

Modi Cracks the European Code

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Summary

Contrary to the widespread presumption, Russia's war in Ukraine has not rocked India's relations with Europe. Instead, it has offered a big moment to explore new pathways to strengthen bilateral ties between India and Europe. While his predecessors struggled to advance India's ties with Europe, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has broken the European code with pragmatism and sustained political attention. The visit of Ursula von Der Leyn, the President of the European Commission, to India in late April 2022 and Modi's whirlwind tour of Germany, Denmark and France in early May 2022 underline the unfolding transformation in India's engagement with Europe.

It was widely presumed that New Delhi's reluctance to condemn Russia's unprovoked war against Ukraine would set back India's budding strategic partnerships with the United States (US) and Europe. Although India's repeated abstentions in the United Nations on various Western resolutions condemning Russia did generate widespread disappointment in the Western political and public opinion, the governments in the US and Europe appear to have made a conscious decision to avoid snubbing India.

Instead, in their high-level engagements with Modi in recent weeks, US President [Joe Biden](#) and British Prime Minister [Boris Johnson](#) sought to wean India away from Russia. Ursula von der Leyn, who travelled to Delhi in the last week of April and the leaders of Germany, Denmark, and France, who hosted Mr Modi on his whirlwind tour of Europe in early May, followed a similar script. All of them were unequal in their condemnation of the Russian invasion, but signalled their willingness to [look beyond](#) the differences with India on Ukraine and explore wide-ranging cooperation with India.

Five broad themes are figured in the current intensive interactions between India and Europe.

The first is commerce, which remains a key driver for Europe. The importance of India as a potential economic partner continues to grow amidst Europe's problems with the Russian and Chinese markets. During her visit to Delhi, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von Der Leyn, announced the formation of a new [trade and technology council](#). This is only the second such council to be announced by the European Union (EU). She also reaffirmed the EU's interest in moving forward with the free trade agreement (FTA) with India. On his part, [Modi promised](#) to bring the same energy and speed to conclude the FTA that his government did in the recent successful negotiation of trade liberalisation with the United Arab Emirates and Australia.

The second is the continuing European interest in the partnership with India in the Indo-Pacific even as differences were aired on Ukraine and European security issues. Underlying

the soft-handed Western approach to India on Ukraine is the recognition that the current crisis in European security triggered by the Russian aggression cannot be allowed to cloud the judgement on the longer-term challenges presented by China and the critical role of India in meeting it. The problem was accentuated by the alliance between Russia and China and raised the stakes in [stronger Western ties with Japan and India](#).

The third is the strong European commitment to assist India in reducing its reliance on Russian weapons. The European nations have strong defence industries and most of them are eager to enhance their position in the Indian arms bazaar which has long been dominated by Russia. However, in his engagements with the European leaders, Modi made it clear that India was no longer interested in buying weapons from Europe. Instead, he would like to see Europe make arms in India as part of the strategy to enhance self-reliance in the defence sector. Both [Germany](#) and [France](#) are now eager to explore terms under which they can invest in India's arms production.

The fourth is the focus on climate change, green growth and clean technologies. Modi's ambitious targets for renewable energy at home and his success in turning India from a problem to a solution in the global climate negotiations have positively affected [Delhi's engagement with Europe](#) in recent years. Climate change and clean energy figured at the top of the agenda in all of his engagements with the European leaders. The dependence of Europe and India on energy imports has been sharply highlighted by the Ukraine crisis, and the two sides are even more eager to invest in alternatives to hydrocarbon imports.

The fifth is the shared commitment to strategic autonomy and the pursuit of a multipolar world. The joint statement issued after talks between Modi and the French President Emmanuel Macron [put it sharply](#), The India-France strategic partnership is anchored in an "abiding faith in strategic autonomy...and belief in a multipolar world shaped by reformed and effective multilateralism." Although there are multiple shades to this framework in different parts of Europe, there is no denying the larger convergence of Indian and European global political goals.

On the face of it, the Ukraine crisis has strengthened trans-Atlantic solidarity. But it has also exposed Europe's deep vulnerability – defined by its dependence on Russia for energy and America for security and put an [end to Europe's geopolitical holiday](#) since the end of the Cold War. As Europe wakes up to the need to shape its destiny, strategic partnership with India has emerged as a critical imperative.

India, in turn, is waking up to the need to look beyond the US, Russia and China to strengthen its room for manoeuvre in the world. Europe has inevitably risen to the top of India's strategic priorities in the Modi era. In the mid-1990s, India wanted to get there in collaboration with China and Russia. While Beijing builds a Sino-centric and unipolar Asia, and Russia aligns itself with China, Europe has emerged as India's natural partner in building a multipolar world.

During the Cold War, India's ideological emphasis on the contradictions between the East and the West, as well as the North and the South, left little room for substantive engagement between India and Europe in the first decades after independence. The end of

the Cold War and India's economic reforms did produce new possibilities for building a solid partnership in the 1990s. However, Delhi's old inhibitions continued to limit India's engagement with Europe. The Modi government sought to actively transcend the old ideological certitudes and devoted serious diplomatic and political energies to intensify the engagement with Europe. The positive results from that strategy are now coming through.

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