

Together at the High Table: Prospects for EU-India cooperation in the United Nations

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The EU and India share a strong determination to “promote effective multilateralism and rules-based multilateral order with the United Nations (UN) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) at its core”.¹ In September 2017, they supported the reforms proposed by the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres², and in 2019, India joined the Franco-German initiative Alliance of Multilateralism, which aims “to renew the global commitment to stabilise the rules-based international order”.³

Yet, they had hardly cooperated in the past and rarely presented joint initiatives at this most important global forum. Available analyses of voting patterns at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) show that the two voted in unison less than half of the time,⁴ and India works more with other BRICS partners like China and Russia than with the EU or the U.S.⁵ This is despite the rising EU-India strategic convergence of late on major international issues, from fighting terrorism to climate change.

If the two can rise above old disagreements, they would form a major force at the UN. The EU is the largest economic bloc, representing more than 400 million people. Though it is formally not a UN member, it enjoys observer status, upgraded in 2011 to present proposals and amendments at the UNGA. Its greatest strength lies in its ability to coordinate and guide

¹ “Joint Statement–15th EU-India Summit,” Council of the EU, 15 July 2020. The same commitment is repeated in previous statements from EU-India summits.

² The current UN reform agenda centres on three key areas: reform of the UN development system, restructuring of the UN peace and security pillar, and reform of the management system.

³ Official website of the Alliance for Multilateralism at: <https://multilateralism.org/the-alliance/>.

⁴ Stephan Keukeleire and Bas Hooijmaaijers, “EU-India relations and multilateral governance: where is the ‘strategic partnership’?,” FPRC JOURNAL, New Delhi, 2013.

⁵ Aparajita Das, “A Fine Balance: India’s Voting Record at the UNGA,” ORF ISSUE Brief No. 192. Observer Researcher Foundation, 2017.

the position of the 27 UN members. India is the world's fifth-largest economy and an emerging power, representing more than 1.3 billion people, and seen often as a voice of developing countries.

As the UN turns 75, multilateralism is in an unprecedented crisis, aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is time for the two largest democracies to step in and correct and strengthen the UN system, which would help save the rules-based international order and prove the strategic dimension of the EU-India partnership.

Potential for cooperation—critical analysis

The lack of cooperation between India and the EU, and the divisions illustrated by their UNGA voting, are often deep-rooted and stem from their different historical experiences, varying levels of development (developing vs. developed countries) and opposite international positions (emerging power vs. status quo power). As such, they might be hard to narrow the gap completely. Yet, among the potential areas of closer cooperation, three seem the most important and within reach: support for the implementation of Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals; peace and security operations; and, reform of the UN, including the Security Council.

In the first area, the EU—the most generous donor of official development assistance (ODA, with the Union accounting for some 40% globally) and India, a developing country but an emerging world donor, are indispensable actors if the SDGs are to be achieved by 2030. They have failed so far to initiate a single joint development-cooperation project in a third country. Moreover, they often disagree on the terms and models of development cooperation, methodology of data collection, global development architecture, and even the definition of ODA. Stronger cooperation between the two on the SDGs could help them to better understand each other, which also would benefit developing countries. They could lead the

response to the COVID-19 pandemic and develop new ideas for the post-pandemic global recovery.

In the second field, the EU and India play a critical role in UN peacekeeping operations. The Union is the biggest revenue provider for UN missions while India is the fifth-largest contributor of personnel (5,335 as of 31 August 2020). Thus far, it has sent more than 200,000 troops on some 49 UN missions, and recorded the most fatalities—more than 160.⁶ Despite this, Indian and European personnel have not cooperated much in terms of training, sharing experiences or coordination.⁷ Closer cooperation in peacekeeping would prove the EU as a security partner to India and contribute towards a renewal of UN peace missions.

In the third aspect, while the EU and India agree in general on the need for UN reform, the lack of a common vision for the UNSC is an irritant in the relationship. India's longstanding strategic goal is to gain permanent membership on an expanded UNSC. Though the EU vows to “support necessary reforms of the bodies and organs of the UN system, including the comprehensive reform of the UN Security Council”⁸ it has failed thus far to clearly support India's aspiration to join the UNSC. The EU strategy on India states only that the Union “will continue to engage with India on the reform of the UN system”,⁹ while the most recent joint statement from the EU-India summit in July 2020 failed to mention UN reform at all.

India has received strong support from two European permanent members of the UNSC—the United Kingdom and France—as well as from Germany and many other Member States. Not surprisingly this dilutes confidence in the EU among Indian decision-makers and confirms their opinion that individual Member States are more important partners than Brussels.

⁶ “India and the UN: Celebrating 70 years of invaluable service to the cause of peace,” UN News, 3 August 2018

⁷ See: Lara Klossek, “‘Training for peace’—a universal practise? How micro-processes are impacting the likelihood of EU-India cooperation in peacekeeping,” European Security, 2020.

⁸ Council of the European Union, “EU priorities at the United Nations and the 75th United Nations General Assembly, September 2020–September 2021–Council conclusions,” Brussels, 13 July 2020, p. 3.

⁹ European Commission, “Elements for an EU strategy on India. Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council,” Brussels, 20.11.2018, p. 9.

Recommendations

The EU has already recognised the need for better alignment with India at the UN¹⁰ and understands that a stronger partnership with like-minded democracies is the way to strengthen the rules-based international order.¹¹ As India will be a non-permanent member of the UNSC for 2021-2023, the time is right to join forces to make the UN more effective, representative, and accountable. To maximise this opportunity, the EU and India could consider the following:

- Establish a regular dialogue at the ministerial level between the EU Commissioner on International Partnerships and the Indian Minister of External Affairs, specifically on Sustainable Development Goals, which will signal their bilateral and global commitment to the SDGs. This will guide European support for India in attaining the SDGs (within its modernisation agenda), serve as a platform for sharing experiences (on urbanisation, migration, etc.), and in developing the best solutions to support developing countries in dealing with COVID-19. This could facilitate EU-India discussions on reform of the UN development system, global trends, and standards in international development cooperation (e.g., sustainable financing, connectivity, etc.) and joint development projects in third countries.
- Strengthen cooperation in UN peacekeeping operations, including by supporting the ongoing reforms of the peace and security pillar of the UN. In practical terms, the two sides must establish regular contacts between their military training institutes and start joint exercises between peacekeeping forces. The security attaché in the EU delegation in Delhi and officials from the Indian Ministry of Defence could lead the consultations.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Elena Lazarou, "The Future of multilateralism and strategic partnerships," European Parliamentary Research service, Briefing, September 2020, p. 1.

- Earnestly launch a regular dialogue on multilateral issues at the highest level and in line with the “EU-India Strategic Partnership: A Roadmap to 2025”. Though this mechanism can be used to consult and coordinate positions on many global issues, reform of the UN must be the priority. To have a meaningful discussion in this regard, first and foremost the EU must start a serious internal dialogue to develop a common position on UNSC reform that includes a clear endorsement of India’s bid for a permanent seat. This support must not be held hostage national ambitions or divisions between the Member States. A joint EU-India proposal on UNSC reform (i.e., number of members, geographical allocation, veto power) must aim at the commencement of negotiations on a draft agreement at the soonest.

Even if the reform remains stalled, this symbolic gesture should increase mutual trust and strengthen the EU-India strategic partnership, possibly paving the way for new joint initiatives on global challenges (e.g., Iran, terrorism, climate change, WHO reform) and new proposals to set standards and regulations in new areas (e.g., cybersecurity, Artificial Intelligence, etc.). If multilateralism is to survive, the EU and India need to engage each other at the UN level more seriously.