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# EU AND INDIA 2024 ELECTIONS:

## WHAT NEXT FOR THEIR RELATIONSHIP?

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*The 2024 elections in India and the EU are particularly significant but the outcome of these elections is unlikely to derail the growing mutual strategic interest that underpins EU-India relations. What this election cycle can do, however, is provide a fresh start in how both parties express the expectations and limitations of their bilateral relationship.*

*The EU and India share common concerns about the need to guarantee security and economic prosperity in a volatile global environment. The EU is coming to terms with being ‘at war’ with Russia while India sees China as its biggest threat. Both face the challenge of economic dependency on China. Additionally, the EU and India seek a ‘middle path’ to navigate the opposing poles of China and the U.S., aiming to secure their strategic autonomy, which India terms “multi-alignment” and EU refers to as “strategic interdependence.”*

*To deepen and sustain their relationship in the long-term, strategic alignment alone is not enough. Key, micro-level steps are advancing the EU-India relationship based on shared interests. However, each partner must also understand where the other is coming from in terms of worldviews and aspirations. Both the EU and India must acknowledge where their strategic interests can best align within their relationship and work around their respective normative claims.*

## INTRODUCTION

The results of India's general elections have just been announced, after six weeks of voting and an estimated 960 million Indians having cast their ballots: the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) will most likely form the new government. Very soon, the outcome of the European Parliament elections will be known too, revealing the 400 EU citizens who will have a stronger influence on Brussels politics.

While a consolidation of right-wing and populist politics is expected in Europe, this is unlikely to derail EU-India relations based on the pragmatic and increasingly strategic nature of the relationship. This continuity is desirable in the short- and mid-term. However, both partners must seek to better align their normative stances in order to deepen their relationship and enable it to endure on a solid footing. Failing to do so will mean that differences in approach towards a desired international order and how to achieve it will continue to mushroom.

New Delhi means business: it has a sense of purpose and strategic potential. Brussels must adequately acknowledge it and, in turn, clearly articulate its own aspirations and red lines. The 2024 elections provide the necessary opportunity to establish better means of communication between the EU and India.

## THE LIKELY OUTCOME

The need for security, economic prosperity, and combatting disinformation amidst a volatile global environment remain common concerns for both the EU and India. In the case of the EU, [radical right-wing parties and Eurosceptic populist groups are likely to take space away from centrist groups](#), eroding the influence of coalitions formed by socialists, liberals, and the green parties. This will likely deepen the sense of liberal democracy being under threat, stemming

not only from external interference but also from domestic political forces. It may also condition the EU's agenda on environment and migration.

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A degree of continuity, however, is foreseeable: the European People Party's (EPP) group is [expected to occupy the highest number of seats within the European Parliament](#). Ursula von der Leyen remains the most likely candidate to continue as President of the European Commission, although her acquiescence around potential future pacts with the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) has drawn criticism from centrists. Meanwhile, Kaja Kallas, Prime Minister of Estonia and a staunch critic of Putin, is the favourite to assume the post of High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP) later this year, underscoring the EU's priority of containing Russia and supporting Ukraine.

The EU is coming to terms with being 'at war' with Russia – even while grappling with profound domestic challenges such as high cost of living, low economic growth, and serious migration issues. In addition, European powers face intense competition at the high table of international politics, competition that questions their historical privileged status amid tectonic power shifts in the international order.

[As predicted by Indian polls](#), Prime Minister Modi from the BJP – leading party within the contesting NDA – has secured a third term in office, albeit with a surprise: the loss of the BJP's majority in Parliament. Therefore, it is likely that the BJP will have to temper down its Hindutva nationalist and



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populist agenda. Modi's centrality to the BJP was evident from the front page of the BJP Manifesto titled "[Modi ki Guarantee](#)."

The Manifesto begins by highlighting the success of the BJP's decade-long welfare schemes, anti-corruption measures, and infrastructure development. According to the Prime Minister's party, it is thanks to these efforts that India is now set to become a developed economy by 2047, a hundred years after the country's independence. These constitute key symbolic aspirations that cater to a Hindutva nationalist agenda, much like the consecration ceremony of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya and India's growing international status, which the party attributes to India's civilizational character.

However, despite this rosy picture, [a survey by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies \(CSDS\)](#) in Delhi did reflect concerns among the Indian electorate regarding issues such as unemployment rates and inflation of staple foods. These concerns have affected the election outcome, particularly in the crucial Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, usually an electoral bastion of the BJP [which it has lost to the Samajwadi Party \(SP\), part of the opposition coalition](#), the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA), in this election round.

For INDIA, these past elections are key to India's secular future after a decade of reaffirmation of a Hindutva agenda. The promise to create a Uniform Civil Code (UCC), already referred to in the 2019 BJP manifesto, constitutes another example of this agenda. Modi's push for self-reliance schemes – such as Make in India, Digital India, Skills India or Production-Linked Incentives (PLIs) – [have come a long way among industry and mid-tier politics](#). Yet, concerns remain regarding the impact of

these initiatives on addressing day-to-day issues of concern to the Indian public, as the election results have shown.

## NAVIGATING A VOLATILE GEO-POLITICAL SCENARIO

The fact that BJP's election promises in India included securing a permanent seat for the country at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is indicative of New Delhi's global aspirations. For the EU electorate, particularly the Eastern European and Baltic Member States, Russia's war in Ukraine has brought home concerns of insecurity along the bloc's borders, as well as the dependence on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) for security guarantees while the EU builds up its own defence industry. Foreign policy concerns are increasingly intertwined with electoral politics, both in India and the EU.

The EU's current threat perception of Russia can be equated to that of India's view of China in that both pose an existential menace. Additionally, sustaining an antagonised relationship with either power comes with domestic implications, such as energy security concerns in the case of Russia for the EU and fears of technological take-over in the case of China for India. In fact, both are overly dependent on China and the desire to change this has brought the EU and India closer together geopolitically, despite differences in approach compounded by diverging policies towards Beijing among EU Member States.

On the other hand, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and in particular India's acquiescence to it, has caused friction in the EU-India relationship. This has not had major implications for New Delhi, however. India is keen to keep its bilateral relationship

with Russia in a status quo since they share strategic views on how the international system should be organised – particularly regarding spheres of influence and multipolarity – but [differ in their approach to the international rules-based order](#). Moreover, the EU-India relationship has too much potential to let it stall, particularly in key issue areas of mutual interest beyond trade, as explained later.

Amidst an increasingly contested world order, with China and the U.S. pulling towards opposing poles, other powers are seeking a convenient middle path. Both India and the EU are looking to secure their strategic autonomy, termed as “multi-alignment” by India and “strategic interdependence” in the case of the EU. For India, strategic autonomy means that on fundamental issues such as national security, trade, or climate change, New Delhi will engage with all those that it can work with based on its interests; however it will be cautious, and [partner with the great powers rather than take sides or ally with them](#). In the case of the EU, strategic autonomy was originally tied to gaining independence in the security and defence realms, and [over time it has acquired a stronger geopolitical connotation](#). Currently, strategic interdependence encapsulates well how the EU needs to [engage with a more fluid network of partners and coalitions](#) focused on shared interests, rather than on an ideological or a values-based approach, in order to achieve its desired autonomy.

In the case of New Delhi, it has scaled up its strategic rapprochement with the U.S. while seeking to contain China, with whom it still has a strong economic dependency. Beijing remains India’s largest trading partner in goods, [with a growing trade deficit in favour of the former](#). From a historical stand-point,

however, the U.S.-India relationship has been far from linear. Today it is on an upward spiral, despite those within the Indian establishment who are wary of becoming overly dependent on Washington. The India-U.S. Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET), launched jointly by both countries in May 2022, [has deepened the U.S.-India Comprehensive Global and Strategic Partnership](#).

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Washington is keen to reduce India’s dependence on Russia’s defence industry, while Modi would like to transform India from being the world’s largest weapons importer into an arms producer, [thus acquiescing to India-U.S.-led co-production of advanced defence systems](#). India’s membership in the U.S.-led Minerals Security Partnership (MSP), following Modi’s official visit to the U.S. in June 2023, is indicative of the new heights of current U.S.-India collaboration. This is unlikely to change even if Donald Trump comes to power later this year.

The EU’s transatlantic relationship with the U.S. comes naturally, partly based on the solid economic foundation between the two, with [U.S. being the EU’s largest trade partner](#) when taking goods, services and investments into account. Both actors are facing key shared challenges, most obviously China and Russia. The U.S. and the EU have differed in their degree of antagonization towards China – with the U.S. initially adopting a “de-coupling” stance against a European “de-risking” approach. However, they have created a solid common front against Russia under NATO auspices and

with support from the Biden Administration. The implications of the U.S. election results for EU-U.S. relations, particularly U.S. support for NATO and Ukraine in its war with Russia, remain to be seen if Donald Trump is elected.

## **DIVERGENT VIEWS ON WORLD ORDER AND THE NORMATIVE DIMENSION**

India expects to achieve pole status by 2050 based on its predicted GDP, [with the fastest projected GDP growth rates](#) among G20 countries for FY 2024 and FY 2025. Yet, New Delhi is not only seeking to consolidate its gains in material power but also its international normative influence. There is a growing sentiment among the Indian leadership, sustained by wide public support, that India deserves a bigger role at the high table of international politics. [During the inauguration of the new Indian Parliament building in May 2023](#), Modi referred to it as “the temple of our democracy that gives a message of India’s resolution to the world... When India moves forward, the world moves forward.” His statement reflects an aspiration for India to play a more prominent role in shaping global affairs and driving change on the international stage.

India’s quest for international influence has two dimensions. The first is its leadership role vis-à-vis the Global South, exemplified by New Delhi’s hosting of the first Voice of the Global South Summit in January of 2023. India’s G20 Presidency has been widely regarded as a success, culminating with the African Union’s (AU) inclusion as a new member. This has further legitimised New Delhi’s aspirations to combine economic development with a role as global “norm setter” rather than a “norm taker.” India, or Bharat (a term increasingly in vogue within Modi’s regime) defines itself as a “civilizational state” keen to adopt the role of Vishwaguru (teacher of the world) or Vishwabhandu (friend of the world) in order

to deliver global good.

The second dimension of India’s normative aspirations has a vindictive aspect that is unlikely to change, regardless of potential future changes in leadership. The Indian establishment firmly believes that the post-1945 order is idiosyncratic and unfair towards the broader developing and emerging world, with the exception of China and Russia, both of whom enjoy a permanent seat at the UNSC. This sentiment extends to International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and crucial issues such as global debt restructuring and climate change financing, as evidenced by India’s strong focus on these topics during its G20 Presidency. While New Delhi subscribes to multilateralism and the rule of law, it sees the post-1945 international institutions as co-opted by the traditional powers. India’s claims are not unwarranted, [considering that it currently has 3.4% of world GDP and 17.8% of world population, yet only 2% UN staff representation](#). In contrast, [France enjoys 3.7% UN staff representation with 2.7% of world GDP and 0.9% of world population](#).

The EU, as an international actor, has been much warier of subscribing to the need for UN and IFI reforms since its leading powers enjoy a good footing in these institutions, with the exception of Germany’s historical claims for a permanent seat at the UNSC. However, EU Member States would typically address such claims on a bilateral level. The EU is currently at a critical juncture regarding its own role and aspirations in an increasingly contested international order. It is grappling to leave behind its historical emphasis on a “[normative power Europe](#)” while seeking to mature into a geo-political union, a concept first officially coined as a “[geo-political Commission](#)” by Ursula von der Leyen in November 2019. The inherent tension between the normative and geo-political aspects currently poses an existential dilemma for the EU against an

uncertain and volatile environment.

Like India, the EU is also realising the need to act more pragmatically in a growing à la carte world, where partnerships mushroom against shared interests in particular issue areas despite existing differences in other realms. New Delhi has been particularly adept at sailing the grey waters between the like-minded and non-like-minded camps, demonstrating that certain actors do not easily fit into either artificially-constructed camp. India has skilfully engaged with a wide spectrum of minilateral groupings that range from the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) to the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO) or the BRICS+, based on pragmatic multi-alignment and a good understanding of its strategic potential.<sup>1</sup>

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## CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR EU-INDIA RELATIONS?

The recent general elections have brought relative political continuity in India and may, to some extent, bring continuity in the EU. However, they come against a background of rising competition and uncertainty. Despite, or perhaps because of this, the EU and India have the will to raise the strategic dimension of their bilateral relationship as their Strategic Partnership Agreement: Roadmap to 2025 signed in 2020 shows. Trade data for 2022-23 reinforces this: [the EU has become India's largest trading partner](#), ahead of the U.S. While India's trade volume is not as significant for the EU, remaining its [10th largest trading partner in goods](#), important steps have been taken since Ursula von der Leyen's

attendance as Chief Guest at the Raisina Dialogue in April 2022.

One notable development is the resumption of parallel negotiations between India and the EU on a Free Trade Agreement (FTA), an Investment Protection Agreement, and a Geographical Indications Agreement. Solid progress has been made in Investment Protection and Geographical Indications, although FTA negotiations are not quite progressing as expected. Historically, the EU-India bilateral relationship has had a strong emphasis on the economic dimension, particularly on trade. It is time to diversify and explore [a wider range of issue areas where both partners share strategic interests](#), such as in securing supply chains and enhancing connectivity, digital transformation and critical technologies, maritime security, and climate change and energy security. Launched in 2022, the Trade and Technology Council (TTC) partly encompasses this new array of issue areas. Both India and the EU are now also part of the US-led MSP and signatories to IMEC, pointing towards shared strategic ambitions where interests align.

To deepen and sustain the relationship in the long-term, strategic alignment is not enough. Proof of this has been the very divergent reactions around the EU's Carbon-Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) regulation, which officially entered into application in its transitional phase on October 1, 2023. Within the EU, [CBAM is seen as a means to restore fair competition, while outside, it has been challenged by several developing countries, including India](#), that perceive it as protectionism. On the ground, cooperation is already taking place between the EU and India in climate modeling and biotechnology as part of of the TTC, such as in recycling waste to hydrogen, electric mobility, and dealing

with plastic litter. The European Investment Bank (EIB) has also pledged [EUR 1 billion in support for India's National Green Hydrogen Mission](#), which aims to tap into a nascent Indian green hydrogen ecosystem and renewable energy projects.

This demonstrates how key steps are being taken on a micro-level to advance the EU-India relationship based on shared strategic interests. Yet, the normative dimension requires greater investment: each partner must better understand the other's worldviews and normative claims. India's self-portrayal as "the world's biggest democracy" has begun to raise eyebrows in certain European capitals though no consequences thus far. India is a rising power with high aspirations while the EU is a traditional power facing an existential crisis. Historically, Brussels has emphasised liberal democracy and human rights as imperatives in its relationship with third parties, and, in contrast, New Delhi is more likely to coalesce on economic openness, the need to guarantee territorial integrity, and counter-terrorism issues. Nevertheless, both actors recognize [multilateralism as essential for achieving cooperation](#).

As noted by [the current Minister of External Affairs, S. Jaishankar, in his most recent book](#), "once we agree that India does matter, the issue that naturally follows is what it takes to ensure it matters more." The EU must publicly articulate a similar sense of purpose. Both partners must acknowledge where their strategic interests can best align [or not] and work to achieve, at minimum, a normative acquiescence vis-à-vis each other. This election cycle can provide a fresh start in how the EU and India express the aspirations and limitations of their bilateral relationship. Going forward, future governments in Delhi and in Brussels must establish more open and fluid lines of communication and actively engage by considering both micro and macro perspectives.

## ENDNOTES

1 BRICS+ has resulted from the official expansion of the grouping in January 2024 beyond its original members – Brazil, China, India, Russia and South Africa - to include Ethiopia, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

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