

Improving EU-India Understanding on Russia

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This paper aims to identify a few areas where the EU, India and Russia could potentially increase understanding and exchange further, despite different dynamics in EU-Russia, EU-India and India-Russia relations. The study provides the reader with an examination of the three bilateral relations in the last decades, outlining some potential areas for EU-India cooperation on Russia in the conclusion.

During the Cold-War, Europe and India engaged with the Soviet Union at very different levels. On many occasions they found themselves supporting the opposite side. Western Europe was part of the American-led western alliance. India, however, had very close strategic and economic ties with the USSR. Despite the collapse of the USSR and termination of special bilateral trade relations in the 1990s, India and Russia have maintained excellent political relations institutionalised through a ‘special and privileged strategic partnership’ in 2010.

Both the EU and Russia also devoted a lot of time and energy in the 1990s to build a strategic partnership. Geographical proximity, mutual interdependence in the energy sector, trade and investment linkages and global ambitions helped the EU and Russia to engage with each other strategically in Europe and elsewhere. However, a number of frictions also emerged: NATO’s integration of some of the former countries of the Soviet Union as well as the war in Georgia and the ‘secession’ of Abkhazia and South Ossetia contributed to worsen relations between the West and Moscow.

Notwithstanding areas of tensions, Russia was a natural partner for the EU to tackle some of the key global and regional challenges, due to its position in the United Nations Security Council; its international linkages as well as its influence in the EU’s neighbourhood. The EU-Russia strategic partnership was thus built through carefully constructed institutional mechanism involving many dialogues, committees and agreements. This was also the time when India’s relations with the EU were strengthening, particularly after 2004 when both signed a strategic partnership. Although established independently on their own merits, strategic partnerships between EU and Russia; EU and India; as well as India and Russia have been useful for all three players to better understand some of the key cross-cutting security and economic issues including Afghanistan, Iran, Eurasian integration and energy security.

Overall, EU-Russia relations have been dominated by mutual dependence in the energy sector and geo-strategic developments in the EU's neighbourhood. On the other hand, India-Russia ties are more influenced by bilateral defence and energy deals as well as evolving security architecture in Asia. In these circumstances, if EU-India-Russia can work together in specific areas, some useful results could be achieved. They have many common agendas related to energy security, climate change, connectivity, Africa, Middle-East, Central Asia and Afghanistan. All three have their respective strengths in these areas. Actions in one partnership may affect the other pair. For instance, the pace of development in EU-Russia relations until the Ukrainian crisis of 2014 was very useful for India not only for a multipolar world but also to resolve some of the key issues in the Middle East, Central Asia and Afghanistan.

Some of the ongoing tensions in EU-Russia ties may create some complications for India in the post-Soviet space. On Ukraine, India has broadly supported Russia. On abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir, Moscow has thrown its weight behind India. On the Iranian nuclear issue, all three are for a negotiated settlement. On Afghanistan, their positions will be evolving in the coming months. Other major powers, such as the US and China have diverging policies and agenda with regards to EU, Russia and India, notwithstanding their own strategies in Eurasia and the Middle East. On the basis of the above discussions as well as the broader analysis contained in the paper, the following recommendations are offered to EU and Indian policy makers.

Policy recommendations

- Consider exchanging notes and establishing a dialogue mechanism on Russia. Within various EU-India strategic partnership institutional mechanisms, frank conversations about Russia may improve Indian and EU perceptions and understanding about Moscow.
- Consider exchanging on shared analysis of Russia's strategy in Afghanistan within the framework of EU-India discussions on peace-making and peace building efforts. These exchanges could focus on ways to reduce drugs, trade and cooperation in the region and the role that Russia could play in this respect.
- Strengthen dialogue between the EU and India on climate change and Russia's role in it. This could be done by including long-term analysis of climate changes threats and Russia's developing position as a response to it. This area would be of great significance for the future of EU-Russia ties and India could also have an interest in taking part.
- In the long term, consider creating a trilateral (EU-India-Russia) consultative mechanism to improve understanding of their respective connectivity plans in Eurasia. The three powers have serious plans concerning Eurasian integration and are engaged with each other at various forums and projects.

