**India and the European Union – The Less Important Relationship**

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The aim of this paper is to provide a tentative assessment of the current diplomatic and strategic relations between India and the EU. The attempt is made to show that there are fundamental deficits on both sides – most of them domestic - that impede their explicit or implicit foreign policy, security and global projections as well as their abilities to effectively work together.

The first section gives a brief introduction to the present international crisis and attempts to situate India’s strive to become a new world power. Secondly, the paper explores the geo-political and security relationship between India and the EU and asks why there is no real engagement taking place. Thirdly, it provides an understanding of the strategic partnership and discusses whether a rising India needs a Europe in decline; finally, it offers some tentative remarks on the recent shifts in interactions between the core players including China in the emerging world order and how these shifts impact the India-EU relation.

**India’s Long Insertion into a Stagnating World Economy**[[2]](#footnote-2)

The world economy is in peril and has entered a state of “depression economics” (Krugman 2010). The global crisis has significantly changed the previously defined geo-political world order to one where geo-economics take precedence. Indeed it is a delicate moment especially for those who believe in a quick fix to the sovereign debt crisis in Europe and a fast or gradual recovery from austerity.

What started as a private sector crisis with excessive private sector borrowing and lending quickly escalated to Europe where as a consequence it turned into a public sector debt crisis. Four years after the crisis started “the major advanced economies remain deeply depressed in a scene all too reminiscent of the 1930s” (Krugman and Layard 2012). There is a refusal to tax the rich and the financial sector and a fiscal restraint without precedent and paradox neo-liberal elites are still pushing for austerity policies and putting a squeeze on government spending. After having bailed out the financial sector several times with tax-payers money it seems that the European Union, the United States, the Western press and financial elites has been moving their expectations towards the BRICS or Japan to save the world economy from agony.

As [Ha-Joon Chang](http://www.guardian.co.uk/profile/hajoonchang) mentioned in the Guardian (11 Oct. 2011): The answer to this question “is a definite no”. Not even China is able to save the world economy from sinking. With only 8.5% of the world's output it does not have enough economic muscle to act as the new market for global exports. On the contrary China accounts for only 9% of global import demand and half of that consist of raw materials and intermediate goods required for processing into exports. India and Brazil, account for 2.2% and 2.7% of world output, while South Africa, with 0.5% of world output obviously cannot act as demand primers either. All these countries also suffer from a variety of development and equity related problem and cannot in any way be seen as financial saviors buying up bonds or otherwise become partners in solving the global crisis and overproduction problem.

When India pledged 10 $billion to the IMF’s European Rescue Fund at the G20 meeting In Mexico many people were rubbing their eyes and could not believe what they saw. However, Delhi’s reaction to the Eurozone limbo was similar to other BRIC countries who promised a total of 75 billion because it was deemed “necessary to find a cooperative solution to resolve this crisis!” (Times of India 19 June 2012). The sovereign debt crisis in Europe has been changing the ”external perception of Europe from a zone of wealth and stability to a continent incrisis looking for handouts from abroad” (Muenchow-Pohl 2012: 9).

*Where does India fit in?*

Although India has experienced high growth rates it is still struggling with high inflation (although this may partly be attributed to Europe’s sovereign debt crisis), especially food inflation in double digits, a political system in paralyses and the inability to raise its growth potential. At the same time there is much debate about India becoming the next superpower or “Great power” or catching up with China, EU and ultimately the US. The debate in Delhi reflects a wish to find the rightful position and status in the evolving structures of global governance (Muherjee and Malone 2011).

Let me give four immediate reasons why it may be problematic for India to strive for superpower status.

1) Development problems i.e. poverty, inequality, displacement and the health crisis

2) Corrupt political class

3) Ethnic, communal and caste contradictions

4) Sneaking foreign policy contradictions - between realism and pragmatic commercialism replacing idealist Nehruvianism and “Great Power” export of democracy as a model. No coherent or grand strategy - The China obsession.

*Elaborating the issues*

Ref 1) India is in an urgent need of land reforms, tax reforms, and a more legally based and formal mines and mineral development plan (Lamont FT 28 Sep. 2011). In the last instance the Indian government has made dramatic wrongs and illegal exploitation of the environment and rural tribal communities threatening security, stability and nation-building.

Furthermore, in a country with more than 400 million people struggling to survive below the official poverty rate on less than 2$ a day it is a question whether India should prioritize its insertion into the foreign sector or devote much more resources to solve its own development problem first. It is also a moral and ethical problem. India is now home to more poor people than the entire Sub-Saharan Africa region and one government Commision estimated that one out of three Indians now live below the poverty line (Lamont FT 27 Sept. 2011).

Ref 2) Severe corruption among politicians and the elite dominate Indian politics. Abusing the “state’s power of eminent domain, its control of infrastructure contracts and its monopoly of natural resources” (Guha FT 20 July 2011) has become the order of the day for the elite to enrich themselves. The examples are legion: looting of mineral resources; graft in connection with the Commonwealth Games in New Delhi; under pricing of mobile phone contracts and property scandals. The scale and ubiquity of these problems is unprecedented. The corruption problem cannot be isolated from the impact of current neo-liberal reforms and retrenchment of the state – where politicians, editors of major media conglomerates and the financial elite interests collude and create a climate of abusing public resources.

Ref 3) Although there have been no communal massacres between Hindus and Muslims and no wars with regional rival, nuclear armed Pakistan during the Congress led government period the situation is still unresolved. The issue related to tribal land and caste especially the Dalit remains an obstacle for the creation of justice and democracy; and communal and national identities and religious upheaval may threaten governance and peaceful solutions to development problems. Much more can be said about these issues which may be perceived as a much bigger threat to security and stability than any foreign threat at the moment.

Ref 4) The political, academic and media establishment in Delhi can best be described by its obsession with China. The relation between Asia’s two great powers may be characterized as one of global cooperation on transnational issues especially vis-à-vis the “West”, geostrategic rivalry at the regional levels in the form of growing commercial competition and in some cases bilateral cooperation, growing trade relations and some unresolved security issues (Schmidt 2013a; Schmidt 2013b). These contradictory processes are complicated by a degree of political cultural and historical asymmetry. China does not appear to feel threatened by India while the Indian political class seems to project a sense of insecurity in coming to grip with China’s rise in the world system (Bajaj 2011; Malone and Mukherjee 2010: 137). Neither of the two emerging economies has developed a grand strategy towards the other. Two observers describe the state of affairs as “China is a more fraught subject in Indian national debates than India is for China” (Malone and Mukherjee 2010: ibid).

With some of the world’s highest levels of inequality and weak prospects for reconciling growth with equity in both countries make their ascendancy fragile and filled with uncertainties. Seen in this light, it is indeed questionable whether they are able or even want to reconfigure the international order with their accumulating might (Jha 2010).

On the other hand the growing trade links can in a liberal perspective bring down the chances for a military conflict (Times of India 31October 2011). China has become India’s biggest trading partner and has created almost overnight a pyramidical trade structure with growing trade relations in Northeast, Southeast and Southwest Asia in an attempt to overcome the import squeeze and growing protectionism in Europe and the US which seems inevitable. Whether this evolution will satisfy the neo-realist hardliners and China bashers (Lamont FT 6 September 2011) in New Delhi remains to be seen but the China bashing and the arms race will continue as long as there is a lack of political will and a pragmatic approach to diplomacy to embrace and enhance real people-to- people, academic and student exchanges, tourism etc between China and India.

Having said this contours of a more pragmatic and less confrontational relationship between India and China seems to be emerging not least due to their increasing economic exchanges. The government in Delhi “prioritizes” its functional relations with Beijing including efforts to continue with confidence-building measures and military-to-military trust and bilateral defense interactions.

Both India and China seem to acknowledge the need for a multipolar Asia, a major point they share with the European Union but not the United States, and they show a gradual albeit slowly increasing interest in providing collective goods in the global arena and sharing responsibilities. The important mutual relationship between China and India does not by definition need to be based on a zero-sum game if the political elites of both countries show enough sophistication in their ascendency in the world system. The same can be said about the EU-India relationship where the greatest impediment has to do with India’s own domestic problems related to equity and political power dynamics and ability to create societal consensus but is also related to lack of “political will” (Muenchow-Pohl 2012b: 39).

In this context the shifting geo-political and geo-economic global order is changing its focus away from the traditional strategic triangle of Europe, the US and China to a newly renovated interest in the conflictual, competitive and sometimes contradictory relationship among India, China and the US (Schmidt 2011).

The question then is what is the European Union’s response and domestic aspirations to play a larger role in world affairs? The question is also whether there is a tendency away from norm-based foreign policy towards a normalization of a realist foreign policy based on a coherent strategy and wish of the European political class to become a world power per excellence?

**India-EU geo-politics and security relations**

The growing body of literature about ties between India and the European Union shows that there is no deepening or policy substance in diplomatic and especially security relations, just talk. One observer describes it there is no real strategic partnership. There is no de facto reciprocity between the two entities and EU’s foreign policy towards India or rather lack of a real coherent strategy may be partly explained by the limited capacity and power of EU institutions; the competition and disunity between EU member states; and unrealistic expectations about India where the reality shows that there are fewer and in some cases no shared security concerns. This is neatly illustrated by Muenchow-Pohl who states: “India and the EU share common objectives, but these relate more to general principles for the global order than to details and deliverables. Geo-political distance and each side’s preoccupation with its own neighborhood contribute to a lack of genuine shared interests—aside from the fight against terrorism and piracy” (2012b: 2). Seen in this perspective bilateral ties between Delhi and Brussels may best be characterized as “lethargic” and this has “weakened the strategic value of this under-delivering partnership. There has been a clear gap in perceptions and priorities” (Khandekar 2012).

It may seem fairly obvious that the limits of India’s political, diplomatic and strategic relations with Europe left the relationship to rely on trade and economic exchanges. The lack of security dialogue may also be explained by the fact that the EU is not a rational actor but “more of a security community” and “though both India and Europe have shared values, they face different security contexts and do not have shared threats” (Jain 2005: 5).

The EU is now India’s second biggest trading partner but rapidly declining vis-à-vis other trading partners. While the original template for a European security policy based on “effective multilateralism” or so-called rule-based global governance may be seen as a shared value between the two partners they don’t seem to share similar geo-political priorities. The reality shows fundamental disagreements persist regarding multilateral issues and different views about trade/WTO, global labor issues, G20, Climate Change and perceptions in India about the “colonial discourse” of EU negotiators and politicians when it comes to human rights and security and conflicts in South Asia. There is a clear perception in Delhi that the EU is “lecturing” and utilizes a prescriptive approach and even worse attempts to meddle into conflicts in Kashmir, Nepal and Sri Lanka are seen as a reductionist approach of internationalization. The EU view is seen as hypocritical and perhaps with good reason so why should India aspire to advocate democracy and human rights abroad. The same applies to EU reluctance to condemn terrorist actions at the India-Pakistan border and even promote a pro-Pakistan foreign policy. India’s critique is also related to the provision of GSP preferences to Bangladesh and Pakistan to the detriment of Indian companies. In short, “there is a lack of political and economic attention from the EU toward India” (Wülbers 2011: 5).

This is further illuminated at the global governance level as well where significant disagreements persist between India and the BRICs on the one side and on the other the EU and the United States. Issues related to maritime security, national sovereignty in Libya, Iran and although Delhi might have moved previous positions regarding the present crisis in Syria, in many other areas, they still stick to their ideal of non-interference. This is even more so with regard to the concept of the right to protect (R2P) and other human rights issues and more fundamentally there are still different threat perceptions in dealing with the Iranian nuclear issue and the Arab Spring (Khandekar 2012: 4). Indeed the EU has been viewed in certain cases through the prism of NATO and thus sometimes seen as interventionist. This has consequences for maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean, implementation of the R2P and not least India’s claim to a permanent seat in the UN Security Council (the EU’s lack of internal consensus on the matter does not help) to the EU requesting more concrete commitment to multilateralism from India (Peral and Sakhuja 2012: 10).

Formal and bilateral relations may sometimes be seen as a “loveless arranged marriage” where joint action plans appear to be a “laundry list” with “no deliverables”, “no goals”, “no timelines” where a long-term observer concludes that there is “no real progress” but “growing pessimism” when it comes to security (Jain 2012). Brussel’s role has largely been vague attempts to conduct “supplemental diplomacy,” with bilateral cooperation between its larger member states and India continuing to dominate key aspects of the Indo-European relationship and in this way adding “to the thrust of the bilateral diplomacy of its member states. That all EU member states are neither in the Euro zone nor in the Schengen area illustrates the point” (Abhyankar 2009: 401).

Nonetheless, increasing ties between non-state actors may challenge both theoretical predictions, academic work and policymakers.

*The blurring of foreign policy*

It is power itself which is becoming more diffuse, diffracted through an increasingly complex, prismatic structure of socio-economic forces and levels of governance. The result is a hollowing out of the state and in this case the European Union but probably also gradually India even if the state maintains the monopoly over the means of violence over a given territory this gives space to a plethora of actors and institutions – not least financial capital - capable of influencing foreign policy and social change in Asia, EU member-states and the world.[[3]](#footnote-3) Transnational issues – or what sometimes is termed nontraditional security threats - including climate change, terrorism, cyber-warfare, pandemics, rush to secure energy and resource supplies, and difficulties in sustaining multilateral focus in trade and on economic issues through the completion of the Doha Round. All open up the foreign policy field and would, ideally speaking, denote a myriad of actors and influences from formal organizations such as transnational corporations to advocacy networks and think tanks ‘epistemic communities’ (networks of individuals and/or organizations based on authoritative claims to consensual knowledge). In the end, this blurring of the levels of ‘sovereignty’ and ‘non-intervention’ sanctioned by socio-political conflicts – internal and external to the state – concerns the classic problem in international political economy: ‘Who gets what, when, where, and how’. These changes are apparent in both India and even more so in the EU where people-to-people relations appear to be in better shape than India-EU and direct government bilateral relations. There are a whole variety of NGOs, civil society and trade union links and dialogues and collaborations across the two entities in many cases running counter to official policies and suggesting another agenda. These activities do not only occur as a backdrop of official EU-India Summits or ASEM activities but are independent and may increasingly be seen as inter-regional lobbying and pressures on the conduct of official bilateral relations.

Resistance against the FTA has not only come from INGOs such as Oxfam, Médecins Sans Frontières as well as Unitaid but also a great number of popular and independent civil society based organizations like AEPF challenge the neo-liberal trait of the FTA. These attempts to resist and influence foreign policy and diplomatic relations between India and the EU are not new but illustrate the need to rethink the equation and context and especially it challenges the norm-based official rhetoric as hypocritical and filled with double-standards. Resistance has been fierce as well India in from trade unions and civil society groups but also from a broad specter of business and private companies like vendors and small traders who stand to lose from the conclusion of the trade agreement.

To be fair there has also been substantial progress on strengthening people-to-people contacts through the EU’s India window of the Erasmus Mundus scholarship programme, scientific and technical cooperation, trade exchanges and two-way investment and EU assistance through partnerships with some Indian states and use of EU’s funds for supporting Indian government’s programmes on health and education (Abhyankar 2009: 400).

**Does India need Europe?**

India’s economic relationship with the EU is not free of problems. Despite the intent of the FTA is to enhance trade, investment and create jobs there are many serious structural problems with the implementation in the domestic context and it cannot in itself be seen as building-block in the ongoing partnership relation between Delhi and Brussels. Even if the FTA may be viewed as a step forward of the partnership in the near future the development of an effective strategic partnership cannot be made conditional on the successful negotiation and implementation of the FTA (Peral 2012: 9)

The EU has a strategic partnership with China and six other partners including the United States while in the case of India there is only a Joint Action plan. It seems that the United States has been more successful in its pursuit of a robust foreign diplomacy focusing on security while “the EU has made little attempt to address India’s new concerns in the changing international environment in stark contrast to the United States which has sought to take full advantage of the opportunities presented by India’s necessarily changed relationship with the Soviet Union and its major successor state Russia” (Allen 2012).

Clearly, the EU sees the strategic partnerships as reinforcing multi-polarity, a perceived cardinal pillar of the international system. Some major items still omitted from the India-EU strategic partnerships are (Abhyankar 2009: 401):

1. acknowledging India’s centrality and regional role in south Asia; it ignores India’s equally important relations with ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), north, west, central and east Asia;

2. the area of defence/military cooperation do not fi nd a mention even though India has the third largest active army in the world and the largest paramilitary force numbering 1 million. Th e acknowledgement

of India as a non-NPT (Non-Proliferation Treaty) nuclear power and one of the largest importers of defence material would positively promote cooperation and exchanges in this sector;

3. despite India’s strong interest in combating counter terrorism, cooperation in this sector has still to develop;

4. mention of cooperation in non-proliferation given India’s impeccable record in this area would spur civil nuclear cooperation at the EU level.

One explanation for these omissions is that foreign policy priorities in the EU never followed the template of neo-functionalism but were rather based on inter-governmentalist logics. Today foreign policy has returned to nationalist government priorities and does no longer take any precedence not only because of the financial crisis in the Eurozone but also because of sharp divisions among member-states over key issues such as support to Arab dictatorships before and after the Arab Spring, the divided stand on the Anglo-Saxon invasion of Iraq and quite recently the Security Council resolution on the establishment of a no-fly zone over Libya and Palestine’s successful bid for UNESCO membership. A long-term analyst of European affairs notes that the perception of the EU by the BRICs including India has significantly changed. “Whereas vibrant Indian public opinion has always tended to be more critical about the ability of an aging Europe to retain a competitive edge vis-à-vis the emerging economies, and even more so about its willingness to set aside national special interests and member states prerogatives for a coherent EU foreign policy, similar sentiments were less openly voiced in China before the unfolding of the sovereign debt crisis” (Muenchow-Pohl 2012a). A typical description characterizes the EU as “a strange creature [that] defies easy and simple classification. It is unique, with attributes of a state but it is not a state […] [it is] a multifaceted actor” (Bava 2005 cf Novotny 2012: 98).

The negative impact of the Eurozone crisis on China’s and India’s growth potential may result in a further reduction of EUs importance in global affairs. The changed balance was highlighted by “the unsuccessful attempts to persuade Beijing to buy into the European Financial Stability Fund set up to bail out faltering eurozone members” (Muenchow-Pohl 2012a).

Transatlantic relations are still important but because of the inability and unwillingness of Brussels and the most important European member-states to act or think strategically vis-à-vis the outside world the EU’s supposed insertion into the global governance structures has been fading. In fact, the EU may be perceived to be in accelerating decline (Muenchow-Pohl 2012b: 4). With Obama’s foreign policy shift towards the Pacific it seems that Europe is gradually being marginalized in world affairs. The world has changed, and this implies that the transatlantic partnership is becoming less important. According to Meunier,”the evolution of NATO is a case in point: nobody would invent it today if it did not already exist. It is not clear what purpose it fulfills, what security dilemma it responds to, or how it surpasses other, competing international security fora. Whereas the Americans pushed hard for EU and NATO expansion, a policy that ran through both Clinton’s and Bush’s presidencies, this now appears to have been taken off the table. Instead we now have the realist ‘reset’ with Russia” (Meunier 2010: 16 cf Ifantis and Ioannis Galariotis 2012: 66) and probably a new attempt to incorporate India in containing Chinese expansion. The question is whether the new American strategy “Pivot to Asia” has any real substance. In fact, India is the only country mentioned by name as a vital partner and this further raises the question how it impacts the Sino-Indian relationship and furthermore whether we are observing a real geo-political and geo-economic shift in gravity from the West to the East. This would imply a weakening of the European sphere of influence whether in the institutionalized form of the European Union or NATO as the prime Atlantic security organization (Schmidt 2012).

Like in India there has been a lot of hype about the EU becoming a new superpower but the reality is that although several initiatives have been taken to add a political and a security dimension it remains essentially an ‘economic giant but a military dwarf’. It is doubtful whether the EU will be able to develop “the capabilities” and “competences” “necessary to fully exert itself on most political and security matters (Muenchow-Pohl 2012b: 1).

The EU is increasingly ignored by the United States and divided by the attention of the BRICs. In this way it may be argued that Brazil, Russia, India and China’s only real concern about dealing with a united EU arises when their interests are directly affected by EU policies or when there is a perceived opportunity to divide the European Union from the United States (Allen 2012). This is illuminated in a paper published by EU external affairs journal where the author tried to establish the EU’s place in India’s Foreign and Security Policy. He concluded that whilst India was seeking “a new pattern of strategic dialogues” (Novotny 2011:105) only the US is regarded as a “central factor in India’s foreign and security policy” with the EU, unlike the US not sharing a common strategic interest either globally or, of greatest interest to the Delhi, regionally. However, this conclusion may appear premature as it excludes the increasing accommodation between India and China.

In a nutshell, the envisioned political operation between Delhi and Brussels still hasn’t progressed much past political dialogue, not exactly what Europe had in mind when they talked about strategic partnership. The EU is at the moment largely perceived as a political-economic grouping that has hardly any strategic vision and perspective with regards to the character and scope of its “strategic partnership” with India (Jain 2008). The EU‐India strategic partnership is overshadowed by the India–US-China strategic triangular relationships which tend to focus on economic, political and security issues of more immediate interest to India (Schmidt 2012).

**Some concluding remarks**

The Eurozone crisis has changed the potential for a unified foreign policy and sharply added to the skeptical perception in Delhi of a Europe which does not present a united front vis-à-vis India. The India–EU relationship has been determined by the national interests or preferences of its member states which are reflected in the lack of trust and shared interests between the two strategic partners.

The paper has given a number of reasons why the strategic partnership has not improved. Although the two entities share core values such as democracy, multiculturalism and a federal structure – albeit a hybrid one in the case of the EU – these values have not been of great help when it comes to real-politics. Even the tone and language in negotiations is being heavily criticized from both sides and reflect both historical animosities and the lack of shared interests. The norms-based approach to foreign policy looks fine on paper but in reality it is the hardcore neo-realist interests of key member states in the EU England, France, Italy and Germany that matter in Delhi and not Brussels. EU Council President Herman Van Rompuy summed up the task at hand for the EU: “Until now we had strategic partners. Now we also need a strategy” (Cf Muenchow-Pohl 2012b: 15) .

Besides the unresolved relationship to Pakistan and domestic conflicts it is the strategic triangle between India, the United States and China which in the coming years ahead will play the most significant role in India’s security strategy and foreign policy in general.

A successful FTA may enhance the possibilities for a closer strategic partnership in the future but that would imply member states in the EU should transmit foreign policy authority to Brussels and on the other hand the lack of political will in Delhi reflects entrenched interests and deep-rooted skepticism among key players who are involved in foreign policy-making. These considerations reflect the divergent geo-political and geo-economic interests and different regional ambitions and the present perception of a Europe in decline.

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2. This section is based on a slightly revised version of a presentation made at the IV International Conference, India: Emerging Economic Power – Quest for EU and World Economic Order at University of Hyderabad., India, 2-4 November 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This part is based on a Presentation at Madras Institute of Development Studies, Chennai, India, 1 November 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)