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TAPPING THE POTENTIAL OF THE EU-INDIA RELATIONSHIP

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In the last month, the people have spoken – both in India and across Europe. Indians delivered a clear political mandate to Narendra Modi and the BJP, while many European voters unleashed a less clear wave of populist protest (benefiting the far right as well as the radical left). Perceived as the catalyst for their frustration and dissatisfaction, the European Union (EU) bore the brunt of the backlash against the economic crisis, national elites, immigrants – especially in some countries – and, arguably, some effects of globalisation. And while India now has a brand new government, the EU will have to wait a few months before having new teams in place at its helm.

In India, the focus on domestic issues (in particular reenergising the economy) lies at the core of both voters’ expectations and Modi’s mandate. That said, he also faces a full foreign policy plate, ranging from regional security (especially the transition in Afghanistan) and relations with Pakistan to reassessing cooperation with the US and coping with a rising China.

The EU, too, has been quite inward-looking of late, mainly focussing on the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty and the creation and consolidation of new structures (not least its External Action Service). But the Union has also faced major challenges to its internal cohesion: for example, the sovereign debt crisis triggered by Greece and the debates over a possible British referendum on EU membership – often referred to, in EU parlance, as ‘Grexit’ and ‘Brexit’. Yet the outside world has not been standing idly by: the rise of China, the US rebalancing to Asia, and major upheavals in the EU’s own neighbourhood – first the so-called Arab Spring and its ramifications and, now, the confrontation with Russia over its actions in Ukraine.

It is in this context that the India-EU Strategic Partnership enters its 10th year this November. Originally devised as a means to facilitate the EU’s work with new partners, the partnership seeks to develop a strategic approach and address the changing distribution of power in the new emerging global system. Both partners stood to benefit: on the Indian side, the expectation was one of greater recognition for its global responsibilities, while for the EU it demonstrated its coming of age as a political (and not just economic) actor.

Yet the past decade has seen a move away from grand ambitions towards pragmatism, prompted by shifts in global, regional, but also internal priorities (and capabilities). What could both sides do to tap into the still unexplored potential of the partnership? The failure to conclude the EU-India trade pact, also known as BTIA (Broad-based Trade and Investment Agreement), is often seen as an indication that the partnership is floundering or just stagnating. But this reduces the EU-India relationship to one (admittedly large) part: bilateral trade. When it comes to foreign policy, there are both shared and diverging concerns and priorities that require (and deserve) mutual engagement to highlight respective analyses and interests, compare notes, and look to the future.

First and foremost, Brussels and New Delhi – capitals of the largest bloc of democratic countries and the largest single democratic country in the world, respectively – must look at the principles they share: democracy, indeed, and also unity in diversity. Then they must consider what divides them, including the different emphasis on integration versus sovereignty, and universal norms versus bilateral priorities. Furthermore, they could explore what really divides and/or unites them when it comes to multilateralism, i.e. the extent to which, beyond Europe's defence of an institutional status quo that disproportionately favours it and India's legitimate quest for greater international status, the two partners share a preference for a rules-based international system – however multipolar it may be.

Finally, the EU and India could identify areas in which better cooperation is not only possible but also mutually beneficial: for instance, there is plenty of scope for increasing cooperation on counter-terrorism; for working together and building capacity on matters related to cyber-security; for enhancing security in the wider Indian Ocean, building on EU engagement not only off the coast of Somalia but also in Aceh and Mindanao, and thus securing trade and communication routes from Suez to Shanghai; and possibly also for exploring the involvement of Indian soldiers in EU-led operations in sub-Saharan Africa. After all, India is one the biggest contributors to UN peacekeeping operations worldwide and Africa is a theatre where EU and Indian interests are more likely to converge than diverge.

Along with the 10th anniversary of the Strategic Partnership, this autumn will also witness the ASEM meeting – may it be a first opportunity for the new teams of Brussels and New Delhi to reset their approaches, reconnect their discourses, and relaunch their relations.

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