undoubtedly true that their actions will influence the continuation of this process, the ultimate outcomes will be shaped by the geopolitical situation in the Arabian Peninsula and the Levant. Large infrastructural projects are often rooted in existing geopolitical conditions, but they can also help determine future dynamics. The ongoing and unresolved conflict between Israel and Hamas, along with the numerous allies of both parties, will significantly impact the progression of these developments²⁹, more than any political decision that Delhi or Brussels can take. Even if Arab countries in the peninsula were to prioritise pragmatism and normalise relations with Israel at the expense of the Palestinian cause, local instability on the ground would nonetheless hinder the full development of the Corridor.

4. *A New Ally in Bharat?* – The recent visit of the EU Commission to Delhi has rightly garnered significant attention, appearing prominently in newspapers, agency headlines, and discussions among think tanks and the public. This visit underscores the importance and political relevance of the relationship between India and the EU. The ties between these two partners are robust across various domains: political, commercial, and military. Notably, the EU has become India's largest trading partner, and its economy is projected to be the third-largest in the world by 2030³⁰. The need for collaboration between India and the EU has never been more critical. Over the past year, Indian Prime Minister Modi has undertaken landmark visits to Greece, Italy, France, Austria, Poland, and Ukraine, demonstrating a proactive foreign policy. Similarly, leaders from EU member states have been visiting New Delhi regularly, highlighting a growing engagement between the two³¹.

Before January 20, 2025, India and the EU regarded each other as essential partners, collaborating in various areas primarily through bureaucratic channels. However, with the onset of Donald Trump's second term as president, the global landscape has entered a period of heightened geopolitical uncertainty. The West appears fragmented, as the US distances itself from European allies and seeks closer ties with Moscow, altering the dynamics of international relations³². As both India and the EU navigate these

²⁷ Sacks, David, *Why Is Italy Withdrawing From China's Belt and Road Initiative?*, Council on Foreign Relations, 03/08/2023. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/why-italy-withdrawing-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative>.

²⁸ Rizzi, Alessandro, *op. cit.*

²⁹ Gili, Alessandro, *op. cit.*

³⁰ Rizzo, Rahcel & Srujan Palkar, *op. cit.*

³¹ *Ibid.* Luykx, Jan, *op. cit.*

³² Luykx, Jan, *op. cit.*

complexities, their partnership will be crucial in addressing challenges and seizing opportunities in an increasingly complex global environment.

However, this should not be mistaken for the possibility of creating a symbiotic relationship with India based on a progressive and complete alignment of interests and strategies. In a rapidly changing global landscape, India seeks to explore diverse avenues of cooperation rather than being limited to a single set of alliances³³. The doctrine of multi-alignment, a development of the non-alignment strategy from the Cold War era, allows India to balance its interests among various international actors³⁴. By consistently pursuing its goals with pragmatism and decisiveness, India aims to navigate complex global dynamics effectively. India, for instance, maintains a neutral stance on the Ukraine war while continuing to strengthen its ties with Russia. Key figures in the Indian leadership, such as Trade Minister Piyush Goyal and National Security Advisor Ajit Doval, have engaged with Russian counterparts to discuss enhancing bilateral cooperation, particularly in trade and military supplies³⁵. The foundations of the Russia-India relationship remain robust, supported by pragmatic considerations like Russian oil exports to India and India's reliance on Russian military equipment³⁶.

5. *Conclusions* – When old friends grow distant, find new ones. The American administration has introduced a new set of challenges for the multilateral system and its relationships with the EU, prompting the European Commission's response with its visit to Delhi. The visit by President von der Leyen and her Cabinet has been historic and should not be underestimated. There were many points of discussion and numerous promises made, so even if only some of the objectives are achieved, it can be considered a success for the European Union's diplomatic efforts, especially after months of harsh criticism regarding the perceived inefficiency of European structures in key geopolitical arenas.

The Free Trade Agreement (FTA) seems to have finally gained significant political relevance, and the political capital invested by both Modi and von der Leyen offers hope for positive outcomes. However, history has shown that Europe and India have a significant gap to bridge in this area. Similarly, discussions regarding the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) have been positive, demonstrating substantial momentum at the highest political levels for its completion. Nevertheless, it remains unclear how many of the proposed objectives are actually within reach, and only the next months will give a clearer answer.

Nevertheless, some other considerations cast a shadow over the results of the entire envoy. Firstly, most negotiations have focused on matters of trade policy, which, while relevant, lack the political saliency that a visit of this nature would typically require. For

³³ Rizzo, Rahcel & Srujan Palkar, *op. cit.*

³⁴ Raghavan, P. S., *The Making of India's Foreign Policy: From Non-Alignment to Multi-Alignment*, in *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, 2017, p. 326 ff.; Hall, Ian, *Nonalignment to Multialignment*, in *Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy*, Bristol, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1332/policypress/9781529204605.003.0002>.

³⁵ Luykx, Jan, *op. cit.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

instance, the absence of any specific references to the situations in Ukraine, the Red Sea, or the Middle East in the joint statement is a strong symptom of the persistent political divergences. It should be clear that India remains a fundamental partner, but it should not be expected to align itself with the EU unless it serves its own interests.

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