

# India and the European Union: Perceptions and Policies

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## Perceptions

According to former US Secretary of State Madeline Albright, "You have to be either French or a genius to understand the European Union." Almost all Indians, confront the "3 Ds" in attempting to understand the strange political and economic animal that the European Union is. For them, the EU is difficult to comprehend; it is different from your friendly neighbourhood regional organization (be it SAARC or ASEAN), and since it is distant and not in your immediate neighbourhood, Indians are generally reluctant to make the necessary effort to try and understand it.

After independence, there has been a clear domination of Anglo-American imagery in the Indian media and popular culture. This has resulted in a rather fragmented and partial view of Europe since it tended to reinforce and sustain traditional stereotypical images and clichés. For instance, France continues to be the land of food, wine and fashion – an image which French cultural policy deliberately seeks to sustain. Switzerland has been immortalized by Bollywood as the ultimate paradise for romance. For the great majority of Indians, however, most of Europe is a strange land, an exotic place for tourism, to which only a privileged layer of society had had access. The Indian elites' perceptions of the EU has been and continues to be essentially conditioned by the Anglo-Saxon media, which impedes a more nuanced understanding of the processes and dynamics of European integration as well as the intricacies and roles of EU institutions.

If you tell the average Indian that the European Commission has an embassy in New Delhi, the usual question is, "For which country does it issue a visa for?" For most others, the abbreviation "EC" signifies not the European Commission, but the Election Commission. For the policymaker, the EU is not an easy political animal to deal with

partly because of the rotating presidencies, proliferating regulations, and so on. India, like many of the Union's other strategic partners, is clearly more comfortable with bilaterals. While there is some clarity regarding policies of EU member states, it is often difficult to say what EU policy is.

There has been a clear domination of Anglo-American imagery in the Indian media and popular culture, which had tended to reinforce and sustain traditional stereotypical images and clichés of Europe. For the great majority of Indians, most of Europe is a strange land, an exotic place for tourism, to which only a privileged layer of society had had access. Many of the historical and cultural bonds and terms of reference which traditionally linked India with Britain – the “Oxbridge” legacy – and, in turn, Europe have considerably withered away with time, including globalization. A wired-in middle class is no longer greatly interested in European history, art or society. There is a clear bias in the importance given to Washington as opposed to Europe or the EU in the Indian media and in both intellectual and cultural ties with the United States.

There are three other enduring perceptions that Indians have of the European Union.

1. More perceptive Indians feel that when it comes to India/South Asia, there still continue to be three kinds of people in the EU: (a) there are those who are otherwise very well informed and knowledgeable but who do not try to understand South Asia, because others have tried it before and failed to do so; (b) then there are those who neither understand anything, nor do they wish to understand anything; and (c) Then there is a small minority which falls in between these categories: those who have the courage and perseverance to make an effort to understand the more complex problems of India and wish to do something about it. The Nordic countries have been perceived as the “moral superpowers”, with strong views on human rights.

Many in India and perhaps in other parts of the developing world feel that Europe very often tends to have a patronizing attitude. Their motto seems to be: “Let's engage and teach you how to do things.”

2. Relations with India are still driven by “very small circles” in Brussels. In the first circle are those which have substantial economic stakes – primarily the Big Three (France, Germany and the United Kingdom). When push comes to shove, they are the ones which bring the requisite energy to move things forward in an increasingly heterogeneous Union. In the second circle are those member states which have interests in certain sectors, but which do not quite have the big picture. In the third circle are the

remaining member states, which broadly feel that if some things are good for others, it is fine with them.

3. Most stakeholders in India feel that India's democratic polity and shared values does not necessarily earn it any brownie points in Europe, that the EU, including the European think tank community, continues to have a fixation with China, and that most senior EU officials feel India "is getting there, but not quite arrived".

### **Policies**

The European Union is India's largest trading partner, source of high technology and a significant aid donor. India no longer regards the European Union as a mere trading bloc, but as an increasingly important political actor in world politics with a growing profile and presence. Most policymakers feel that the EU would be taken more seriously as a global actor once the Lisbon Treaty comes into effect.

For the most part, the driving force behind EU-India relations has been, is, and will continue to be trade and commerce. With the conclusion of the India-EU trade and investment agreement hopefully by the end of the year, trade is likely grow significantly. If trade goes forward, then many more things will move forward as well. Political dialogue has considerably widened and deepened in recent years with growing discussions on regional issues. The security dialogue (Nov 2008) held shortly after the Mumbai attacks was more substantive than any of the previous ones, but meaningful cooperation on security issues will not be with the member states and not the EU because it is *they* who have the assets and competences, not the Union.

Europe is facing increasing difficulties in defining the international agenda and creating a new architecture of global governance. Emerging powers like India argue that the structures of global governance must be more democratic, representative and legitimate by increasing the participation of developing countries. Europeans see a patchwork of existing institutions with different coverage, often overlapping competences, principles, and governance structures; most of which have limited compliance or weak enforcement mechanisms, which they would like to strengthen. While Europe recognizes the importance of a rising India in the reconstruction of international institutions and has often talked about making it a full partner in the management of the global order, it is yet to take definitive steps. The emerging powers want to *change* the prevalent world order to facilitate preferred outcomes. Effective multilateralism – which European political elites call the DNA of the European Union –

will continue to be elusive because it cannot simply be reduced to legal regulation or common values, but is a process of political negotiation.

There is some convergence in policy and practice between the EU and India on questions of multilateralism and global governance, but that convergence has notable and significant limitations. Climate change is a major irritant in EU-India relations with the Europeans insisting that so long as the so-called “major emitters” like China and India remain outside the emissions reduction regime, their own efforts will make little difference to the global goal of reducing and stabilizing anthropogenic CO2 emissions.

Postmodern Europe is a lonely power in what is basically a Westphalian world with pre-modern and modern mindsets. The emerging powers are extremely sensitive to what Andre Sapir calls the “regulatory imperialism” of the West. They want to play a greater role in the making of new rules of the international economic and financial system. The new big kids on the block have no difficulty with a rule-based world order, what they want is “a different set of rules”.

There are many things that India needs to do in order to deal with the growing profile and role of the European Union in world politics. It needs to intensify its engagement of EU institutions, especially the European Parliament and enhance its contact and interaction with the Council. It needs to promote civil society exchanges and linkages between India and Europe and build greater expertise in Indian universities and the think tank community on India and the European Union.

### **Conclusion**

After nine summits, India and the European Union are gradually getting used to working together. There is a widening and deepening of political dialogue and a variety of consultation mechanisms on around 45 issues, which have enabled the two sides to better understand and appreciate each other’s positions, perspectives and perceptions. However, shared values do not necessarily translate into greater cooperation; one needs to have shared interests and priorities. Mutual long-term interest is going to be in areas like scientific and technological cooperation, movement of skilled persons, etc. The time to build and enhance existing frameworks is now.

Europeans have to revise their mental maps about the growing profile of emerging powers. This is not easy and old habits die hard. Europeans are used to beget influence, and at one point of time, whether you get listened to depended on Europe. But today Europe tends to be seen by many Asians as increasingly a region in relative power

decline.

Europe increasingly should increasingly think and cooperate with emerging powers and other key countries in the construction of a new international system, rather than demanding that they “prove” themselves to be responsible stakeholders. Emerging powers need to be made full partners in the writing of new rules for institutions in a rapidly changing world.