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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

India's European Pivot — What the Merz Visit Reveals About Multi-Alignment in a Multipolar World

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MAINS RELEVANCE: **GS Paper 2**



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"India abstained on UN resolutions condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, creating friction with European democracies. Yet India is simultaneously deepening strategic ties with Germany and pushing for the India-EU FTA. Is India's foreign policy position coherent, or is it opportunistic multi-alignment?"

WHY IN NEWS

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz visited India for his first major bilateral engagement outside the EU and US, delivering a USD 8 billion submarine deal, semiconductor cooperation, and a fresh push on India-EU FTA. The visit crystallises a paradox in India's European foreign policy: principled abstention on Ukraine alongside deepening strategic and economic partnerships with the very democracies most affected by Russian aggression.

THE INDIA-EUROPE RELATIONSHIP: STRUCTURALLY UNDERPERFORMING

There is no diplomatic relationship in India's foreign policy that more consistently underperforms relative to its potential than India-Europe. The EU and India share foundational commitments: constitutional democracy, rule of law, multilateral institutions, the UNCLOS-based maritime order. Together they account for roughly 45 percent of global GDP. Yet they have no comprehensive FTA. There is no institutional forum comparable to the Quad or SCO through which India and the EU systematically coordinate. Annual India-EU summits produce declarations without transformative deliverables.

Chancellor Merz's India visit, while commercially productive, cannot obscure this structural reality. But it does illustrate both the opportunities and the frictions that define this relationship.

THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE FAULT LINE

The most visible friction is India's position on the Ukraine war. India has consistently abstained on UN General Assembly and Security Council resolutions calling for Russian withdrawal or condemning Moscow's actions. India has not imposed sanctions on Russia. Indian oil imports from Russia have surged from below 1% before 2022 to over 30% of crude imports by 2025 — benefiting from the steep discount Russia offered after Western sanctions reduced its buyer base.

European leaders — including multiple German chancellors — have repeatedly expressed discomfort with this position in bilateral meetings. For Germany, which is spending approximately 2% of GDP on defence (for the first time meeting the NATO threshold), reducing its own gas dependency on Russia (at enormous economic cost through Nordstream's shutdown), and providing tens of billions in aid to Ukraine, India's hedging posture looks, at minimum, like a free-rider problem.

India's response has been consistent and broadly principled: strategic autonomy, non-alignment traditions, the 60+ million Indians who depend on Russia-linked fertilizer supply chains, and the historical asymmetry in how Western powers view conflicts (India notes that its abstentions on Western military actions in Iraq, Libya, and Afghanistan were never similarly criticized). The argument has internal coherence even if European audiences find it convenient.

What this disagreement has done is inject a constant undercurrent of mistrust into India-Europe engagement. For every Merz visit and submarine deal, there are diplomatic undercurrents questioning whether India is a fully reliable partner in a world being reorganised around democratic solidarity.

MULTI-ALIGNMENT: FOREIGN POLICY REALISM OR ETHICAL ABDICATION?

India's foreign policy doctrine — sometimes described as “strategic autonomy,” sometimes “multi-alignment” — involves maintaining independent relationships with competing powers without committing to any bloc. In practical terms: defence partnerships with the US while buying Russian military equipment; trade with China while competing with it strategically; energy from Russia while building strategic partnerships with Europe; membership of QUAD (with the US, Japan, Australia) while hosting SCO summits (with Russia and China).

Critics from Europe argue this is not principled — it is opportunistic hedging that benefits from the US security umbrella without accepting its obligations, from Russia's oil while other democracies bear the cost of sanctioning it.

India's defence is that multi-alignment is not moral neutrality — India has condemned the Bucha massacre, voted for humanitarian access resolutions, provided USD 50 million in aid to Ukraine. India's abstentions are on questions of territorial sovereignty and military resolution, not on humanitarian principles.

More substantively, India's foreign policy reflects a sober realism: India's security architecture remains 60% Russian-origin equipment; switching is not a one-election decision. India's fertilizer supply chain — potash from Russia and Belarus, phosphate from Morocco and China — cannot be diversified in a year. Strategic

autonomy is not a choice; it is a constraint that pragmatic diplomacy works within.

WHAT GERMANY GETS FROM THIS RELATIONSHIP

Germany's turn toward India is not driven by charity. It is driven by hard economic calculation:

Supply chain diversification: Germany's strategic vulnerability — overdependence on authoritarian suppliers (Russian gas, Chinese rare earths, Taiwanese semiconductors) — is being addressed partly through India partnerships

Market access: India's consumer market (1.4 billion people, rapidly growing middle class) is Germany's next large frontier after China's growth slows

Defence co-production: The Project 75I AIP submarine deal is not just an export — it creates long-term maintenance, spare parts, and upgrade contracts; Germany's defence industry is expanding after decades of under-investment

UNSC: Germany's own UNSC permanent seat ambitions align perfectly with India's. G4 solidarity is a genuine mutual interest

THE INDIA-EU FTA: THE MISSING ARCHITECTURE

The most significant undelivered element of India-Europe relations is the FTA. Negotiations have been off-and-on since 2007 — the 2013 suspension lasted nearly a decade. The resumed negotiations (2022) are in their 10th round but have not closed on the critical chapters: automotive tariffs (EU wants India to lower import duties on European EVs and luxury cars), government procurement (EU seeks open bidding access to India's public contracts), and data protection (India's Digital Personal Data Protection Act creates new obligations that EU industry wants aligned with GDPR).

Chancellor Merz's push to finalise the agreement is welcome — but previous German chancellors (Merkel, Scholz) made similar calls without breakthrough. The deal will require political will to override domestic automotive lobby resistance in both directions.

A finalized India-EU FTA would be the largest bilateral trade deal by combined GDP in history — potentially USD 24 trillion in combined economic output. For India, it would lock in preferential access to Europe's Single Market and provide a hedge against US tariff unpredictability.

THE STRATEGIC TAKEAWAY

The Merz visit's significance is not the submarine deal or the semiconductor MOU in isolation. It is that Germany — India's most important European partner — chose India as its first major bilateral destination outside the Western alliance structure. That is a signal of India's rising weight.

But India needs to be careful that “strategic autonomy” does not become an excuse for avoiding the harder conversations that deep partnerships require. The rules-based order that India invokes — UNCLOS, WTO, international humanitarian law — is maintained not by abstention but by active defence. India’s growing power creates growing responsibility to participate in that defence.

UPSC RELEVANCE

G4 (India, Germany, Japan, Brazil); Project 75I (USD 8 billion; AIP; 6 submarines); India-Germany bilateral trade (~USD 50 billion); GSDP; KfW; India-EU FTA (negotiations since 2007; resumed 2022)

MAINS GS-2:

“Critically examine India’s ‘strategic autonomy’ doctrine in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war and its implications for India-EU relations. Is multi-alignment a sustainable foreign policy framework for a rising power?” | “Evaluate the India-Germany strategic partnership — what structural factors drive convergence and what are the key friction points?”

ESSAY:

“In a world that demands sides, India’s strategic autonomy is either wisdom or cowardice — the difference lies in what India chooses to do with the freedom it protects.”

INTERVIEW:

“How should India calibrate its relationship with Russia in a way that maintains strategic partnerships with European democracies without compromising its core national interests?”

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

INDIA-GERMANY PARTNERSHIP:

Bilateral trade: ~USD 50 billion/year | India-EU total: ~USD 200 billion

Germany: India's largest EU trading partner

Strategic Partnership: Established 2000; deepened through "Focussed Partnership" framework

Indian students in Germany: 60,000+ (largest international cohort)

EU Blue Card: Germany top destination for Indian professionals

G4 GROUP:

Members: India, Germany, Japan, Brazil

Goal: UNSC reform — new permanent representation for major democracies

Opposing group: "Uniting for Consensus" (Italy, Pakistan, South Korea, Mexico, Argentina) — against new permanent seats

Current P5 veto members: USA, UK, France, Russia, China

INDIA RUSSIA TRADE (CONTEXT):

India's Russian crude import share: <1% (pre-2022) to ~30%+ (2025)

India's total crude import dependence: 85-88%

India's position on Ukraine: Consistent abstentions at UNGA + UNSC; not joining Western sanctions

INDIA-EU FTA:

First negotiations: 2007 | Suspended: 2013 | Resumed: 2022

Key sticking points: Automotive tariffs (Indian), government procurement, data protection alignment

Combined GDP (India + EU): ~USD 24 trillion (would be world's largest bilateral FTA by GDP)

PROJECT 75I:

Value: USD 8 billion | 6 AIP-equipped conventional submarines

AIP technology: German fuel-cell system (hydrogen + liquid oxygen; electrochemical; silent)

Build in India: Atmanirbhar Bharat defence manufacturing

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

India's S-400: Russian air defence system acquired despite US CAATSA threats; signals Russian defence dependency

Nordstream: Russian gas pipeline to Germany; sabotaged September 2022; Germany's energy crisis catalyst

NATO 2% GDP defence target: Germany met it (2024); had been below for decades

Quad: Australia, India, Japan, USA — Indo-Pacific security grouping; India a member despite Russia ties

Sources: The Hindu, MEA India, Insights on India

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