

How Can Less Powerful European States Enhance Their Relations With India?

The less influential European countries need to work out “less strategic strategies.”

India’s relations with Europe tend to focus on the Old Continent’s western side – and for good reasons. France has emerged as a significant supplier of military equipment, Germany is India’s biggest trading partner within the EU, and the U.K. is a hub for Indian companies. And yet there is certainly room for New Delhi’s relations with other European states to grow, even though their capabilities are much more limited.

For instance, as most of Central Eastern Europe is a part of the EU, the region offers foreign companies access to the European Union’s markets but with lower operation costs than further west. The Apollo Tyres factory in Hungary is a rare case of a major Indian firm investing in the region with probably those considerations in mind.

On another level of relations, India’s diplomatic outreach to Poland after tensions with Pakistan in 2019 – outreach that included the visit of the Indian foreign minister to Warsaw – was connected to the fact that the European country was at the time presiding over the United Nations Security Council. Europe’s less powerful countries, in this way, can use what opportunities they do have to enhance relations with India. Perhaps Portugal’s declaration that during its current presidency of the European Union, Lisbon will give priority to enhancing EU-India ties is also an example of this approach.

There are already some signs that India and the EU may indeed try to strengthen relations. May will witness the convening of a summit between Indian and European leaders in Porto, Portugal. The two sides are also apparently trying to resurrect negotiations on a free trade agreement. Such processes call for smaller states of the Old Continent to spell out their positions and make their voices heard.

Apart from further engaging with India through the EU format, less powerful European nations should certainly step up their bilateral efforts. A recent report by the Swedish Institute of International Affairs – “Circles of EU-India Engagement: How Member States Cooperate with India on Global Issues” (by Henrik Chetan Aspengren, Emil Lidén, and Axel Nordenstam) – offers certain insights and advice in this regard. The publication focuses on the “second circle” EU member countries, by which it means all nations other than France and Germany (with Italy considered to be on the edge of the two circles).

Based on a survey conducted among experts from eight “second circle” states, and on a reading of various diplomatic sources, the report concludes, among others, that:

(1) These countries tend to engage with India on global issues (such as U.N.-related matters or arms control) through the EU rather than bilaterally. This is likely because this format “has more impact collectively” and probably due to a certain division of labor: “The EU addresses regional security issues and global policy discussions [...], while the member states focus bilaterally on promoting the business interests.”

(2) India, however, “seems to prefer bilateral engagement.”

(3) As for the latter type of relations with New Delhi, the survey’s respondents identified “business opportunities” as their main driver, followed by “India’s global weight and influence.”

[Vocabulary list \(A\)](#)
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Apart from general policy recommendations related to the EU level, the study concludes that second circle states need to emphasize bilateral ties more with India. The authors observe, for instance, that in terms of high-level visits in 2014-2019, some of the researched countries “have a visiting frequency above the mean” (Greece, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden) while the rest “show a frequency below the mean” (Ireland, Lithuania, Poland), a clear sign that the latter should strive for more such delegations.

But there is certainly untapped potential on other levels as well. Some if it would require immediate political action on at least one side. Less powerful European states could, for instance, consider putting effort into attracting Indian companies that are planning to leave London due to Brexit. Other fields of cooperation may appear out of the mist in the near future, and there is still time to forge strategies. The above report picks “5G, Artificial Intelligence and cybersecurity” as areas of such potential. Take the last one of these: If the Asian powerhouse that is Japan has already noticed Estonia’s expertise in cybersecurity, then perhaps New Delhi can collaborate with Tallinn as well?

An Indo-Pacific Strategy or an Asian One?

Given the above, should the governments of less powerful European countries work out more coherent strategies toward Asia? At least four countries have published Indo-Pacific strategies or policy guidelines recently: France, Germany, Ireland, and the Netherlands. Notably, while all of these belong to Western Europe economically, two have been counted among the “second circle” in the above-mentioned study. The significance of two of these strategies has been covered by 9DashLine – the German one in an article by Garima Mohan, and the Dutch one in a text by Gokul Sahni, while Céline Pajon wrote about the French strategy for the Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs. This is certainly a rising trend and it should be expected that European countries’ engagement in the Indo-Pacific will matter for New Delhi as well.

But I believe that most of the less significant European countries should strive to formulate their strategies toward Asia — especially in economic terms — rather than toward the Indo-Pacific. Beyond being a regional description, Indo-Pacific is understood as a concept and one with a military aspect.

France has a military presence in the Indian Ocean and its navy is already holding joint exercises and patrols with India. In a text for USI, Subhasish Sarangi outlined the French military presence in the Indo-Pacific, and the significance of Paris’ cooperation with the countries of that region (India included); Joy Mitra provides a summary of the importance of Indo-French joint patrols, too. While the assets at the disposal of Berlin with regards to this field are not comparable to the French, Germany also dispatched a frigate to the Indian Ocean for patrolling in 2021. But most of European countries do not have the capabilities to engage in the Indo-Pacific that way. As before, they will have to depend on others – chiefly the United States – to guard the shipping lines, which are important for their economies.

What these countries need, therefore, are strategies toward Asia that will focus on leveraging economic opportunities as well as mitigating direct challenges coming from the region (such as cybersecurity threats, terrorism, economic overdependence, and so on). These should consider both the bilateral, as well as the European Union level, of conducting foreign policy and should address aspects such as investment (including attracting Asian companies) and trade (such as their approach to EU’s trade rules with Asia, including the FTA negotiations with India).

A bit paradoxically, such strategies will have to be less “strategic.” In military parlance, strategy means planning for the whole war, while tactics is planning for a battle. Thus, “strategy” came to commonly mean a policy focused on long-term goals: a multistage plan that is hoped to eventually bring significant results. But the fewer resources you have, the more difficult it is to realistically plan far ahead. Thus, most European policies need to be more down-to-earth, focused on realistic economic gains and direct threats, taking into account great power rivalry but not led astray by dreams of elusive great power status. In simpler words: More focus on how to attract an investor, less on navy operations in far corners of the world.

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Relations with New Delhi should certainly be a part of such policies. While it seems that on the bilateral level they are bound to be mostly economic in nature, there are challenges that even the lesser European countries will have to face on their own ground (some of them non-economic or intertwined with other aspects). These include the realm of cybersecurity and this is a largely unexplored field of Indo-European cooperation.

[Vocabulary list \(B\)](#)
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