

Indo-Europe: A Strategic Response to US-China Rivalry and Eurasian Instability

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Abstract

The current evolving international order, marked by increasing US-China rivalry and resulting instability in the Eurasian region, has compelled both middle and regional powers to seek alternative strategic frameworks to protect their interests. In this context, the emerging strategic alignment between India and Europe is playing a crucial geopolitical role in navigating the new power balance and systemic uncertainty. The strengthening political, economic, technological, and security ties between India and Europe offer a vital pragmatic approach to maintaining a rules-based international order while reducing over-reliance on any single major power. This crucial partnership is driven by shared concerns over supply-chain vulnerabilities, coercive economic practices, maritime and national security, and the erosion of multilateral norms, particularly in the Indo-Pacific and Eurasian regions. The closer engagement between India and Europe not only transcends the US-China rivalry but also enhances strategic autonomy by diversifying defence cooperation, technology access, and diplomatic partnerships. For Europe, it offers an opportunity to expand its strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific, manage risks arising from Eurasian conflicts, and balance relations with both Washington and Beijing. This cooperation is also relevant amidst Russia's aggressive behaviour towards Europe, disruptions in energy security, and unbalanced connectivity projects in Eurasia. By promoting aspects of connectivity, digital governance, climate cooperation, and maritime security, India and Europe can act as a stabilizing bridge between the Indo-Pacific and Europe. This study argues that the India-Europe alignment is not directed against any power but rather serves as a strategic hedge aimed at fostering resilience, stability, and a multipolar balance. This highlights the potential of India and Europe to form a flexible and inclusive framework capable of mitigating great power rivalry and contributing to long-term Eurasian stability.

Keywords: India–EU Partnership, Defence and Strategic Cooperation, Strategic Autonomy, Balancing China, Connectivity Corridors, Multipolar Order; Eurasian Stability.

Introduction

Geopolitical Context

In geopolitics, power cannot be exercised in isolation, as no state possesses all the resources, capabilities, or strategic advantages required to secure its national interests independently. The uneven distribution of economic resources, technology, energy, markets, and strategic geography compels states to engage with one another through partnerships, alliances, and institutional arrangements. Consequently, international relations emerge not merely from cooperation but from calculated interactions shaped by national interest, relative power, and mutual dependence. Within this framework, states pursue external relationships to compensate for domestic limitations, enhance strategic leverage,

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and navigate an interconnected global system where influence is increasingly derived from networks rather than self-sufficiency alone.

As the global order undergoes transformation, power is no longer exercised solely through military dominance but increasingly through control over connectivity, supply chains, and strategic corridors. The disruption caused by US–China rivalry and the resurgence of geopolitical fault lines across Eurasia have exposed the vulnerabilities of existing economic and security architectures. The Indo-Europe initiative reflects an emerging geo-economic and strategic response aimed at enhancing connectivity, resilience, and autonomy across two of the world's most dynamic regions.

The changing global order, in which the United States, under Donald Trump's leadership, is pursuing an "America First" policy and moving towards closer ties with China, contrary to European concerns, is creating persistent instability and fear of Russia throughout Europe. As competition among major powers intensifies and traditional security frameworks weaken, middle powers are increasingly seeking flexible and diverse partnerships. In this context, the emergence of the Indo-European region as a strategic area reflects a shared effort by India and European countries to navigate geopolitical uncertainty and maintain strategic autonomy, stability, and a rules-based international order.

- **The Changing Global Power Structure:** The current international order is undergoing a profound transformation, characterized by a relative decline in unipolarity and the rise of a fragmented multipolar system. Post-Cold War, the growing rivalry between the United States and China has replaced Russia as the central axis of global geopolitics, shaping diplomatic alignments, security arrangements, trade patterns, and defence strategies worldwide. This rivalry extends beyond economic competition to encompass technology, military modernization, maritime security, and ideological influence, particularly in the Indo-Pacific and Eurasian regions. As global institutions prove increasingly unable to effectively manage these tensions, states and regions are rapidly seeking alternative strategic partnerships to safeguard their autonomy and interests.

In the contemporary international environment, state behaviour is largely shaped by pragmatic calculations of interest, capability, and long-term sustainability. As power becomes more diffused and uncertainty increases, countries tend to prioritize flexibility over rigid alignments, engaging with multiple partners simultaneously to protect their economic and strategic interests. Cooperation is pursued where tangible benefits exist, while partnerships are continuously reassessed in response to changing global conditions. India's growing engagement with Europe fits within this broader pattern. By strengthening economic, technological, and strategic ties with European countries, India seeks to expand trade opportunities, access advanced innovation ecosystems, and enhance its global economic standing. This diversification of partnerships allows India to reduce excessive dependence on any single major power, preserve strategic autonomy, and respond effectively to the complexities of a transforming international order. Such an approach is both natural and necessary for states operating in an increasingly competitive and fragmented global system. The current international order is undergoing a profound transformation, characterized by a relative decline in unipolarity and the rise of a fragmented multipolar system. Post-Cold War, the growing rivalry between the United States and China has replaced Russia as the central axis of global geopolitics, shaping diplomatic alignments, security arrangements, trade patterns, and defence strategies worldwide. This rivalry extends beyond economic competition to encompass technology, military modernization, maritime security, and ideological influence, particularly in the Indo-Pacific and Eurasian regions. As global institutions prove increasingly unable to effectively manage these tensions, states and regions are rapidly seeking alternative strategic partnerships to safeguard their autonomy and interests.

- **US-China Rivalry and Strategic Polarization:** The US-China competition has led to strategic polarization, forcing many countries to navigate between competing pressures for cooperation and alignment. Competition over supply chains, semiconductor technologies, digital infrastructure, and maritime routes has created vulnerabilities for middle powers that depend on stable global connectivity. In this environment, rigid bloc politics risk undermining economic stability and diplomatic flexibility. Both India and European nations face the challenge of balancing relations with Washington and Beijing while simultaneously preserving their strategic autonomy. This has encouraged the pursuit of diversified partnerships that reduce dependence on any single power centre.

- **Eurasian Instability and Security Uncertainty:** Eurasia has emerged as a key region of instability, shaped by conflicts, power transitions, and contested connectivity projects. The Russia-Ukraine conflict, tensions in West Asia, instability in Central Asia, and strategic competition over transportation corridors and energy routes have disrupted traditional security and economic networks. China's growing influence through connectivity initiatives and infrastructure investments has further reshaped the geopolitical landscape, raising concerns about debt dependence, strategic control over critical assets, and political influence. These developments have increased uncertainty for both European and Asian countries that rely on Eurasian stability for trade and energy security.
- **The Emergence of the India-Europe Strategic Space:** Against this backdrop, India and Europe have emerged as a strategic space connecting the Indo-Pacific to Europe through political dialogue, economic cooperation, and security collaboration. This reflects a shared interest in maintaining open sea lanes, resilient supply chains, and rules-based connectivity across Eurasia. Rather than forming a rigid alliance, India and Europe represent a flexible framework that promotes strategic autonomy, a multipolar balance, and regional stability. By strengthening India-Europe cooperation, this geopolitical space offers a constructive response to great power rivalry and Eurasian instability, contributing to a more balanced and resilient international order.

Strategic Autonomy and Connectivity

- **The Concept of Strategic Autonomy:** Strategic autonomy means that states can make independent political, economic, and security decisions without excessive dependence on external powers. In the current international environment, where competition among major powers is intensifying, the need for strategic autonomy to protect national interests has become paramount. For India, this concept has historically been rooted in the definition of non-alignment and has evolved into a flexible, multi-aligned approach. In Europe, strategic autonomy reflects the desire to reduce over-reliance on external countries for defence, energy, and critical technologies, while simultaneously maintaining a commitment to multilateral cooperation.
- **Strategic autonomy in a competitive global order:** The escalating US-China rivalry has increased strategic pressure on middle and regional powers. Trade disruptions, technology restrictions, and economic coercion have exposed vulnerabilities stemming from concentrated supply chains and limited partnerships. In response, India and Europe are striving to diversify their strategic engagements and strengthen internal capabilities. In this sense, strategic autonomy does not mean isolation, but rather the freedom to cooperate with multiple partners while maintaining freedom of decision-making in a polarized global order.
- **The Role of Connectivity in Enhancing Autonomy:** Connectivity is a crucial enabler of strategic autonomy. This includes physical infrastructure such as ports, highways, railways, and maritime routes, as well as digital, energy, and institutional networks. Reliable and diversified connectivity reduces dependence on any single route or country, thereby increasing economic resilience and mobility. For India and Europe, secure maritime corridors in the Indian Ocean and stable Eurasian transport routes have become critically important for trade, energy security, and strategic resilience.
- **The Geopolitics of Connectivity:** In recent years, connectivity has emerged as a strategic tool rather than purely an economic instrument. Competitive infrastructure and corridor projects in Eurasia have heightened concerns about excessive reliance on debt, disproportionate and unilateral control over strategic assets, and political influence. As a result, India and Europe are placing greater emphasis on adhering to principles of transparency, sustainability, and respect for sovereignty in connectivity initiatives. This approach ensures that connectivity aims to strengthen long-term stability and support autonomous policy choices, rather than create new strategic dependencies.
- **Digital and Technological Connectivity:** Beyond physical infrastructure, digital and technological connectivity has rapidly gained strategic importance. Reliance on external providers for digital networks, data management, and emerging technologies can compromise security and economic competitiveness. Enhanced cooperation between India and Europe in

digital governance, innovation, and technology standards helps safeguard strategic interests while promoting inclusive growth.

- **Strategic Autonomy and Connectivity as Complementary Pillars:** Strategic autonomy and connectivity reinforce each other. Strategic autonomy grants a nation the freedom to engage selectively in global affairs, while robust and secure connectivity ensures access, resilience, and influence. Together, they enable India and Europe to respond to great power rivalry and regional instability in a balanced and pragmatic manner, contributing to a stable, open, and multipolar international order.

Connectivity Corridors and Strategic Tools

Today, the importance of connectivity corridors extends beyond mere transportation or trade routes; they are increasingly crucial for projecting geopolitical influence and power. These corridors, spanning land, sea, energy pipelines, digital networks, and logistics chains, are shaping a strategic architecture that connects Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. Amidst the growing US-China rivalry, these corridors are not only connecting countries economically but also encouraging them to pursue strategic autonomy, enhance resilience, and diversify partnerships. This trend demonstrates that connectivity corridors have become avenues for both cooperation and competition across Eurasia and beyond. An analysis of current circumstances reveals that global trade has historically depended not only on economic efficiency but also, and perhaps more significantly, on power dynamics and control over transit routes. As countries build and compete over connectivity routes, they are also competing over who will set the rules of trade and transit. For example, the South Caucasus remains a key crossroads of competing connectivity interests due to its geographical position linking East and West, which has intensified strategic competition among powers seeking to influence Eurasian corridors. In Central Asia, new Eurasian transport corridors are providing Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and other countries with economic and political stability, integrating them into robust transit networks.

Some Major Connectivity Corridor Initiatives

- **India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)**

The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) has been launched as a major connectivity initiative aimed at connecting South Asia, the Arabian Peninsula, and Europe through a multimodal transportation network of ports, railways, and maritime links.



Source- <https://pwonlyias.com/editorial-analysis/india-middle-east-europe-imec/>

This project is being advanced with the support of India, the European Union, key European countries, Gulf partners, and the United States. Its purpose is to diversify trade routes and mitigate vulnerabilities associated with choke points like the Suez Canal in the event of disruptions or conflicts, as witnessed during the Red Sea disruptions in 2023-24. It is projected to reduce transit time for goods between India and Europe by up to 40% and logistics costs by approximately 30%. IMEC is more than just an economic corridor; it is a strategic response to supply chain risks. It reflects India and Europe's intention to build robust infrastructure that reduces over-reliance on contested or unstable routes and supports various sectors, from manufacturing to energy.

- **China's Led Corridors and the Expansion of the BRI**

China is deeply integrating connectivity into its foreign policy, a prime example being the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which it is expanding and transforming into a high-quality, multidimensional connectivity network. This includes rail corridors, maritime links, and digital and e-commerce cooperation.

Official Chinese statements reveal ongoing plans to integrate railway, road, and maritime routes into a comprehensive Eurasian network. This includes strengthening the China-Europe Railway Express and expanding the new international land-sea trade corridor. Strategically, this reflects Beijing's ambition to establish itself as a central hub in economic centres across Eurasia through logistics and transportation infrastructure, enabling it to leverage economic dependence and geopolitical influence whenever it chooses.

- **Alternative Transport Corridors: INSTC and Middle Corridor Strategies**

Other major corridors, such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), aim to connect India to Russia and Europe via Iran and Central Asia, serving as an alternative to existing maritime routes. Although the INSTC predates more recent initiatives, its relevance remains. It has the potential to reshape Eurasian trade relations by significantly reducing transit times and costs. Furthermore, new land rail links connecting China to Iran and beyond offer non-maritime alternatives. These reduce reliance on vulnerable sea lanes and Western surveillance. Such corridors are increasingly being described in strategic analyses not only as infrastructure for trade but also as tools for circumventing sanctions and diversifying geopolitical influence.

Balancing China and Managing Competition

- **Great-Power Competition and Shifting Alliances**

Today's geopolitical landscape is profoundly shaped by the escalating strategic rivalry between the United States and China, the effects of which are felt across Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. China's rise as an economic and military power has impacted global governance, supply chains, technology standards, and regional power dynamics. Beijing has established a vast network of ports, railways, energy grids, and digital infrastructure across Eurasia through its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), placing itself at the centre of the regional connectivity architecture. This has sparked considerable concern in several European capitals, Washington, and New Delhi. Many nations perceive certain aspects of China's strategy as disruptive, potentially undermining the rules-based international order. Currently, both India and Europe are attempting to manage this competition without provoking a direct confrontation with China. The goal is not to "contain" China, but rather to strategically avoid excessive dependence, ensure diversified partnerships, and maintain a multipolar balance. This is driven by the desire to prevent any single power from unilaterally dictating trade terms, standards, or regional arrangements.

- **India-Europe Strategic Expansion: "The Mother of All Deals"**

A pivotal moment in this balancing act came when India and the EU announced a free trade agreement, dubbed "the mother of all deals." It was finalized on January 27, 2026. This historic treaty between India and the European Union hailed by leaders and economic experts as a transformative economic and strategic agreement brings together a market of nearly 2 billion people and accounts for roughly a quarter of global GDP.



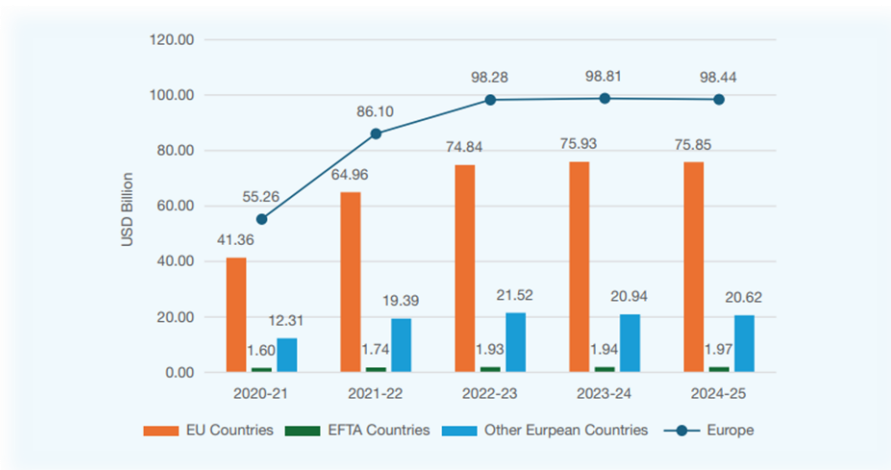
Source-<https://conven.org/indonesia/news>

The agreement, referred to as "the mother of all deals," is designed to dramatically reduce tariffs on a wide range of goods, from Indian textiles and engineering products to European automobiles, pharmaceuticals, and machinery. It also includes frameworks for deeper cooperation in services,

regulatory alignment, and mobility for students and skilled workers. Importantly, this economic milestone is complemented by a robust security and defence cooperation framework, establishing annual dialogues on issues such as maritime security, cybersecurity, and counter-terrorism. The India-EU FTA sends a collective strategic signal that both sides are prepared to diversify beyond traditional blocs, reduce dependence on US and China-centric systems, and build a resilient strategic network based on democratic, rules-based norms. This diversification strengthens Europe's ability to balance between Washington and Beijing, while providing India with an alternative to the China-centric economic order.

Defence and Strategic Cooperations

Defence and strategic cooperation between India and Europe has reached a new and elevated phase in recent years, encompassing institutional frameworks, landmark agreements, and growing military-industrial collaboration. This aligns perfectly with broader geopolitical shifts and shared security interests. During the 16th India-EU Summit in January 2026, India and the European Union signed a comprehensive security and defence partnership, expanding cooperation on maritime security, cyber defence, counter-terrorism, hybrid and emerging threats, space security, and critical infrastructure protection.



India's Export to EU, EFTA and other European Countries

Source- Ministry of Commerce

It also establishes a structured annual security and defence dialogue and thematic exchanges to address shared challenges amidst global instability. This partnership, alongside the historic India-EU Free Trade Agreement, hailed as the "mother of all deals," not only deepens economic ties but also integrates defence cooperation into a broader strategic agenda, linking trade, mobility, and security within a unified framework. Leaders from both sides emphasized that these developments strengthen democratic partnerships and the rules-based international order, enhancing resilience against coercive practices and rising geopolitical tensions. European defence cooperation with India today extends beyond high-level frameworks to concrete military-industrial integration. Leading European firms like Airbus and Dassault Aviation are partnering with Indian industry to establish production lines in India for transport aircraft and components for Rafale fighter jets under India's "Make in India" initiative. The collaboration with Germany's ThyssenKrupp Marine Systems (TKMS) under Project-75(l) demonstrates ambitions for co-development in conventional submarine manufacturing. This industrial cooperation not only enhances India's defence manufacturing capabilities but also provides European companies access to one of the world's fastest-growing defence markets. This also strengthens bilateral defence cooperation and strategic partnerships with key European Union member states. For example, India and Germany recently agreed to expand defence and security ties in several areas, including joint exercises, training, logistics support, and new technology exchanges, with proposals for a joint production roadmap underscoring mutual trust and capacity building. Germany's involvement includes deeper cooperation on submarine capabilities, counter-UAV systems, and military exercises such as MILAN and TARANG SHAKTI, reflecting a shared commitment to interoperable forces.

Challenges and Opportunities

The evolving India-Europe strategic partnership presents a complex landscape of challenges and opportunities shaped by global power dynamics, regional instability, and growing competition with China. A major challenge lies in differing strategic priorities and threat perceptions, as India's security concerns are primarily focused on China and South Asia, while Europe is deeply engaged with Russia, Eastern Europe, and internal security issues. Institutional hurdles within the European Union, including slow consensus-based decision-making processes and regulatory obstacles, often lead to delays in the implementation of defence and strategic initiatives. Disparities in defence procurement systems, export control regimes, and technology-sharing norms further constrain the pace of defence industrial cooperation. Furthermore, Europe's significant economic dependence on China creates strategic caution, complicating efforts to adopt a unified and assertive approach to counterbalance Beijing. Ongoing instability in Eurasia and West Asia, coupled with disruptions to maritime routes and supply chains, also poses risks to long-term connectivity and security cooperation. Despite these challenges, the opportunities presented by India-Europe cooperation are significant. The growing convergence around the concept of strategic autonomy provides a strong normative and political basis for cooperation beyond traditional alliances. The recently concluded India-EU Free Trade Agreement, described as the "mother of all deals," has opened new avenues for defence industrial partnerships, technology transfer, and resilient supply chains. Enhanced cooperation in maritime security, cyber defence, space security, and emerging technologies offers new opportunities to increase interoperability and collective resilience. Connectivity initiatives such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) provide an opportunity to promote transparent, sustainable, and rules-based infrastructure as an alternative to coercive connectivity models. Rather than an alliance, Indo-Europe represents a pragmatic framework for strategic diversification and shared resilience. By combining India's regional security role with Europe's technological and institutional strengths, India-Europe cooperation has the potential to practically manage competition with China, while also contributing to a stable, multipolar international order.

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