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A strategic partnership: security cooperation between India and the European Union

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Abstract:

The EU's relationship with India dates back to 1994, when the first cooperation agreement between the then European Community and the Asian country was signed. Since then, there has been a shift between a certain distancing, if not criticism from Europe, for example, on the occasion of India's nuclear tests, and a recent mutual interest that has been brewing since 2004, when the relationship was elevated to the category of strategic partnership with similar objectives regarding the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific and common commercial interests. In the security and defence field, this interest in fluid cooperation is manifested in three aspects: a high-demand Indian market and companies and projects from several European countries involved; the perception of the systemic risk that China poses for both the European Union and India, which includes collaborating in joint military manoeuvres; and finally, the uncertainty surrounding a new US attitude, where a possible protectionist policy towards both India and the European Union could exponentially increase the chances of building a mutually beneficial alliance in the security and defence sector.

Keywords:

European Union, India, Security, Defence, P artnership

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Introduction

India, as a more than incipient global power, participates in and influences various multilateral international fora ranging from the G20 to the BRICS+. Apart from its historic foreign policy of non-alignment under any bloc and being a champion of what we might now call the global south, India's participation in these international fora also serves its national interests. In the decade since Prime Minister Modi came to power in 2014, India's foreign and security policy vision has shifted towards what Samir Saran and Shashi Tharoor aptly defined as the 'Indian imperative'[1] , that is, the safeguarding at all times of Indian interests in international affairs, be they in the Asian giant's neighbourhood or in its relationship with the West. A position that the current Indian foreign minister, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, similarly advocates in his book on India's main foreign policy thrusts[2] . This is also illustrated by Modi's numerous trips and meetings, which have increased since last year's elections, from Southeast Asian states to high-level meetings with the leaders of China, the US, Japan, Russia and EU countries.

India is today an attractive ally for the European Union (EU) in many areas, from economic relations, with more than 95 billion euros in the exchange of common goods and services, to the fight against terrorism and piracy in the Indo-Pacific, to cultural exchange, collaboration in the field of technology and infrastructure construction, with European investment of almost 4 billion euros in various projects[3] . This good harmony was not always the case. After independence in 1947, India was suspicious of the former colonial power, the United Kingdom, but also of other countries that still had possessions in the country, such as France and Portugal, while for many Europeans the country symbolised the exotic and was a huge democracy in the making, but also troubled, with economic problems and high poverty rates. This vision changed and India gradually established itself as a country with undeniable cultural appeal and immense possibilities for growth. Seventy-five years after independence, this perception has changed dramatically. As a recent report by the Australian Lowy Institute highlighted, India has displaced Japan as the third largest power in the Indo-Pacific, behind only the United States and China, and

[1] THAROOR, Shashi and SARAN, Samir. *The New World Disorder And The Indian Imperative*. Aleph Book, 2020. ISBN 978-8194233732.
[2] JAISHANKAR, Subrahmanyam. *The India Way. Strategies for an Uncertain World*. HarperCollins, 2022. ISBN 978-9394407213.
[3] EUROPEAN COMMISSION. *EU-India Strategic Partnership 2024*. Available at: India - European Commission (accessed 9/1/2025).

with enormous growth potential, which offers an enormous attraction to an EU eager to find partners in a scenario where its presence has been rather limited until now[4].

In 1994, a first cooperation agreement was signed between the then European Community and India on tariffs on mutual imports and exports[5] , but it would be a decade before the EU would again become interested in strengthening relations and formalising new agreements with India, finally becoming strategic partners in multiple areas since 2004 and signing a joint action plan a year later, to redevelop bilateral relations in the economic sphere, an area where, however, attempts to reach a mutually beneficial free trade agreement have stalled, with negotiations dating back to 2013, a year before the election of Narendra Modi as Indian prime minister[6] . India already had very important economic ties with major European powers such as the UK, France and Germany before 2004. Between 2000 and 2014, cumulative investment inflows from EU countries amounted to some 55 billion euros, 26 % of the country's total, and Indian companies had invested 54 billion euros in Europe since 2003[7].

It should also be noted that the interests of the two partners were not always identical. There were divergences, for example, in terms of respect for human rights, which have gradually been diluted, generating considerable momentum in the last decade on issues such as cooperation in the fight against climate change, maritime security and cybersecurity[8] . Indeed, while there is a shared commitment to democratic values in both areas, the EU continues to show some reservations and concerns on issues such as freedom of the press or the question of minorities, which in turn has not been welcomed by the Indian government, which last summer recalled that the EU itself is not a perfect democratic space[9] . However, these differences do not have a critical impact on the momentum of current bilateral relations, as global geopolitical realities make common

[4] PATTON, Susannah; SATO, Jack & LEMAHIEU, Hervé. *Asia Power Index 2024. Key Findings Report*. Lowy Institute, 2024. Available at: lowy-institute-2024-asia-power-index-key-findings-report.pdf (accessed 9/1/2025).
[5] EUROPEAN COMMISSION. *Cooperation Agreement between the European Community and the Republic of India on Partnership and Development.* 27 August 1994. Available in: EUR-Lex - 21994A0827(01) - EN - EUR-Lex (accessed 9/1/2024).
[6] SARKARNDIAN, Bhaswati. "India and the European Union: A Relationship Re-energised", *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, Vol. 18, 3-4. 2023, 209-22.
[7] SACHDEVA, Gulshan. "EU-China and EU-India: A Tale of Two Strategic Partnerships", *Strategic Analysis*, 38:4. 2024, 427-431.
[8] SÁNCHEZ-CACICEDO, Amaia (ed.) "EU-India relations: gaining strategic traction?", *Chaillot Paper,* n.º 181. February 2024. Available at: CP_181.pdf (accessed 9/1/2024).
[9] MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS OF INDIA. *Official Spokesperson's response to media queries on the European Parliament discussing developments in Manipur*. 13 July 2023. Available at: Official Spokesperson's response to media queries on the European Parliament discussing developments in Manipur (accessed 10/1/2025).

interests far more important than disagreements, especially in the areas of security and the defence market.

Thus, over the last two decades, the services sector has become the most important and fastest growing sector of the world economy. It is also the area in which the EU and India have reached the most agreements, such as the Comprehensive Trade and Investment Agreement (BTIA), which has served to enable other agreements in different areas, such as sustainable development, connectivity, digitalisation, the fight against climate change, energy and respect for democratic and human rights worldwide[10] . However, the EU is a regional bloc of 27 countries, although the EU's Indo-Pacific Partnership Strategy 2021 sets out the desire to have a common policy towards its partners in the region, including India in particular[11] , bilateral agreements with several countries, especially France, are also a reality in the booming defence market, where India has become a major investor[12].

If any agreement has given a boost to the India-EU relationship, it has been the launch of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), the project to build a huge rail and maritime transport network connecting India with Europe, passing through the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Israel. The Memorandum of Understanding was signed on 9 September 2023 during the G20 summit in New Delhi, currently paralysed by the conflict in the Middle East, but which will allow for a smoother relationship and easier access to each other's markets, including, of course, defence and security[13].

Converging visions of strategic autonomy

India and the EU share democratic principles, multilateralism and international law. These values create a solid normative basis for cooperation. Both also seek strategic autonomy: India as an emerging great power navigating a multipolar world and the EU in its quest for greater global influence outside traditional alliances. India's concept of strategic

[10] EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT. *Relations between the European Union and India*. January 2024. Available at: Relations between the European Union and India (accessed 9/1/2025).
[11] EUROPEAN COMMISSION. *The EU strategy for Indo-Pacific cooperation*. 16 September 2021. Available at: jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf (accessed 9/1/2025).
[12] INDIA. *The Military Balance*, 124 (1). 2024, pp. 265-271. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/04597222.2024.2298593 (accessed 10/1/2025).

[13] GHANEM, Dalia & SÁNCHEZ CACICEDO, Amaia. "From hype to horizon: what the EU needs to know to bring IMEC to life", *European Union Institute for Security Studies*. 10 June 2024. Available at: Brief_2024-10_IMEC.pdf (accessed 9/1/2025).

autonomy is heavily influenced by its colonial history and post-independence foreign policy posture of non-alignment. India's strategic autonomy in the 21st century focuses on retaining sovereignty in defence, technology, trade and foreign relations. India would not like to be overly dependent on any one nation, such as the US, Russia or China, and instead aims for balanced partnerships with global powers. The EU is moving towards strategic autonomy to minimise dependence on the US, especially in defence and security, and to achieve economic and technological sovereignty in a context of increasing global competition. Events such as Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic and other geopolitical tensions (e.g. the US-China rivalry) have accentuated the EU's vulnerabilities and called for self-reliance in key areas such as energy security, defence and digital technologies.

This mutual aspiration opens the space for a partnership that is neither subordinated to external powers nor constrained by ideological divisions. The EU's quest for strategic autonomy is manifested in the European Defence Fund (EDF) and the Strategic Compass, aimed at enhancing its defence capabilities and operational readiness. India's strategic autonomy, inherited from its non-aligned past, has matured into a more pragmatic diplomacy in building its various partnerships. The alignment of perspectives allows it to collaborate on security issues without compromising its independence.

Donald Trump's re-election as US president may provide the much-needed impetus for the two powers to cooperate closely on a path that may not necessarily go through Washington to Brussels. The EU and India are sufficiently equipped to take this bilateral relationship further.

Security cooperation to date

In 2004, India and the EU upgraded the relationship to a 'strategic partnership', based on the belief that they shared values of democracy, pluralism and multilateralism[14] . This period marked the beginning of incipient security cooperation. The counter-terrorism dialogue was initiated between India and the EU in 2005 and became an important forum for sharing and exchanging intelligence, best practices and strategies in the fight against

[14] EUROPEAN COMMISSION. *EU-India Strategic Partnership 2024*. *See* note 3.

terrorism[15] . This cooperation gained prominence in the aftermath of the 2008 Mumbai attacks, which highlighted the importance of global efforts in the fight against terrorism. Cooperative actions against piracy in the Gulf of Aden began in the late 2000s and highlighted the growing awareness of common maritime security interests.

Since 2010, security collaboration between India and the EU has diversified, driven by emerging global issues such as cyber threats, climate change and maritime conflicts. The s Operation AtalantaEU', its counter-piracy initiative in the Indian Ocean, has shown substantial cooperation with India[16] . Indian and European naval forces collaborated in information sharing and conducted cooperative operations to safeguard critical sea lanes. The establishment of the India-EU Maritime Security Dialogue at 2021 formalised this partnership[17] . In 2015, India and the EU also began collaborating on enhancing cyber capabilities and data security. This was joined by the EU-India Connectivity Partnership (2021), which emphasises secure digital infrastructure and new technologies such as artificial intelligence and 5G[18] . Likewise, cooperative efforts under the International Solar Alliance (ISA), jointly established by India with EU support for climate change adaptation programmes, highlighted their mutual dedication to merging environmental and security issues.

Main lines of security cooperation

The Indo-Pacific region, comprising crucial sea lines of communication and economic choke points, is the key focus of India-EU security relations. Both actors prioritise the rules-based system, freedom of navigation and the protection of sea lanes. *The EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy*, which was published in 2021[19] , is in line with India's SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) approach. During 2021, the EU also conducted counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden together with the Indian Navy[20] . In addition,

[15] TANEJA, Kabir. "A Contemporary Analysis of India-EU Cooperation in Counterterrorism", *Observer Research Foundation.* 11 August 2023. Available at: Issue Brief accessed 6/1/2025).
[16] "EU Naval Force in Operation ATLANTA". Available at: https://eunavfor.eu/ (accessed 6/1/2025).
[17] EXTERNAL ACTION OF THE EUROPEAN UNION. *Second EU-India Maritime Security Dialogue*. Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/second-eu-india-maritime-security-dialogue_en (accessed 6/1/2025).
[18] MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS, GOVERNMENT OF INDIA. *India-EU Connectivity Partnership*. Available at: https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/33854/IndiaEU_Connectivity_Partnership (accessed 6/1/2025).
[19] EXTERNAL ACTION OF THE EUROPEAN UNION. *EU-Indo Pacific Strategy*. Available at: https:(accessed 7/1/2025).
[20] LAHIRI, Saaz. "A Critical Analysis of the European Union's Key Maritime Security Engagements in The Indian Ocean", *National Maritime Foundation.* 17 April 2024. Available at: https:(accessed 7/1/2025).

the first India-EU Maritime Security Dialogue was held to explore ways and means of jointly addressing issues such as illegal fishing, trafficking and piracy. Other exercises, such as the India-EU Maritime Exercise (IEME) also enhance operational coordination .[21]

In an increasingly digitised world, cybersecurity has become a key concern for both India and the EU. Cyber-attacks, data breaches and the use of digital technologies for espionage pose substantial threats to national security and economic stability. India and the EU recognise the danger posed by state-sponsored cyber-attacks and non-state entities using cyberspace. Ensuring the security of critical infrastructure, safeguarding personal data and countering disinformation are objectives of both sides.

India has consistently fostered strong defence relations with several EU member states, especially in areas such as arms procurement, production collaboration and technology exchanges. The connections between these entities create a solid basis that the EU can use at the institutional level to enhance security cooperation and foster a more unified defence-industry partnership. By bringing defence collaborations together within a structured framework, rather than relying on separate national initiatives, the EU can reinforce its strategic independence while enhancing India's defence strengths.

India shares with France one of its strongest defence partnerships in Europe. France, as a leading military force in the EU, has been instrumental in enhancing India's defence capabilities. Over the past ten years, the defence partnership between India and France has grown significantly, especially with the acquisition of Rafale fighters. The 7.87 billion euro deal between India and France's Dassault Aviation for the acquisition of 36 Rafale *jets* has strengthened India's air capabilities and opened the door to future partnerships in military aviation[22] . France has played an important role in supporting India's naval defence, notably with the Scorpène class submarines, developed through Project-75 in partnership with the Naval Group[23] . These projects have not only improved India's defence preparedness, but have also enabled technology transfer, allowing India to

[21] GOVERNMENT OF INDIA. *Press Information Bureau*. Available at: https:(accessed 7/1/2025).

[22] "India, France ink € 7.87 billion agreement for 36 Rafales", *The Hindu*. 17 November 2021. Available at: https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/India-France-conclude-Rafale-deal/article55936333.ece (accessed 15/1/2025).

[23] "Commissioning of INS Vaghsheer, the sixth Kalvari class submarine built entirely in India based on the Scorpene design", *Naval Group*. Available at: https://www.naval-group.com/en/commissioning-ins-vaghsheer-sixth-kalvari-class-submarine-entirely-made-india-based-scorpener#:~:text=Naval%20Group%20remains%20fully%20committed,robust%20Indian%20naval%20industrial%20ecosystem (accessed 17/1/2025).

strengthen its domestic defence production through the *Make in India* initiative. In addition to its defence equipment, France has actively participated in joint naval exercises such as the Varuna series, showing a growing commitment to maritime security, especially in the Indo-Pacific region. The EU has a great opportunity to build on the strong Indo-French defence partnership by fostering collaboration in defence production, engaging in joint research and initiating strategic dialogues.

Germany, one of Europe's leading defence players, has intensified its collaboration with India in recent years. Germany, which has typically focused on economic partnerships, is now taking significant steps to collaborate with India in defence, especially in the area of advanced submarine technology. Thyssenkrupp Marine Systems, a leading player in the defence sector, has entered into talks with India to collaborate on the development of advanced submarines through Project-75I[24] . This partnership has the potential to greatly strengthen India's naval capabilities. Germany seeks to partner with India not only in naval defence, but also in areas such as defence electronics, artillery systems and cyber defence. Germany's leading role in the European defence sector opens up opportunities for meaningful collaboration with India, especially through the EDF. This initiative fosters joint research and development in defence technology, paving the way for stronger partnerships. By fostering meaningful partnerships between Indian defence companies and European manufacturers, the EU can establish a collaborative space to develop innovative security technologies such as the development of AI for warfare, drone systems and cyber threat intelligence.

Italy has played a vital role in strengthening India's naval defence systems through significant defence cooperation. Italy's Leonardo, formerly known as Finmeccanica, has supplied India with state-of-the-art defence electronics, torpedoes and radar systems, strengthening India's maritime security framework[25] . The Indian Navy has procured a number of naval systems from Italian manufacturers, strengthening the defence partnership between the two nations. However, these interactions often seem more like transactions, lacking the depth of lasting partnerships. The EU's Permanent Structured

[24] "German-Indian JV emerges as sole contender for $5 billion India submarine deal", *Reuters*. Available at: https://www.reuters.com/markets/deals/german-indian-jv-emerges-sole-contender-5-billion-india-submarine-deal-2025-01-23/ (accessed 18/1/2025).
[25] "India, Italy open new chapter of defence ties; announce strategic partnership", *Deccan Herald*. Available at: https://www.deccanherald.com/india/india-italy-open-new-chapter-of-defence-ties-announce-strategic-partnership-1196544.html (accessed 18/1/2025).

Cooperation (PESCO) is a framework aimed at strengthening defence collaboration between member states. It represents an opportunity to engage India in European defence initiatives, fostering ongoing partnerships in areas such as naval defence, aerospace systems and missile technology.

Sweden is emerging as a potential defence ally of India, especially in the field of military aviation. Sweden's Saab Group has presented India with its Gripen fighter jets, a model of technology transfer under the *Make in India* initiative. In addition to its contributions to aviation, Sweden has played a key role in the collaborative development of advanced radars, surveillance systems and defence communications networks. With its strong focus on innovation and technology research, Sweden has the potential to significantly enhance India's defence research ecosystem. The European Defence Industrial Development Programme (EDIDP) provides funding for collaborative industrial projects within the EU, and has the potential to foster closer cooperation between India and the EU in the field of defence innovation. This approach allows Indian defence companies to collaborate with European manufacturers in the development of key technologies such as hypersonic weapons, defence satellite systems and advanced cyber warfare tools.

Spain, while not as committed to India's military industry as France or Germany, has been steadily increasing its defence cooperation with India in recent years. Spanish military companies have shown a desire to collaborate with India in sectors such as naval defence, aerospace and cybersecurity. Spain's involvement in the European military framework, especially through its participation in EU-led security projects, offers an additional avenue for formalising defence collaboration between India and the EU.

One of the main areas of military cooperation between India and Spain is shipbuilding and marine defence. Navantia, a leading Spanish naval defence company , has been in talks with Indian shipyards on future joint ventures. Navantia has proposed its S-80 Plus class submarines for India's Project-75I, an initiative designed to enhance the Indian Navy's submarine capabilities[26] . This may represent a substantial advance in military-industrial collaboration, as Spain's naval engineering expertise complements India's

[26] "In race for key Navy deal, Spanish firm displays S-80 AIP submarine", *Indian Express*. Available at: https://indianexpress.com/article/india/in-race-for-key-navy-deal-spanish-firm-displays-s-80-aip-submarine-9703014/ (accessed 22/1/2025).

growing defence manufacturing capabilities under the *Make in India* project. In addition, Spain has participated in the design of the upcoming Landing Platforms (LPD), amphibious combat ships essential for maritime security and disaster relief missions.

Spain has also shown interest in the Indian aeronautics industry. Airbus Defence and Space, a division of the European aerospace giant, in collaboration with Indian companies, has been involved in projects related to military transport aircraft and satellite systems. Airbus, as a leading European aerospace corporation with a significant presence in Spain, has also been involved in India's defence modernisation initiatives, specifically through the C-295 military transport aircraft programme. The C-295 agreement, signed in 2021, includes a collaboration between Airbus and India's Tata Group for local production of the aircraft, representing a significant step forward in Spain's defence industrial partnership with India. The partnership enhances India's air mobility capabilities and promotes domestic military manufacturing, a key aspect of India's strategic independence[27].

For its part, Spain, through its National Institute of Cybersecurity (INCIBE), has been involved in cyber defence projects at the EU level in the cyber security sector. Given India's growing interest in cyber security, mitigating cyber threats and strengthening digital defence infrastructure, there is an opportunity for Spain and India to work on cooperative cyber intelligence operations, cyber threat assessments and capacity building projects. Spain's growing participation in the cyber security regulations of the EU makes it an important partner in formalising Indo-European cyber defence cooperation.

Spain's participation in EU security missions and frameworks, including PESCO, the EDF and the Coordinated Maritime Presences (CMP) programme, offers new institutional opportunities for military partnership with India. Given Spain's strong naval capabilities and dedication to maritime security, it could enhance a structured Indo-Pacific security framework between India and the EU, facilitating better coordination in maritime patrols, humanitarian assistance and counter-piracy initiatives.

Despite these extensive bilateral interactions, the lack of a formal institutional framework at the EU level has limited the full potential of mutual military collaboration. One method

[27] "Pioneering 'Make in India' in aerospace with the Airbus C295", *Airbus*. Available at: https://www.airbus.com/en/newsroom/stories/2024-11-pioneering-make-in-india-in-aerospace-with-the-airbus-c295 (accessed 22/1/2025).

of addressing this disparity would be to include India in the EDF, as it supports joint military initiatives among EU member states. By providing India with access to EDF-supported initiatives, the EU can establish systematic collaboration in advancing military technology, facilitating cooperative research and development in areas such as AI-enhanced combat, cyber defence and space security. Given India's significant defence modernisation initiatives and its emphasis on achieving self-sufficiency in military manufacturing, such a partnership would be advantageous for both sides.

The establishment of a formal military partnership between India and the EU could have several benefits, including greater Indo-European institutional interaction that would facilitate access to advanced European military technology, thereby reducing dependence on conventional suppliers such as Russia and the US. This would allow India to enhance its military manufacturing capabilities through joint ventures and technology-sharing agreements. Enhanced security collaboration between the EU and India would strengthen the EU's security position in the Indo-Pacific, allowing it to exert greater strategic influence in the area. In light of the EU's growing fears of Chinese aggression and regional instability, a strengthened military partnership with India would allow the EU to diversify its security engagement beyond conventional transatlantic alliances.

On the other hand, the combination of India's human resources and the development of new defence companies offers great prospects for industrial cooperation. This favours both India and the EU, as India seeks to diversify its imports and introduce new defence technologies, while the EU can rely on India for the mass production of such defence equipment. A multipolar world driven by global institutions is in the interests of both India and the EU. Together, a strong partnership between the two key multilateral actors will help shape global security norms and institutions. It will also allow the EU to work on its rules-based normative order, where security also encompasses climate security and disaster management.

Conclusions: Perspective of cooperation

Two decades have passed since the EU signed the first partnership agreements with India. These were partly boosted by the signing in 2003, a year earlier, of another strategic agreement with China, the other Asian giant. Although this cooperation came to an end after a few years, cooperation with India continues to develop, the interest being mainly economic, with increased trade and investment, but increasingly extending to other areas, as we have mentioned, despite some disagreements within the EU, such as the purchase and sale of Russian crude oil, as India did not join in condemning and sanctioning Russia after the outbreak of war in Ukraine in February 2022, disagreements that were soon resolved[28].

Indeed, until a few years ago, the EU was hardly a factor in India's foreign policy debates, while today they share common concerns about the need to ensure security and economic prosperity in a volatile global environment. While the EU sees Russia as the greatest threat, India sees China as its greatest and current risk, while both Europeans and Indians face the challenge of economic dependence on China. Thus, geopolitical interests overlap and both the EU and India seek balance in their relations with the world's two superpowers, China and the US, sharing the goal of ensuring their respective strategic autonomy.

In security and defence matters, beyond the defence industry, the EU seeks to deepen and maintain a solid relationship and strategic alignment with the main players in the Indo-Pacific such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, ASEAN and, of course, India, with a convergence of objectives, the main one being the perceived risk of China's presence and projection in the region, but not only that, as for example the fight against piracy and the security of maritime routes, so important for the economic balance in the Europe-Asia relationship, are other shared objectives. For this reason, the EU is increasingly assertive in its security policy in the Indo-Pacific, wanting to be present and to be an essential partner for powers directly involved, such as India.

[28] "India reveals the 'trick' to launder Russia's oil and resell it to Europe legally", *El Economista.es*. 17 May 2023. Available at: India reveals 'trick' to launder Russia's oil and resell it to Europe legally (accessed 9/1/2025).

It was 1998 when India concluded its Operation Shakti[29] in Pokhran, testing its nuclear weapons for the second time. The decision was not well received internationally, for example in the EU, and numerous sanctions were brought against India as a result. Most of India's economic and strategic partners were unwilling to listen to India's argument and its security concerns, leading to the 'nuclear taboo' and multiple problems for India[30] . Its most valuable foreign partner, Russia, also condemned these tests, yet it was France, a European power, that opened its doors to India and listened to its security concerns[31] . Since then, the strategic partnership between India and France has become one of the most important bilateral relationships of the 21st century. The Franco-German alliance has been the engine of the EU, but France has been a staunch advocate of strategic autonomy and the development of independent security capabilities that would allow the bloc to protect itself against any security threat[32].

The EU's and India's institutional framework and normative approach to its foreign policy posture pose a plethora of challenges to both actors. Moreover, both have different partners, which can influence their ties. This requires careful management of expectations and outcomes from both partners and the creation of strong institutional mechanisms to enhance engagement. The India-EU security partnership offers ample opportunities to create a benchmark for equitable and effective international partnerships in the 21st century.

Finally, the relationship between the new Trump administration's US and India is also very important, with an EU that is expectant in this regard. The election of Donald Trump as US president has also complicated a scenario in which he once declared that he would 'encourage' Russia to attack if NATO allies did not pay their bills[33] . This uncertainty means that the EU may rethink its security policy and look for new bilateral allies that can work to develop mutual security benefits, such as India. Undoubtedly, the US has its own interests and is also a competitor for the EU in terms of exports, which are very important

[29] "25 aniversary of Pokhran-II: India's journey to become a nuclear power", *Indian Express*. Available at: https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-history/25th-anniversary-pokhran-ii-8604356/ (accessed 23/1/2025).
[30] "What Is the Nuclear Taboo and Is Putin About to Break It?", *Union of Concerned Scientists*. Available at: https://blog.ucsusa.org/emacdonald/what-is-the-nuclear-taboo-and-is-putin-about-to-break-it/ (accessed 5/1/2025).
[31] SOOD, Rakesh. "How Delhi and Paris became friends," *Observer Research Foundation.* 27 August 2019. Available at: https://www.orfonline.org/research/how-delhi-and-paris-became-friends-54811 (accessed 5/1/2025).
[32] VOHRA, Anchal: ""Strategic Autonomy" Is a French Pipe Dream", *Foreign Policy.* 3 July 2023. Available at: https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/07/03/strategic-autonomy-is-a-french-pipe-dream/ (accessed 6/1/2025).
[33] "Trump says he would "encourage" Russia to attack NATO allies that don't pay their bills", *BBC*. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-68266447 (accessed 7/1/2025).

in the defence market where competition for juicy contracts is at its highest, or the relationship with NATO member states, where India does not have the same strategic partnership as, say, Japan, South Korea or Australia, all of which may play for or against further rapprochement or estrangement in Indo-European bilateral relations[34].

The geopolitical game between the US, the EU and India involves another key actor, China, not only from the perspective of the Sino-Indian border conflict, always pending fragile agreements, but also from President-elect Trump's China policy, as the trade war that may be unleashed in the form of tariffs is a warning to other potential rivals, including the EU and India itself, although both Trump and Modi have professed mutual affection and have already held two high-level meetings in 2019 and 2020, in Houston and Ahmedabad. The future of this three-way relationship between India, China and the US may lead to a further strengthening of the EU's relations with the former, including with regard to shared security and defence interests.

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[34] IWANEK, Krzysztof: "How can India cooperate with NATO?", *The Diplomat*. 3 June 2021. Available at: How Can India Cooperate With NATO? - The Diplomat (accessed 9/1/2025).