

Let's go digital: EU-India cooperation in the digital age

In July 2020, the leaders of the European Union (EU) and India [EU-India Strategic Partnership: Roadmap to 2025](#) at the 15th EU-India Summit. The two partners emphasized the need to enhance connectivity cooperation between them and in third countries. As the COVID-19 pandemic prompted an acceleration of digitalization within and between countries, a strong focus on [digital connectivity](#) in the EU-India strategic partnership is in place.

The EU and India share an interest in enhanced cooperation with a view to upholding an open, free, stable and secure digital space, and in promoting common approaches and standards for the digital transformation of industry and society. The defining feature of the hardening geopolitical contest between the United States (US) and China is technology. Eventually, those who control the development, use and standardization of digital technologies will [increasingly be able to influence](#) economic, societal and political outcomes. This includes, for example, the future of the internet: whether a predominantly free and open internet, a secure and human-centred internet, or an internet based on the idea of cyber sovereignty will dominate or whether three 'internets' exist in parallel. Similarly, almost every [subset of digital connectivity](#) whether in the regulatory, business, or infrastructure domain - is imbued with explicit and implicit assumptions about what and whom to prioritize in organising the digital domain, and which norms should underpin the use of new technologies and applications. Considering these divergences, identifying common ground and common purpose is a first important step to furthering practical cooperation on digital connectivity between the EU and India.

This paper analyses the state of play and future potential of EU-India cooperation in the domain of digital connectivity. First it considers the effects of the US-China tech contest on economic competition as well as norms and standard-setting in this domain. It will then highlight the common interests that the EU and India have in furthering the human-centred approach that values the privacy of citizens over business or national security interests. Finally, three practical avenues for cooperation will be presented to deepen digital economic ties in the coming years, namely platform fairness, digital human rights and digital Official Development Assistance (ODA).

A shared human-centred approach?

The US-China tech rivalry presents countries throughout the world with a choice between the US call for an open, free internet and cyber sovereignty, which allows its cyberspace. China is advancing its interests in this strategic technological competition through its Digital Silk Road (DSR). The DSR [combines](#) a domestic push to export Chinese technologies developed with assertive industrial policies, with a broader agenda to augment interoperability and compatibility between Chinese and overseas technological networks. This is responding to a real need for digital tools and technology of third countries, on Chinese terms. The US answer to curb [Chinese influence over technology ecosystems](#) abroad came with the [Digital Connectivity and Cybersecurity Partnership](#) (DCCP): a whole of government approach that promotes an open and secure internet in the US and beyond. The DCCP furthers investments in communication infrastructure development through technical assistance and partnerships in US partner countries.

Both the EU and India have an interest in avoiding a binary choice, however. The EU now appeals for a third way that prioritizes the human individual rather than state or business

interests and aims for transparency, openness and inclusiveness in the digital domain. Digital human rights including online freedom of speech, individual privacy, and so- are key to its approach. India, the largest upcoming digital economy, is seeking a path of its own, picking and choosing from these three perspectives to cope with the challenges and opportunities of the digital age. Its [Personal Data Protection Bill](#), for example, is based to a large extent on European data privacy regulation, but also includes strict data localization requirements.

Clearly, similarities and divergences in approach will shape future EU-India cooperation on digital connectivity. In the digital economy, India in the summer of 2020, when the government banned [TikTok](#) and 58 other Chinese applications on the grounds of stealing and surreptitiously transmitting user data without authorization to servers outside of India. The arguments put forward by the Indian government were grounded in norms and standards of privacy and platform fairness, which the EU and India share.

There can be no doubt that, as digital platforms are becoming an important part of the digital economy, governments need to balance privacy, business and national security needs. The Indian government, as well as EU member states wish to [guarantee](#) citizens privacy over business and national security concerns. This includes a transparent approach on how algorithms shape, filter and personalize information flows and which personal data has been used to create this. This contrasts with the US approach, which banned TikTok and other Chinese apps such as WeChat citing [national security concerns](#).

That said, India's ban of Chinese applications also touches upon the debate of digital human rights. Here, the EU and Indian positions on certain issue diverge. How, when and where data are collected and processed differs between the EU member states and India, and decisions in this regard have significant impact on their digital economies. India, not unlike some other governments, in specific instances [limits](#) the data that certain groups of people can access, thereby curbing free speech and press activity. The EU and India would do well to discuss underlying norms and standards of digital governance at home, also because these inform their international position, for example on data free flow with trust. Failing to address such difficult topics now, may hinder bilateral ties in a later phase, as the EU experiences now in its relationship with China. The EU and India need to engage in frank discussions in order to make their strategic partnership fit for the digital age.

How to move forward?

Three subfields of digital connectivity stand out as particularly promising for the EU and India, as a way of furthering bilateral cooperation in line with the EU-India Roadmap to 2025, and ultimately also strengthening a multilateral rules-based system: (1) the platform economy; (2) digital human rights; and (3) digital ODA.

Ad 1. Both the EU and India have set out to curb the power and influence of Big Tech platforms, mostly from the US and China. European Commissioner for Competition Margrethe Vestager advocates for a global solution to the monopolisation of the market and the vast amounts of user data those platforms collect and sell. The Indian government faces similar difficulties concerning platform regulation, especially as (social media) platforms seem to [live by their own terms and rules](#) of engagement and content monitoring. Both the EU and India are strong supporters of platform regulation and platform fairness, and are now taking steps to curb the dominance of American and Chinese tech monoliths and their power over smaller players in their markets. India and the EU already announced their intention to [upgrade the bilateral dialogue](#) on technology with AI and 5G. In order to also advance cooperation and to mitigate the negative effects of the platform economy, a bilateral dialogue to share insights, best practices and ideas

on platform regulation and platform fairness should also be added to this list.

Ad 2. Relatedly, the EU and India stand to benefit from more debate the normative side of digital governance, in particular the human-centred approach to digital connectivity. As Europe in recent years started to see China also as a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance, the two partners now arguably have a shared interest in curbing so- India upgrade their bilateral ties, a digital human rights-dialogue in a track 1.5-setting seems fruitful to discuss views on how to organize and promote an inclusive, transparent and open digital domain. Dialogue between key stakeholders including government officials, academics, business representatives and non-governmental organisations will contribute to better digital norms and standards.

Ad 3. Separately, the EU and India could further practical cooperation in developing economies in Africa and Asia.

initiativ [Digital for Development policy](#) (D4D), which prioritises digital actions in using digital technologies and services as a cross cutting tool in the EU development interventions. Joint EU-India digital ODA projects would combine Indian experience and expertise in a much- rd in Africa. The COVID-19 crisis has only reinforced the need for digital financial services, as these may enable governments to deliver [quick and secure financial support](#) to -to- Joint efforts of the EU and India in digital ODA will thereby also potentially strengthen the economic recovery of emerging economies.