



India's outreach in Central and Eastern Europe: A Roundup of Two Visits

*Dr. Surabhi Singh**

With Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) fast emerging as the site of a tussle for influence between China and European Union (EU), these countries were the focus of high-level engagement by India. The importance given to the region is evident from the two high level visits to the region in quick succession. The visit of President Ram Nath Kovind to Cyprus, Bulgaria and Czech Republic (2-9 September, 2018) was followed by that of Vice President M. Venkaih Naidu to Serbia, Malta and Romania (14-20 September, 2018). This paper looks at these two visits in Central and Eastern Europe and their importance in strengthening ties in the region.

Highlights of the Visit

The highlight of these visits was the signing of 18 MoUs to foster closer economic relations and people to people connectivity between this region and India. Academic engagements, boosting trade ties, promoting cooperation in the field of tourism, shipping, plant health, nuclear energy, reiterating India's historical ties with countries in the region, respect for core universal values of peace, recognizing the threat of terrorism, and a need to reform the United Nations (UN) were some of the core issues raised and discussed by both the visiting dignitaries i.e President Kovind and Vice President Naidu.

Cyprus is the eighth largest FDI investor in India and bilateral trade is to the tune of 101 million USD¹. Discussion on economic cooperation was a major focus of the President's visit to Cyprus. The President in his address to the Special Session of the House of Representatives, emphasized on the role of Cyprus as one of the largest investor in the country to assist in India's economic growth. President Kovind's visit to Bulgaria came after a gap of 15 years since the last Presidential visit of APJ Abdul Kalam in 2003. In the joint statement released by the two countries, it was agreed that there was a need to further intensify high-level engagement and mutual

support for candidatures and initiatives within the UN and other organizations.² Both the leaders, President Kovind and President Rumen Radav of Bulgaria, condemned terrorism and agreed to strengthen counter terrorism initiatives. FICCI organized a business delegation coinciding with the Presidential visit to further cooperation in the area of IT & ITES, pharmaceuticals, financial services, agriculture and food processing, defence production and tourism among other themes, and both the Presidents graced the India-Bulgaria business forum to drive home the crucial nature of the engagement. The President also unveiled the statue of Mahatma Gandhi at Sofia's south park.

The visit to Czech Republic saw signing of agreements to promote research in science and technology. The President also addressed India-Czech Business Forum and paid a visit to the Charles University. The two leaders, President Kovind and President Milos Zeman of Czech Republic, also agreed on the need for a comprehensive reform of the United Nations.³ A host of MoU's on combating money laundering, environment, cooperation in the field of science, technology and nuclear energy, tourism and visa waiver (in the case of Czech Republic) were the key takeaways during the President's visit to Cyprus, Bulgaria and Czech Republic.

Close on the heels of President's visit, came the visit of the Vice President, M. Venkai Naidu, to Serbia, Malta and Romania. The highlight of the visit, apart from the various MoUs signed on academic engagement, shipping, tourism, plant health and air services with the three countries, was his address to the Special Session of the National Assembly of Serbia, where he drew extensively on the democratic traditions of both the countries and stressed on the close ties of India and Serbia.⁴ In Malta, the Vice President in his remarks emphasized that India has reopened its mission in Malta to tap the complementarities in sectors such as IT, financial services, health, pharmaceuticals, transport, generic drugs and health care facilities.

The visit to Romania coincided with 70 years of the establishment of diplomatic relations with Romania, and centenary year of Romania. Romania is set to take the EU Presidency in 2019 and the Vice President hoped that it would lead to some progress in the EU-India Broad-based Trade & Investment Agreement (BTIA). The Vice President was also accompanied by a business delegation headed by CII to strengthen the bilateral economic ties with all the three countries.

Significance of India's Outreach

India had close ties with the countries in Central and Eastern Europe during the cold war. These two visits in Central and Eastern Europe derive their significance from the fact that India's outreach in the region has been perfunctory rather than consistent. All these visits have been after a gap of several years. EU- India partnership has been dominated by western member states such as France, Germany, and U.K. Trade, academic engagements, tourism, energy cooperation, shipping, movement of high skilled personnel, and people to people connectivity with Central and Eastern Europe present an untapped potential.

Further, the geo strategic developments in the region render it more crucial. China is seeking to expand its influence in the region much to the displeasure of the EU. Bulgaria hosted the 16+1 Summit, which is a meeting of CEE countries with China, earlier this year. The 16+1 initiative and Chinese investments through the Belt and Road (BRI) initiative has not gone down very well with the EU which perceives China's outreach in the area as an attempt to create differences within the bloc.⁵The CEE countries have felt marginalized⁶ in the European policy making and have been subjected to strict monitoring for instance in the case of Romania and Bulgaria, which are still not part of the Schengen⁷ acquis.⁸ As a result they have courted Chinese investments. Further, Romania is also due to head the rotating EU presidency. It assumes significance in the wake of reviving the negotiations on India and EU trade agreement. In this context, economically and strategically, it is pertinent that India engages with CEE countries in a sustained manner through strengthening and deepening its economic ties, as well as promoting cooperation in science and technology, research, tourism and fostering people to people contacts.

** Dr. Surabhi Singh, Research Fellow, Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.
Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

Endnotes:

¹ High Commission of India , Cyprus (2018), "India-Cyprus Bilateral Relations", Accessed on 5 September, 2018, URL: <https://hci.gov.in/nicosia/?0700?000>

²Ministry of External Affairs (2018), "India-Bulgaria Joint Statement during the State Visit of President to Bulgaria, Accessed on 9 September ,2018 ,URL:<https://mea.gov.in/outgoing-visitdetail.htm?30360/IndiaBulgaria+Joint+Statement+during+State+Visit+of+President+to+Bulgaria+September+46+2018>

³Ministry of External Affairs (2018), "India-Czech Republic Joint Statement during the State Visit of President to Bulgaria, Accessed on 9 September, 2018, <https://mea.gov.in/outgoing-visit-detail.htm?30366/IndiaCzech+Republic+Joint+Statement+during+President+Visit+to+Czech+Republic+September+69+2018>

⁴Ministry of External Affairs (2018), "Address by the Vice President at the National Assembly of Serbia, Accessed on 16 September, 2018, URL: <https://mea.gov.in/outgoing-visit-detail.htm?30394/Address+by+the+Vice+President+at+the+Special+Session+of+the+National+Assembly+of+Serbi+a+15+September+2018>

⁵ Reuters (2018), "China's ambitions in eastern Europe to face scrutiny at summit", Accessed on 15 September, 2018, URL:<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-easteurope/chinas-ambitions-in-eastern-europe-to-face-scrutiny-at-summit-idUSKBN1JU1NR>

⁶ Raja Mohan C. (2018), "Raja Mandala: After Indo-Pacific, the Eurasian idea", Accessed on 2 October 2018, URL: <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/raja-mandala-after-indo-pacific-the-eurasian-idea-4968067/>

⁷ Schweiger Christian, Anna Visvizi ed. (2018), *Central and Eastern Europe in the EU: Challenges and Perspectives under Crisis Conditions*, London: Routledge

⁸ The *acquis* is the body of common rights and obligations that is binding on all the EU member states.