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The EU at Kartavya Path — What India's Choice of Chief Guest Signals About Its Foreign Policy

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

""India invited the EU as collective chief guest for Republic Day 2026 — the first time a bloc rather than a single nation was given this honour. What does this signal about India's foreign policy priorities? How does India balance its partnerships with the US, EU, Russia, and China?""

WHY IN NEWS

For the first time in the 77-year history of India's Republic Day parade, the European Union was invited as a collective chief guest — with European Council President António Costa and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen jointly attending, coinciding with the 16th India-EU Summit and the conclusion of the India-EU Free Trade Agreement.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE INVITATION

Republic Day chief guests are never accidental. Since the first Republic Day in 1950 (when Indonesian President Sukarno was invited), the choice has consistently signalled which bilateral relationship India wishes to publicly honour, deepen, or reset.

The EU invitation in 2026 carries layered significance:

FTA timing: The India-EU Free Trade Agreement concluded on January 28, 2026 — two days after Republic Day. The chief guest invitation was part of the choreography of a diplomatic breakthrough 19 years in the making (negotiations began as BTIA in 2007).

A bloc, not a nation: Inviting the EU — both the European Council and European Commission Presidents — rather than any individual EU member state signals India's recognition of the EU as a strategic actor in its own right, not merely as a collection of 27 bilateral partners.

Balancing narrative: The invitation comes at a time when India has simultaneously engaged deeply with Russia (continued energy trade, S-400 purchase) and the US (iCET, Quad, defence partnerships). Elevating the EU to the most symbolically prominent bilateral honour India bestows rebalances India's optics in the West.

INDIA-EU: FROM NEGLECTED PARTNERSHIP TO STRATEGIC CONVERGENCE

The India-EU relationship has, for most of its existence, punched below its structural weight. Both are large democracies, rule-of-law systems, and pluralist societies — yet the relationship was treated as secondary to India-US and India-China calculations.

What changed:

China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific has made EU member states — especially France, Germany, and the Netherlands — more attentive to supply chain diversification and Indo-Pacific security

Russia-Ukraine war (2022): Re-calibrated European security priorities; made EU members more conscious of strategic dependencies on non-Western autocracies; created alignment with India's interest in a rules-based international order

Digital and technology competition: Both India and EU are building regulatory frameworks (India's DPDP Act; EU's GDPR, AI Act, Digital Markets Act) that represent alternatives to both US big tech dominance and Chinese state surveillance capitalism

THE CHINA FACTOR IN THE ROOM

It would be naive to read the India-EU FTA and the Republic Day chief guest invitation without acknowledging the China factor.

Both India and the EU have trade imbalances with China that worry their domestic industries. Both have experienced coercive economic behaviour from Beijing (EU's trade dispute with Lithuania; India's LAC standoff and trade restrictions). The India-EU partnership — particularly the Trade and Technology Council (TTC, established 2022) — is partly designed to create a third pole in global trade and technology governance.

The TTC framework:

Digital connectivity

Clean energy supply chains

Trusted trade in semiconductors and critical minerals

5G/6G telecommunications

AI governance

The unstated message: India and the EU, together, represent over USD 4 trillion in combined GDP and 1.8 billion consumers — a market large enough to set global technology and trade standards independently of both Washington and Beijing.

THE LIMITS OF THE PARTNERSHIP

The Republic Day optics should not obscure the genuine tensions in the India-EU relationship:

- 1. Climate and carbon:** The EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) will impose costs on Indian steel and cement exports. EUDR (Deforestation Regulation) affects Indian coffee and rubber. India considers these instruments disguised protectionism; the EU considers them legitimate environmental standards.
- 2. Human rights and democracy:** The EU's trade partnerships typically include human rights conditionality clauses. India has resisted any linkage between trade access and governance assessments — calling it interference in internal affairs.
- 3. Strategic autonomy:** India's continued purchase of Russian energy and S-400 systems under CAATSA (US sanctions law) irritates EU partners. The EU has not been as vocal as the US on this, but it remains a friction point.
- 4. Mode 4 vs data protection:** India wants EU to commit to more worker mobility (Mode 4); the EU wants India to strengthen data protection standards before agreeing to digital trade provisions. The DPDP Act (2023) partially addressed EU concerns, but adequacy assessment is pending.

WHAT REPUBLIC DAY DIPLOMACY CANNOT DO

The Kartavya Path ceremony can honour and signal. It cannot substitute for the hard work of managing divergent interests. The India-EU FTA is a landmark — but its value will be determined by whether India can navigate the non-tariff barriers (CBAM, EUDR, CSDDD) that remain outside the FTA text.

The EU chief guest honour is a beginning, not a destination. The test is what India and the EU do with the 19-year-old FTA infrastructure, the Trade and Technology Council, and the Horizon Europe research partnership in the years that follow.

India's genuine strategic interest: A strong, sovereign EU that is not a vassal of either Washington or Beijing serves India's multipolar vision. India should invest in EU institutions, academic partnerships, and political relationships with the full breadth of EU member states — not just France and Germany.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Republic Day chief guests — 1950 Sukarno (Indonesia); 2015 Obama (USA, first US President); 2024 Macron (France); 2026 Costa + von der Leyen (EU, first collective); European Council President: António Costa; European Commission President: Ursula von der Leyen; India-EU TTC (2022); CBAM; EUDR; CSDDD; BTIA (2007); India-EU FTA concluded 2026; CAATSA; Horizon Europe (EUR 95bn, 2021-2027); Mode 4 (GATS).

India's foreign policy — strategic autonomy; India-EU Strategic Partnership; India-EU FTA significance and challenges; multilateralism vs bilateralism in India's approach; EU institutions (Council vs Commission); India's balancing between US, EU, Russia, China.

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

REPUBLIC DAY CHIEF GUESTS (KEY):

1950: Sukarno (Indonesia) | 2015: Barack Obama (USA) — first US President

2024: Emmanuel Macron (France) | 2026: **António Costa + Ursula von der Leyen (EU) — first collective**

EU INSTITUTIONS:

European Council: Heads of state of 27 EU members; sets political direction; President: **António Costa** (since December 2024; former PM Portugal)

European Commission: EU executive; proposes laws, implements budget; President: **Ursula von der Leyen** (re-elected July 2024; second term to 2029)

INDIA-EU FTA TIMELINE:

2007: BTIA (Broad-Based Trade and Investment Agreement) negotiations began

2013: Suspended

2022: CTIA (Comprehensive Trade and Investment Agreement) relaunched

January 28, 2026: Concluded

EU: 97% tariff lines opened | India: 92.1% tariff lines

19 years in making; India's 22nd FTA partner

INDIA-EU TRADE AND TECHNOLOGY COUNCIL (TTC):

Established: **2022** | Focus: Digital, clean energy, semiconductors, 5G/6G, AI

NON-TARIFF BARRIERS (EU):

CBAM: Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism — EU carbon tax on imports (effective 2026)

EUDR: EU Deforestation Regulation — GPS traceability for commodities (coffee, rubber, palm oil, soy)

CSDDD: Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive — supply chain audits (effective 2027)

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

Horizon Europe: EUR 95 billion EU R&D framework (2021-2027); India integration being explored post-2026 Summit

Mode 4 (GATS): Movement of natural persons; India's primary interest in services trade

India-EU bilateral goods trade: ~USD 135 billion (FY2023-24); EU = India largest trading bloc partner

CAATSA: Countering America Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (US law, 2017) — sanctions countries buying Russian weapons; India's S-400 purchase creates potential friction

Sources: Indian Express, MEA India, European Commission

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