

India's Strategic Dance with Europe Amidst Geopolitical Shifts

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Summary

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's third-term re-election began with a diplomatic visit to the 50th G7 summit in Italy from 13 to 15 June 2024, underscoring growing relations with the West. In recent years, India's interactions with Europe have intensified through regular participation in forums like the G7 and G20, as well as increased bilateral engagements with key European nations such as France, Italy and Germany. This commitment was further highlighted by India's participation in the Ukraine Peace Summit in Switzerland on 15 and 16 June 2024. Although India and several Global South nations, including Indonesia and Thailand, refrained from [signing the joint communique](#), India's active presence signalled its role as a Vishwa-Mitra (Universal Friend). However, are these shifts indicative of the fundamental changes in India-Europe ties, or merely tactical cooperation?

Congruence of Tensions

India's role as a diplomatic bridge is increasingly significant in a world where geopolitical alliances are evolving. New Delhi's ability to maintain relationships with diverse nations highlights its diplomatic flexibility. This approach is not without challenges, as evidenced by India's complex relationship with Russia and its balanced stance during the Ukraine crisis. This balancing act is part of India's broader foreign policy strategy, which includes maintaining strong ties with both the West and Russia, despite global tensions.

Similarly, Europe finds itself navigating the great power competition between the United States (US) and China. With Washington pressuring its allies to adopt a firmer stance against Beijing, Europe balances its economic interests and strategic autonomy, managing a complex relationship with China.

These parallels underscore the nuanced diplomacy required by both India and Europe in managing their respective geopolitical interests and challenges.

Chief Geopolitical Challenges

India's primary geopolitical challenge comes from Beijing, with whom it shares multiple territorial disputes and has experienced tense relations since the 2017 Doklam standoff and the 2020 Galwan Valley clash. Beijing's aggressive grey zone tactics in Taiwan and the South China Sea are, therefore, particularly concerning for New Delhi.

Europe, on the other hand, faces its chief geopolitical challenge from Russia. Despite perceptions of Moscow as a declining power, its war in Ukraine and the potential resurgence of a Donald Trump presidency in the US have prompted Europe to reassess its security

infrastructure and alliances. This introspection has led to [increased defence budgets across the North Atlantic Treaty Organization states](#), with 23 of the 32 countries meeting the previously agreed target of spending two per cent of their gross domestic product on defence, up from 11 countries in 2023. The trend of bolstering national and European defence capabilities is evident, with Germany considering the revival of mandatory conscription, and Italy and France signing a Letter of Intent to create a joint industrial hub for ground defence.

Challenges from Chief Opponents

China's rapid military expansion further complicates India's strategic landscape. With Beijing's [nuclear stockpile](#) exceeding 500 warheads, it now possesses the third-largest nuclear arsenal, following the US and Russia. By contrast, India's stockpile is at 172 warheads. Additionally, China's advanced fleet of aircraft, including the indigenously built fifth-generation J-20 Mighty Dragon fighter, poses a significant challenge, while India continues to acquire 4.5 generation fighters from France (Dassault Rafale) and, previously Russia (Sukhoi 30-MKI).

Similarly, despite its perceived decline, Russia's military capabilities remain substantial. With over 5,800 nuclear warheads, Russia continues to be a formidable nuclear threat to Europe, as evidenced by President Vladimir Putin's repeated threats amid Western support for Ukraine. While Russia may lack the technological edge of the US or China, its robust domestic production of fifth-generation fighters (Su-57) and various fourth and 4.5 generation fighters like the Su-30, Su-34, Su-35 and MiG-35 underscore its significant aerial power.

Opportunities for Collaboration

In recent years, India has pursued a path of indigenisation to build a robust defence production capability. This quest presents opportunities for collaboration with international defence manufacturers, many of which are based in Europe, including Dassault, Airbus, Leonardo and SAAB. Potential partnerships with these firms are crucial for India's defence modernisation and could be mutually beneficial for Europe as well, providing bilateral defence networks.

Both India and Europe face similar strategic urgencies due to their neighbours' actions, creating opportunities for closer defence ties. Bilateral collaborations are already underway, with [France emerging as India's "New Russia"](#) and Germany negotiating a [submarine deal with India](#). These partnerships reflect the strategic convergence between India and Europe, driven by common concerns for security and mutual economic interests.

Divergence of Fundamental Interests

However, tensions exist between Europe and India, particularly regarding their relationships with Russia. India has a longstanding relationship with Russia, as evident during the Ukraine Peace Summit in mid-June 2024 where India did not sign the joint communique. Additionally, India continues to purchase Russian energy despite European sanctions following the 2022 Ukraine war escalation. This enduring relationship contrasts sharply with Europe's interests.

Another point of contention is China. While India views Beijing as a clear threat, Europe does not uniformly share this perception. The European Union labels Beijing as a competitor and trade partner, reflecting varying threat perceptions among the European states. This divergence can lead Europe to continue, if not deepen, its ties with China, which fundamentally contrasts with India's interests.

Conclusion

The shifting geopolitical landscape presents opportunities for greater collaboration between India and Europe, particularly in defence. While India is growing closer to Europe, fundamental points of contention, particularly regarding Russia and China, prevent full alignment. Furthermore, India must navigate its relationships with the individual European states, such as France, Italy and Germany, rather than treat Europe as a monolithic bloc. These evolving bilateral ties are likely to shape the future of India-Europe relations.

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