

EU-India strategic partnership: Taking the stock

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The prevalent perception of the European Union (EU) in India is predominantly constructed by the British and American media. At the time of a global economic downturn, its ripple effects on the continent especially on the 'PIIGS' (Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece and Spain) and an imminent crack in the Eurozone have been the debate of the day. In a recent article in *The National Interest*, James Joyner, has however examined this genre of 'Europe's obituary'. Making a comparison with EU's transatlantic sibling, he identifies three errors in this type of analyses, 'treating the EU as if it were a nation-state, regarding anything less than utopia as a failure, and projecting short-term trends long into the future'. However Joyner is also right when he describes the EU as 'a confusing array of overlapping treaty commitments'.

If this is the current discourse in the West about the future of EU, here in India, it is mainly considered as a trading bloc of 27 member countries out of them, three are most important for India: Britain, France and Germany. India prefers the bilateral mode and maintains strategic partnerships with all of them. Annual summits (though sometimes irregular) are the most important component of these strategic partnerships. Since 2001 annual summits are also conducted with the EU. First one was in Lisbon. The term 'strategic' was there in the joint declaration since the initiation of the summit-level dialogue. So it was rather comprehensible when India and the EU entered into a strategic partnership at the Hague Summit in 2004, that trade would be the backbone. But backbone alone does not make the body. Is it that given the trend of overexploitation of the term 'strategic partnership', it was also casually tagged with the EU-India relationship? Moreover, if it were merely a trading bloc, what kind of competence does it have in areas like security? And without a strong security component, any strategic partnership is essentially hollow.

The background is however different. The urge of the EU to build strategic partnerships with various parts of the world like China, India, Japan, Canada, indeed emanated from security imperatives. The first-ever European Security Strategy (ESS), adopted in December 2003, could be described as the harbinger. India also responded positively. Next year at The Hague Summit, India and EU entered into a strategic partnership. A Joint Action Plan was adopted in 2005. However in the intervening period it

has been felt that the annual summits have become mere rituals and if the incumbent presidency, is not one of the EU majors, there would hardly be any coverage in Indian media. The Implementation Report of the ESS in late 2008 also accepted the fact there is indeed an enough scope for cooperation. The EU-India Security Dialogue and the Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism (JWG-CT) have also remained only on paper. Reason was also that in the summer of 2005 EU faced another crisis in the form of Dutch and French referenda rejecting a Constitutional Treaty, which again put a big question mark in front of the European project. Similarly the post of the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, remained unoccupied for months, after the first incumbent had completed his term in March 2007. In the meantime, the EU also became a 27 member behemoth by including members from the Baltic and Central and East European countries (CEEC). The internal and external security challenges have also been unprecedented. It faced terrorist attacks in Madrid on March 11, 2004 and the suicide bombings in the London underground on July 7, 2005; security agencies have continuously been unearthing terrorist sleeper cells and foiled attacks; experienced the short-lived Russia-Georgia War. Last but the most important, keeping its soldiers posted in Afghanistan has also lead to radicalisation of a part of its young immigrant Muslim communities. The Af-Pak region offers these young extremists ample scope for graduation from the terrorist camps operating there. This security imperative is one of the prime reasons which led to two summit level talks between EU and Pakistan in the last one year. The senior EU officials also admit that the EU-Pakistan relationship has the main focus on Counter-Terrorism.

In December 2009, The Treaty of Lisbon came into force, which envisages, if not a phenomenal change, but an organisational centralisation of the bloc's common approach to the outer world in the form of a diplomatic service, the European External Action Service (EEAS). A European Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) would also be guiding the EU's role in conflict management, peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction missions in various parts of the world. As such, the aspiration of the bloc as a united, credible, security actor in various parts of the world is visible as well as well-documented. Whether this strategic ambition would be fulfilled and if it really would, then whether it would radically change the very nature of the bloc, is a matter of theoretical debate. At present sceptics are not so hopeful about the new EU diplomatic service and its functioning, but the time has not yet come to be judgmental of the EEAS. Undoubtedly it depends upon the member states or to be precise, major member states, for the success of the EEAS. But strategically, the notion of a common European Foreign and

Security Policy is evolving. An illustration would not be out of sync here, while this month the new British Foreign Secretary, William Hague, outlined the future contours of British foreign policy in his speech, 'Britain's Foreign Policy in a Networked World'. Hague has depicted the EU as a 'changing network' which is mutually beneficial for all member states but also hinted that the British approach so far to deal with largest member states is no more tenable.

India may also flag the new British approach where the smaller and newer EU member states can also be engaged in continuous dialogue apart from the EU majors. However in order to achieve the aim, the existing discussion fora should be revived and new institutes should be built. The focus should be to gather area experts, foreign policy analysts and academics from all member states and India in dedicated sub-groups to devote on various aspects of the strategic partnership. The image of 'Incredible India' in Europe is positive. The perception is no longer burdened by the clichéd images of poverty and social evils and India's rise is being observed with admiration. However observers have the feel that neither the EU nor its influential member states are sanguine what India actually wants from these strategic partnerships, which may be construed as India's unwillingness and prioritising India's relations with the US and South East Asia. This analysis is however not entirely correct. As there is a wider political consensus in India to deepen the EU-India strategic partnership, innovative ideas are required to make the strategic partnership more vibrant and multi-faceted and not annually ritualistic summit-based routine affair. Emulating Joyner, to comprehend the complex and 'confusing' structure of the EU, a steadily increasing pool of Indian expertise in EU affairs is required. Hence opportunities available of various European academic networks and think tanks have to be exploited. In the crucial sector of security the evolution of the EU would become a credible actor, however concrete areas of cooperation instead of annual and sporadic security dialogues and exchange of experience ought to be institutionalised.

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