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# From Norms to Realpolitik

*Re-reading India-EU Relations  
in a Fragmenting Order*

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**Mohammed Amaan Asim**

MPhil in Development Studies  
mohammed.asim@sant.ox.ac.uk

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*‘Participating in military exercises, purchases of oil – all these are obstacles to our cooperation when it comes to deepening the ties. The question is whether we leave this void to be filled by somebody else or try to fill it ourselves’*

**Kaja Kallas**, Vice-President of the European Commission  
on the India-EU Strategic Partnership<sup>1</sup>

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The above quote is an apt summary of the rationale and logic that is defining the relationship between the European Union (EU) and India, in spite of the proverbial elephant in the room, Russia. The EU and India in 2025, are closer than ever in reaching a much-coveted Free Trade Agreement, and further enhancing their trade partnership. All while India continues to engage with Russia and maintain its stance of strategic autonomy on the Ukraine war.

The relationship between India and the EU has evolved from a lukewarm, underdeveloped engagement during the Cold War into a multifaceted strategic partnership today. Both sides are influential democracies with vast economies and accrues €120 billion in trade in goods annually.<sup>2</sup> Yet for decades, this partnership underperformed its potential and as argued by Khandekar, their relationship was “...well matched but with no spark of chemistry, the EU and India appear tied together in a loveless arranged marriage.”<sup>3</sup>

Historical factors like India’s non-alignment policy and closed economy, as well as Europe’s focus on its own integration and Cold War alliances, meant that early ties did not blossom fully. Since the 1990s, however, dramatic changes such as India’s economic liberalization, the fall of the USSR, and the formation of the EU has created new opportunities. Despite recurring political and security frictions, economic cooperation has steadily deepened. Indeed, trade has often triumphed over politics in India-EU relations, with pragmatism and mutual interest keeping the partnership on track.

This essay argues that in an increasingly volatile and dynamic global order, the EU is adapting its stance from a normative power that seeks relationships built on shared values and norms to a more pragmatic and transactional power. India is the proof-case of this pivot: despite differences over Russia, the relationship has thickened around the Trade & Technology Council, the rebooted Free Trade Agreement track, Indo-Pacific security cooperation, and green-tech investment. Brussels cloaks its pragmatism and realpolitik in the language of

values and norms. India as an established follower of non-alignment, or its rebranded version, of strategic autonomy is an ideal partner to see how trade and mutual benefit triumphs divergent worldviews on other matters.

The essay is structured in five sections broadly. First, a brief literature review to situate the essay in the broader debates on the changing nature of the European Union's engagement in the global arena and the EU relations with the Global South. The second outlines the historical foundations of India-EU relations, tracing how early normative distance gave way to pragmatic cooperation. The third section analyses three specific moments of tension- the 1998 nuclear tests, the 2014 Crimea crisis, and the 2022 Ukraine war, that reveal Europe's growing willingness to engage despite normative dissonance. The fourth section examines the 2025 strategic pivot, when Brussels explicitly embraced India as an indispensable partner despite its continued ties with Moscow. To contextualize this shift, the fifth section compares the EU's approach to Brazil and South Africa, both fellow adherents of India's policy of strategic autonomy. Analysed side by side, it demonstrates that India is not an anomaly but part of a broader European trend toward pragmatic engagement with the Global South. In doing so, the essay contributes to ongoing debates on the EU's international identity, arguing that India is the test case through which Europe's transition from normative to pragmatic power becomes most visible.

### **Literature Review: From Normative Power to Strategic Pragmatism**

The scholarly debate surrounding the EU's external identity has long been dominated by the notion of "normative power Europe," articulated by Ian Manners, who argued that the EU's external relations are animated not by coercive or military means but by the projection of norms such as democracy, human rights, and multilateralism.<sup>4</sup> This school of thought, enriched by authors such as Whitman and Tocci, portrayed the EU as a distinctive global actor which emphasised diffusion of norms through setting an example, or norm diffusion and promotion.<sup>5</sup> However, critical and realist IR literature such as Hyde-Price and Kagan have questioned whether the EU's behavior matched its normative rhetoric, suggesting instead that material interests and geopolitical imperatives often guide its actions.<sup>6</sup> This divergence between what the EU says and what it does has been termed "normative hypocrisy"<sup>7</sup> and has led to the emergence of a "principled pragmatism", a term which the EU has itself acknowledged and institutionalized as part of its 2016 Global Strategy on Foreign and

Security Policy.<sup>8</sup> Scholars like Tocci have suggested that the EU's increasing exposure to global instability has led it to embrace this more strongly with an approach that maintains rhetorical commitment to norms but operationalizes foreign policy through flexible, interest-based partnerships.<sup>9</sup>

This shift is particularly evident in the EU's dealings with large, autonomous democracies like India. Scholars such as Khandekar argue that India-EU ties have historically lacked strategic depth precisely because of their differing worldviews and normative disconnects.<sup>10</sup> While India champions "strategic autonomy", a rebranded continuation of its non-alignment doctrine, the EU initially approached India with expectations rooted in liberal convergence. This mismatch, as Jain & Sachdeva and Kienzle observe, created persistent frictions, particularly around issues such as nuclear non-proliferation, Russia, and human rights.<sup>11</sup>

India's insistence on maintaining relations with Russia during the Ukraine war, and the EU's decision to deepen trade and tech cooperation regardless, has become a key case study in this literature. Kienzle's earlier work on nuclear norms bending foreshadowed the trend: when engagement yields greater returns than exclusion, the EU adapts its normative stance.<sup>12</sup>

In summary, the literature traces an intellectual arc from normative power to pragmatic power, paralleling Europe's response to multipolarity and systemic uncertainty. What remains less examined is how this shift plays out in the EU's engagement with rising powers of the Global South that share democratic credentials but diverge strategically on security and alignment. By situating India-EU relations within this theoretical continuum, this essay bridges the gap between debates on the EU's evolving identity and the politics of strategic autonomy in the Global South. It argues that India is not merely an exception to the EU's normative project, but the most revealing case of its pragmatic transformation.

## **The Historical Evolution of India-EU Relations**

Post-India's independence under the Prime Ministership of Nehru, India adopted a policy of non-alignment and led the global alliance of non-aligned countries along with Egypt's Nasser, Yugoslavia's Tito, Ghana's Nkrumah and Indonesia's Sukarno. As the world broke into cold-war alignment, these newly independent countries found the policy as both a pragmatic and value-based decision. As Nehru explained it "[w]e have to steer a middle course not merely because of expediency but also because we consider it the right course".<sup>13</sup>

India viewed the initial formation of the European Economic Community under the Treaty of Rome with suspicion and fear. As noted by Jain, Nehru's fear with the formation of the EEC, revolved around three primary concerns. Firstly, the impact of the EEC on the process of decolonisation and the continued economic exploitation and entanglement of Eastern Europe's associated territories. The second revolved around trade, and the impact of a common market on the principles agreed under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). Thirdly, Nehru feared the economic cooperation would be 'coloured by military factors' in many parts of the world.<sup>14</sup> On the other end, for members of the EEC, India was less of a strategic concern in the EEC's formative years. Europe's strategic lens was trained on East-West confrontation, and South Asia was seen largely through a Cold War or post-colonial prism. As Jain further analyses "relations with India were of marginal interest for Brussels", with India viewed more as part of the Third World non-aligned bloc rather than as a key player in its own right.<sup>15</sup>

India's non-alignment principles were soon challenged with growing tensions with China and Pakistan in the 1960s which prompted India to recalibrate. This recalibration meant a stronger Soviet partnership, which was at odds with European policy. For instance, during the global criticism and condemnation of the USSR's brutal intervention into Hungary to thwart the revolution in 1956, India was the only democratic government to stay silent. India's non-alignment translated to India declining to support the initiatives of the United States. While Nehru's stance evolved over time it largely remained as a principled bystander who preferred non-interference. During the Prague Spring, India under Indira Gandhi had more firmly joined the Soviet bloc with the signing of an India-USSR defence cooperation agreement. As Jain argues, "until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, India's foreign and military closeness to Moscow only increased. This, in turn, meant New Delhi came to see its Central European policy as little more than a subset of its relationship with the Soviet Union".<sup>16</sup> These factors highlight the limited possibility of partnership on political and defence matters between India and Europe.

Despite this, India was one of the first countries to recognize the EEC, initiating diplomatic relations in 1963.<sup>17</sup> However, despite diplomatic relations, the economic engagement was spurred by Britain's entry into the EEC in 1973. India, concerned by the loss of its Commonwealth trade preferences, responded by signing a commercial cooperation agreement with the EEC in 1973.<sup>18</sup> Despite the limited engagement and wide gulf on political and security matters, India and the EU shared strong economic ties. This was driven largely



by India's ties on a bilateral basis with Western European countries. In 1984, Indian imports from the EC represented 23 per cent of its total imports, as compared to 10 per cent from the US, 7 per cent from Japan and 6 per cent from the former Soviet Union.<sup>19</sup> The bilateral trade remained skewed in favor of the EC mainly because of the protectionist policies that put a bar on entry of Indian products especially textiles.<sup>20</sup> This early history is a validation of the longer trend between India and Europe where trade is a constant feature that overrides other concerns of incompatibility on values or differences on security policy.

The early 1990s marked a turning point. Three pivotal changes created a more favorable setting for India-EU engagement. First, facing a balance-of-payments crisis, India undertook sweeping reforms to open its economy. Liberalization dramatically increased India's growth and integration into global trade, making it an attractive partner for major economies. The EU, now seeing India's market potential, grew more interested in robust economic ties. Second, the fall of the USSR in 1991 ended the Cold War strategic dynamic. India lost its superpower patron and began diversifying its foreign relations. Simultaneously, Western Europe, no longer constrained by East-West bipolarity, expanded its outreach to emerging powers. Thirdly, in 1993, the signing of the Maastricht Treaty created the European Union (EU), enhancing Europe's collective weight in global affairs. The newly formed EU sought to project itself as a global actor and identified India as a potential "strategic partner" early on.<sup>21</sup>

These shifts led to concrete advances in India-EU relations throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. A pivotal step was the 1994 EU-India Cooperation Agreement, which broadened the scope of engagement beyond trade to economic and development cooperation. This was accompanied by a Joint Political Statement, signaling a new level of dialogue and recognition of shared fundamentals of democracy and diversity.<sup>22</sup> For the first time, Brussels and New Delhi began holding regular ministerial meetings and political dialogues.

This early phase established a long-term pattern that would define India-EU interactions: normative and strategic distance coexisting with steady economic engagement. Even as political alignment remained elusive, trade relations provided a durable foundation, foreshadowing the EU's later tendency to privilege economic pragmatism over political harmony.

## Moments of Tension

### The 1998 Nuclear Tests - A Litmus Test for Relations

India in 1998 conducted nuclear tests which caused shockwaves around the world. The nuclear tests were an official endorsement of India's growing stature and arose out of multiple reasons including the insecurity over China, Pakistan's constant threat as well as relatively friendly international climate that would not react as sharply. The EU was divided in its response towards these tests. While some EU members including the Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark suspended bilateral aid to the country, France and the UK strongly resisted an EU-wide aid freeze and urged a more moderate response.<sup>23</sup> From India's perspective, these Western lectures seemed hypocritical and violative of its sovereignty. This episode revealed mutual trust deficits: Europe questioned India's commitment to global rules, and India resented Europe's sidelining of engagement over normative differences.

However, between the tests in 1998 and the signing of India and the US's civil nuclear deal and India's acceptance into the privileged club of nuclear states in 2008, the European Union came to accept India's emerging status and the inability to dictate terms. Kienzele's research particularly focuses on the acceptance of India's nuclear status as a way of bending international norms and leading to broad acceptance. A major driver apart from the acceptance of India's status as a democratic and responsible power, was the economic potential that was hard to ignore. While initial reactions to the test by certain EU members saw India as a rogue entity that defied the international order, in the years immediately after the tests, India and EU co-operation grew stronger.<sup>24</sup>

The episode demonstrated that Europe's normative condemnation of India's nuclearization ultimately gave way to acceptance shaped by economic and strategic calculus. The EU's gradual normalization of ties underscored a growing realization that engagement, not isolation, yields greater influence, a pragmatic instinct that would define later crises such as Crimea and Ukraine.

### The 1998 Nuclear Tests - A Litmus Test for Relations

The Russian invasion and annexation of Crimea, and the subsequent Indian abstention from condemnation and timid acceptance of Russia's position was a precursor to how the future of India- EU relations would develop vis-à-vis Russia. While Brussels expected India to stand up

as a responsible member of the international community, New Delhi chose to walk the tightrope. India abstained in the UN General Assembly vote on 27 March 2014 endorsing Ukraine's territorial integrity, and its public statements were deliberately muted.<sup>25</sup> For example, India's National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon acknowledged Russia had "legitimate interests" in Crimea.<sup>26</sup> While the Ministry of External Affairs pressed for a "dialogue" rather than naming Russia as aggressor, India's support along with China's was explicitly appreciated by Putin who thanked India for its reserve and objectivity.<sup>27</sup>

From the EU's vantage point, the annexation was a blatant violation of international law and European security norms. The EU institutions, including the European Parliament, were unequivocal in rejecting the referendum in Crimea and saw Moscow's action as an aggression. India judged that backing the West's line would carry risks to its defence and energy ties with Russia, and upset the balance it sought with China, where Russia remains an important hedge

But despite the discomfort, the India-EU relationship did not collapse. Europe consciously refrained from treating India as adversary; rather it switched to a more tactful mode. It adopted a policy of continuing trade and dialogue but quietly registering India's divergence on a key foreign policy axis. Analysts note that Europe recognized India's structural constraints and preferred to engage and influence rather than isolate.<sup>28</sup> In effect, the crisis accentuated the trade-and-economics anchor of India-EU ties: while politics diverged, commerce and institutional cooperation held up.

The Crimea episode laid bare the fault-lines in India-EU relations: shared values and norms were not enough to ensure alignment on geopolitics. India's choice demonstrated that interest often trumped values, and that strategic autonomy remains a live doctrine for New Delhi. Europe, for its part, realized that it must modulate its expectations of India: not as a club-member in Western alliance structures, but as a partner with its own agenda.

In the wake of Crimea, India's balanced stance triggered European unease but did not rupture the partnership. It did, however, sharpen the terms of engagement: India would be accepted as an autonomous actor whose foreign-policy choices sometimes diverged from Europe; meanwhile Europe adjusted from expecting alignment to seeking cooperation even amid difference. The Crimea crisis thus became an inflection point in Europe's external posture where normative expectations were quietly replaced by strategic tolerance. India's balancing act was not seen as betrayal but as a signal of its autonomous agency.



## 2022 Ukraine Crisis

When Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, India immediately adopted a neutral stance. Across multiple United Nations votes, India abstained rather than voting to condemn Russia.<sup>29</sup> India's statements appealed for cessation of violence and dialogue, without naming Russia as the aggressor.<sup>30</sup> This echoed its line from the 2014 Crimean invasion and stayed consistent with its friendship with Moscow. New Delhi also declined to join Western sanctions on Russia. In fact, as the war progressed, India dramatically increased its imports of discounted Russian oil, from 4 million tonnes in 2021-22 to over 87 million tonnes in 2024-25.<sup>31</sup> Since 2022, cheap Russian crude has saved India a cumulative 9 Billion USD aiding its economy but raising eyebrows in the West.<sup>32</sup> To Europe, India's behavior appeared as an evasion of the global effort to isolate Putin's regime. Further, as highlighted by senior EU officials, India's purchase of crude Russian oil was being shipped to Europe, as a refined product. India's role was crucial in circumventing sanctions and gaining from playing the role of an intermediary refiner.

India defended its neutrality as driven by its strategic interests and principles. Firstly, India wished to have continued access to critical military supplies from Russia. A 2021 analysis by defence experts, estimated that 85% of India's defence platforms are Russia dependent.<sup>33</sup> While diversification of India's defence supplies has been a priority, it is an ongoing process that is yet to see significant shifts. Secondly, ensuring energy security amid high oil prices is critical for India. Post the imposing of sanctions and the price cap on Russian oil in 2022, India replaced the EU as the largest purchaser of Russian crude oil.<sup>34</sup> India's energy demand is driven both by its consumption where it ranks third globally as well as the booming refinery business wherein crude oil is bought, refined and re-exported globally, including to the EU.<sup>35</sup> Third, India is keen to keep Russia engaged to prevent it from moving entirely into China's orbit. With China's increasing support and alignment with Pakistan, India's primary foe, maintaining amity with Russia is a top priority for India.

Overarching this pragmatic and realist understanding of India's support to Moscow is India's principle of strategic autonomy. India has attempted to play the role of peacemaker. On one hand, while India benefits from the global price cap on Russian oil it has also attempted to call for cessation of the war in cloaked terms. In both 2022 and 2024, Modi in his meetings with Putin has called for dialogue and peace to resolve the conflict.<sup>36</sup> A cue to India's balancing act

was visible in PM Modi's 2024 visit to Moscow which was followed up with visits to Kyiv and Warsaw. This was seen as New Delhi's approach to assuage Europe's concerns on its continued friendship with Russia.

In the early part of Russia's 2022 aggression, The EU was initially caught off-guard by India's equivocation. European officials had hoped that as a "like-minded democracy," India might lean toward condemning a clear violation of international law. Instead, as an EU analyst noted. In the early weeks of the war, there was a flurry of European diplomacy aimed at persuading India to harden its stance: the EU envoys in New Delhi, along with the Ukrainian ambassador, jointly met Indian officials to urge support for a UN resolution.<sup>37</sup> Despite these efforts, India persisted with neutrality, abstaining in the March 2, 2022 UNGA vote that condemned the invasion.

The EU had to calibrate its response. It could choose between isolating and penalising India for its ambivalence. Instead, the EU opted for persuasion and incentivization. Amidst the war, in April 2022, the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen visited India with a dual message: encourage India to reduce reliance on Russia and offer deeper EU partnership. The talks led to the announcement of an EU-India Trade and Technology Council (TTC), which is a format the EU had exclusively reserved for the US thus far, to boost cooperation in high-tech.<sup>38</sup> Von der Leyen's visit to New Delhi was preceded and followed by state visits by the British and French, both of whom pitched for a stronger defence partnership.<sup>[2]</sup> The concerted attempt by the West has been to veer India away from the dependence around Russia particularly in its defence procurement.

One of the most contentious issues became India's role in Russia's energy export chain. As the EU placed embargoes on Russian oil and refined fuels India became a key buyer of cheap Russian crude, refining it, and then exporting products (like diesel) to Europe, India was essentially acting as a backdoor for Russian oil to re-enter Europe.<sup>40</sup> This sparked frustration in Brussels. EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell publicly warned in May 2023 that "if diesel or gasoline is entering Europe... produced with Russian oil, that is certainly a circumvention of sanctions and member states have to act".<sup>41</sup> India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar retorted sharply that EU rules themselves allowed such "substantial transformation" and that India was simply buying lawful oil and selling lawful products.<sup>42</sup> This public spat revealed the tensions: the EU saw India as undercutting the spirit of its Russia sanctions, while India

retorted sharply at what it saw as Western attempts to police its trade. European Commission Vice-President Margrethe Vestager tried to smooth things by saying the EU would discuss the issue “with an extended hand and not a pointed finger”, acknowledging that alienating India would be counterproductive.<sup>43</sup>

The Ukraine war made visible the full extent of the EU’s recalibration. Despite India’s open defiance of sanctions and its booming oil trade with Russia, Brussels chose constructive engagement over confrontation, institutionalizing cooperation through the Trade and Technology Council. This moment crystallized the EU’s shift from a values-led to an interest-led foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific.

### **The 2025 Pivot**

Despite these frictions, the EU continued to drive its relationship with India forward realising engagement and interaction would yield more than isolation. In 2023, the long-stalled India-EU FTA talks were re-energized.<sup>44</sup> In February 2025, President von der Leyen’s address in India during her historic visit with the entire EU’s College of Commissioners laid bare the EU’s re-calibrated posture toward India. By declaring 2025 a “historic window of opportunity to build an indivisible partnership” the EU signalled that its engagement with India would no longer be anchored solely in normative affinity but in shared strategic and material interests.<sup>45</sup>

Analysts observed that the EU’s India agenda has “moved from broad, aspirational commitments toward a more concrete, action-oriented framework” and posited that Europe is adopting “a pragmatic approach rather than focusing on India’s ties with Russia.”<sup>46</sup> The acknowledgement that India continues to maintain deep economic and defence ties with Russia while the EU nevertheless pursues deeper engagement signals a willingness to tolerate divergence in favour of cooperation.

This evolving posture reflects three interlocking dynamics. First, Europe now elevates India as a geo-economic partner of structural importance not solely as a partner sharing a common worldview. By framing the partnership as indivisible, von der Leyen signalled that India is central to the EU’s own search for strategic autonomy. Second, the EU has sharpened its focus on concrete deliverables, like trade, technology, supply chains, green transition, thus prioritizing operational over rhetorical cooperation. Third, by refraining from conditioning cooperation on full political alignment with the West, the EU exhibits a more open posture toward strategic autonomy in its partners.

The visit was followed by the EU Commission's new comprehensive strategy for India built on five pillars - trade, green transition, digital, security, mobility. The strategy is the first to make explicit references to Russia. In one section, the strategy signals the EU's intent to "engage with India on all aspects of countering Russia's military aggression against Ukraine." It further states " In that context, the EU will continue exploring ways of preventing re-export of battlefield items of EU origin to Russia and sanctions circumvention, including through Russia's shadow fleet and other energy measures".<sup>47</sup>

The timing was notable – just as the EU announced this, India was holding joint military drills with Russia and Belarus near NATO's doorstep.<sup>48</sup> Yet the EU chose engagement, essentially reasoning that it has more to gain than to lose from deeper cooperation with India, given India's strategic importance in the Indo-Pacific and as the world's most populous country. This marked a mature recognition in Brussels that compartmentalizing the Russia issue might be necessary.

In parallel to Von der Leyen's visit in February 2025, Modi also visited France and held extensive talks with President Macron and concluded three agreements around civil nuclear energy.<sup>49</sup> This is a reflection of how alongside institutional ties with Brussels, New Delhi has long pursued intensive bilateral relationships with individual EU member states — most notably with France, but also with the United Kingdom, Germany and others. These one-to-one engagements that encompass defence procurement and co-production, energy cooperation, investment and technology partnerships give India additional strategic options for engagement rather than complete absence of a relationship. Bilateral deals move faster and can be calibrated to national interests in ways that multilateral EU processes cannot, enabling India to deepen defence-industrial and energy ties with select European capitals even while preserving strategic autonomy on issues such as Russia. Member-state diplomacy supplements and sometimes outpaces EU-level diplomacy.

To further contextualize the evolution of India-EU relations, it is instructive to examine how the European Union engages with other large, strategically autonomous democracies—specifically Brazil and South Africa. Like India, both countries are regional powers, members of BRICS, and active proponents of multipolarity. They also espouse foreign policy doctrines rooted in strategic autonomy, often adopting stances that diverge from the dominant Western consensus. Notably, both Brazil and South Africa were designated as EU strategic partners in 2007, echoing India's elevation to this status in 2004.



By 2025, the EU had internalized the logic of engagement amid divergence. India was no longer judged by its normative alignment but valued for its geo-economic and strategic complementarity. The decision to compartmentalize disagreements over Russia and democracy confirmed that Europe's external influence now rests on pragmatic coexistence rather than value convergence.

## **A Comparative View of other Strategically Autonomous Rising Powers**

### **Brazil-EU Relations: Strategic Calculations amid Normative Tensions**

Brazil's relationship with the EU exemplifies how economic interdependence and diplomatic institutionalization can endure despite political friction. As the EU's second-largest trading partner in Latin America and a major recipient of European foreign direct investment, Brazil remains central to the EU's strategic vision for the region. Bilateral trade is anchored in the exchange of agricultural exports for high-technology and industrial goods from Europe.<sup>50</sup>

The centerpiece of EU–Brazil economic engagement is the proposed EU–Mercosur trade agreement, negotiated over two decades and provisionally concluded in 2019. However, the deal's ratification has been stalled due to environmental concerns.<sup>51</sup> Several EU member states, notably France and Ireland, opposed ratification without stricter climate safeguards. This impasse epitomized the EU's internal tensions between its normative commitments such as environmental protection and geostrategic imperatives, including countering China's influence in Latin America.

With the return of President Lula da Silva in 2023 and his renewed commitment to environmental governance, negotiations have been revitalized. Lula has positioned the Mercosur agreement as geopolitically essential, especially amid global supply chain realignments.<sup>52</sup> The EU, in turn, had offered an addendum to the agreement outlining sustainability guarantees to assuage domestic concerns.<sup>53</sup>

Notably, Brazil's independent stance on the Russia–Ukraine war has not derailed EU engagement. President Lula's calls for mediation and criticism of both Russian aggression and NATO's expansionism elicited concern in Western capitals, yet did not lead to any downgrading of EU–Brazil relations.<sup>54</sup> On the contrary, in 2023, European Commission



President Ursula von der Leyen visited Brazil to launch a strategic raw materials partnership focused on securing access to lithium and rare earths, resources essential for the EU's green industrial strategy.<sup>55</sup> Brazil's hedging between Western and Chinese spheres of influence is evident in its cautious engagement with the Belt and Road Initiative and interest in a potential Mercosur–China trade agreement. Brussels has emphasized the depth of its investment portfolio and technological cooperation as counterweights to Chinese economic inducements.<sup>56</sup> The underlying logic appears that by embedding Brazil within European supply chains and green investment frameworks, the EU hopes to cultivate alignment over time without resorting to coercive measures.

### South Africa-EU Relations: Strategic Hedging and Economic Anchoring

South Africa represents the EU's most institutionalized partnership on the African continent, grounded in the Trade, Development and Cooperation Agreement (TDCA) since 2000. The EU is South Africa's largest trading partner and investor, accounting for approximately 25% of the country's total trade.<sup>57</sup> As with India and Brazil, South Africa pursues a foreign policy of strategic ambiguity where it maintains strong ties with Western countries while deepening relations with China and Russia.

This posture was most clearly demonstrated in Pretoria's response to the Russia–Ukraine conflict. South Africa abstained from UN General Assembly resolutions condemning Russia, hosted joint naval exercises with Russia and China in 2023, and faced accusations from the United States of covert arms transfers to Moscow.<sup>58</sup> These developments strained U.S.–South Africa relations, with Washington ending South Africa's eligibility under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA).<sup>59</sup> However, the EU adopted a markedly different approach.

After a seven-year hiatus, the EU–South Africa summit was revived in 2025. The summit, held in Pretoria. Despite Pretoria's refusal to adopt the EU's stance on Ukraine, the summit emphasized “recalibrated strategic engagement,” resulting in a €4.7 billion investment package under the Global Gateway initiative.<sup>60</sup> The EU also proposed a Clean Technology and Investment Partnership (CTIP), focusing on green industrialization and mineral supply chains which are critical for both parties.<sup>61</sup>

Rather than penalize South Africa for its geopolitical posture, the EU reinforced its economic and technological offer, signaling a preference for inclusion over estrangement. Observers note that this stands in sharp contrast to the more punitive U.S. approach, highlighting divergent Western strategies in responding to Global South hedging. As Ramaphosa reaffirmed South Africa's non-alignment and support for "strategic autonomy for the South," the EU opted to work within this framework, leveraging geoeconomic tools to strengthen bilateral ties.

Despite South Africa's rhetorical solidarity with Russia and China, the material realities of its economic landscape impose constraints on its geopolitical drift. European trade and investment remain essential to South Africa's developmental agenda. Pretoria's careful balancing act—hosting naval exercises with both Russia-China and NATO—reflects a pragmatic attempt to sustain multipolar engagement without jeopardizing critical economic partnerships.

### Synthesis: Patterns of EU Strategic Engagement

The comparative experiences of Brazil and South Africa affirm several key features of the EU's external engagement with strategically autonomous partners. First, while all three countries are designated as strategic partners, the substance of these partnerships is better understood as a framework for managing divergence than one denoting consistent alignment. Strategic partnerships with India, Brazil, and South Africa are grounded in dialogue and diplomacy rather than ideological congruence. Institutional arrangements and engagements allow the EU to keep channels of communication open even amidst differing stances on global issues of security.

Second, the EU has demonstrated a notable tolerance for political divergence. Whether it is India's energy ties with Russia, Brazil's neutral stance on the Ukraine conflict, or South Africa's military diplomacy with adversarial powers, the EU has largely refrained from issuing ultimatums or imposing sanctions. This marks a pragmatic departure from earlier attempts to condition cooperation on value alignment and reflects the EU's broader geopolitical calculus.

Third, the EU's increasing reliance on economic statecraft further supports this pragmatic orientation. Through tools such as the Global Gateway initiative, strategic raw material partnerships, and targeted investment agreements like CTIP, the EU is actively using economic incentives to foster strategic convergence. These instruments serve both to secure European interests and to offer tangible benefits to partner states, creating a reciprocal dynamic that sidesteps contentious normative debates.

Finally, shared global challenges such as climate change, digital transformation, and global health are emerging as critical domains of cooperation. These issues often transcend geopolitical fault lines and provide platforms for substantive engagement. EU collaboration with Brazil on biodiversity, with South Africa on green hydrogen, and with India on climate finance and digital public infrastructure illustrates how mutual vulnerability can be converted into strategic opportunity.

In summary, the EU's engagements with Brazil and South Africa mirror its evolving relationship with India: all three are managed through a lens of strategic pragmatism. The EU increasingly prioritizes long-term economic integration and multilateral cooperation over strict political alignment. This broader pattern reinforces the central argument of this essay: India-EU relations are emblematic of a systemic shift in EU external relations, where functional convergence is privileged over normative unity in a fragmenting global order.

## Conclusion

The evolution of India-EU relations over the last three decades is less a reversal of values than a practical recalibration. It is a telling example of the EU reconfiguring its status as a normative power and India exercising the independence of strategic autonomy as a rising power. What the preceding analysis makes clear is that the EU's shift from normative idealism toward principled pragmatism is not a betrayal of its values but as a response to a fragmenting global order. If the past of this relationship was defined by an uneasy coexistence of commerce and difference, the future offers a purposeful cooperation where convergence is built through mutual interest, institutionalized mechanisms, and a willingness to compartmentalize disagreement.

A credible, forward-looking India–EU partnership rests on three important pillars. First, by actively pursuing the FTA, they must institutionalize and strengthen the geoeconomic gains that have made the relationship resilient. Second, translate cooperation into concrete technological and climate deliverables. The Trade and Technology Council is the right step towards building both economic and technological integration. Third, it is essential to build on security and defence ties, even if there are great divergences to begin with. New Delhi's willingness to reduce its military dependence on Moscow is evident with its engagement of various European defence manufacturers over Russian options.<sup>62</sup> This combination is both politically feasible and strategically wise: it recognizes India's agency, leverages European strengths, and addresses shared vulnerabilities in a multipolar world.

Finally, the relationship while focusing on these key areas and deliverables must not ignore principled dialogue. Compartmentalization and realpolitik cannot become a source for moral abdication. The EU should continue to speak for the norms it champions from human rights to respect for international law and promotion of democratic values. Mechanisms for regular political consultations, track 2 people to people exchanges, and civil-society linkages must remain robust. They are the sources of soft power that ensure the relationship remains more than a transactional alignment of interests.

In sum, the India–EU partnership's future lies in engineered interdependence: selected, reciprocal commitments that lock in mutual gains while leaving space for strategic divergence. That partnership will be judged not by rhetoric but by deliverables—green industrial corridors, semiconductor and raw-material supply chains resilient to coercion, joint defence production lines, and operational Indo-Pacific cooperation producing measurable goods. If the EU can combine economic leverage with genuine offers of technology and climate finance, and if India can translate strategic autonomy into predictable, reciprocal cooperation, the relationship will evolve from a pragmatic tolerance into a strategic anchor for both sides.

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