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ARTICLE

The prospects for EU–India security cooperation

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Abstract For Europe, four security challenges predominate: Russian revanchism, Islamist terrorism, the migrant crisis, and the associated problems of civil war and state collapse in the Middle East and North Africa. For India, the environment looks very different. Its two most important security challenges are cross-border terrorism from Pakistan-based militant groups, often sponsored by the Pakistani intelligence services, and the steady growth of China's economic and military presence along India's land and maritime borders, including as part of the Belt and Road Initiative. These differing priorities risk pushing Europe and India in different directions. India's hope is that an improved US–Russia relationship will create a thaw in Europe, allowing all parties—India, Europe and the US—to focus on addressing China's rise. But there is little sign of such a shift at present. However, there is considerable room for greater convergence on a range of issues, such as maritime security, Afghanistan and counterterrorism.

Keywords EU | India | China | Terrorism | Middle East | Afghanistan

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Introduction

In his recent book, *How India Sees the World*, the distinguished Indian diplomat and former foreign secretary Shyam Saran reflects on Europe's place in the world and India's relationship with it. In 2004–5, when Saran was leading India's Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi and Brussels 'had forged a very strong partnership based on shared values as multi-ethnic, multicultural, multi-religious, multilingual plural democracies. Each side had a stake in the success of the other, and India looked upon a strong, united Europe as a pole in its own right in the global order' (Saran 2017, 52). Indeed, it was in November 2004, at the fifth India–EU summit in The Hague, that the two powers signed a strategic partnership, including a breakthrough agreement on nuclear energy.

Unfortunately, Saran goes on to note, that momentum has gone. The eurozone crisis, Britain's vote to leave the EU and US–Europe tensions under the Trump administration have taken their toll. 'It appears unlikely that the promise of a cohesive Europe playing the role of an influential international actor, either in its own right or as part of a powerful trans-Atlantic partnership, will be realized in the foreseeable future, if ever', Saran (2017, 263) laments, implying that Europe's value as a partner to India has correspondingly diminished.

Is this pessimism warranted, or can the spirit of the mid-2000s be recaptured in this era of greater nationalism, instability and uncertainty?

European and Indian priorities

It may be worth reviewing each side's security priorities. For Europe, four challenges predominate: Russian revanchism, Islamist terrorism, the migrant crisis, and the associated problems of civil war and state collapse in the Middle East and North Africa (Ekim 2017). For India, the environment looks very different. Its two most important challenges are cross-border terrorism from Pakistan-based militant groups, often sponsored by the Pakistani intelligence services, and the steady growth of China's economic and military presence along India's land and maritime borders, including as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

These are not self-evidently complementary agendas. While India perceives a large and growing threat from China, Europe's own efforts to create an economic and military balance vis-à-vis Russia have in fact pushed Moscow and Beijing closer to one another—to New Delhi's detriment. At the same time, India's efforts to prevent Russia from drifting closer to China (and Pakistan) have led New Delhi to take a softer line on Russia's aggressive behaviour in Europe (Radyuhin 2014). While India has aggressively opposed the BRI (Jaishankar 2017), the EU—particularly some Central and Southern European member states—has been more receptive (Le Corre 2017). This is a structural problem: Europe's priority is Russia, while India's priority is China. This

pushes them in different directions. India's hope is that an improved US–Russia relationship will create a thaw in Europe, allowing all parties—India, Europe and the US—to focus on addressing China's rise; but there is little sign of such a thaw at present.

Moreover, each side's concerns around terrorism are distinct. The threat to Europe arises principally from European nationals and residents with ties to Islamic State and Al Qaeda, while India's concern is Pakistan-based groups with a local, India-focused agenda. India, like Russia, believes that Europe should support, rather than undermine, the Syrian regime in order to reduce instability and terrorism. Meanwhile, European states—and particularly Britain, with its large Pakistani diaspora—have historically required a high degree of intelligence cooperation with Pakistan, and have placed a lower priority on 'local' groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba or Jaish-e-Mohammed.

EU–India convergence

However, on both of these issues, we should not exaggerate the tensions. There is in fact considerable room for convergence. While Russia looms larger, the EU has not overlooked the Chinese challenge. The EU's *Global Strategy*, published in November 2016, is clear that 'peace and stability in Asia are a prerequisite for our prosperity', and that this requires upholding the 'freedom of navigation,… respect for international law, including the Law of the Sea and its arbitration procedures, and… the peaceful settlement of maritime disputes' (European Council 2016c, 37–8). This language, clearly directed at Chinese behaviour in the East and South China Seas, echoes that used by India, including in New Delhi's joint statements with security partners (*The Wire* 2017; *Times of India* 2017). In July 2016, the EU responded to China's rejection of a Permanent Court of Arbitration verdict with a strong statement invoking 'the international order based upon the Rule of Law', and implying that Chinese behaviour had put this at risk (European Council 2016b).

India's most important security partners in creating a counterbalance against China are the US, Japan, Australia and Vietnam, with a particular emphasis on maritime cooperation in the form of naval drills. There is considerable scope for greater cooperation between India and Europe's key naval powers in this area. France, which argues that Chinese behaviour in the South China Sea could affect maritime rights in the Arctic or Mediterranean, has called for a 'regular and visible' European presence in the South China Sea (Yee 2016), while the UK has conducted over-flights of the area (Brunnstrom 2016) and has signalled that its two new aircraft carriers will be sent on patrol there (Johnson 2017).

India is eager that regional naval cooperation is not viewed as a military alliance directed at China; an advantage of EU–India cooperation is that European involvement not only diversifies India's security relationships at a time of flux, but also that European forces are less threatening to Beijing than those of the US or Japan. However, there will be questions over the sustainability and persistence of any European naval presence

in Asia, and whether Europe can develop the breadth to make it more than an Anglo-French initiative (McGrath 2013).

Beyond naval cooperation, the EU and India would also benefit from greater coordination in their responses to the BRI. Both sides want to see Chinese investment that is transparent, sustainable and firewalled from non-civilian (intelligence or military) uses. While European states will continue to be more comfortable with the BRI than India is, they could include coordinated language in future joint statements, much as India has done with the US (White House 2017). This might be accompanied by mutual consultations on the shared concern regarding Chinese investment in strategic sectors, such as telecommunications and artificial intelligence (Varadhan and Dasgupta 2017; Huang 2017; Beesley 2017).

On terrorism, the EU and India have also made important progress. At the 13th EU–India Summit in March 2016, attended by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the leaders issued a joint declaration on counterterrorism (Mohan and Xavier 2017). As with maritime security, the UK and France have made the important interventions. Both have strongly supported India's interests in the UN, notably by co-sponsoring resolutions (with the US) in the so-called 1267 Committee to designate the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed leader, Masood Azhar, an international terrorist (*The Hindu* 2017). The 10th India–EU Counter Terrorism Dialogue in August 2017 also strengthened links between Indian security agencies and their European counterparts, including Europol, among other steps forward (India, Ministry of External Affairs 2017).

In practice, counterterrorism cooperation is likely to remain lopsided because of the larger European capability and interest in India's neighbourhood relative to India's capability and interest in the Middle East and Europe. For instance, Europe will have greater information about and interest in Pakistan-based plots against Indian cities than India will in Islamic State plots against European cities. Moreover, the counterterrorism relationship is also likely to remain largely bilateral because of the concentration of global intelligence capabilities in a handful of Western European states and the EU's very limited institutional capacity.

Broader security cooperation

More broadly, Garima Mohan and Constantino Xavier (2017, 5) argue that the EU and India have shared interests in a 'Eurasian arc of instability', which stretches from Turkey to Pakistan, and as far south as the Indian Ocean. Two of the most important areas of overlap are likely to be in the Middle East and Afghanistan.

As India's strategic horizons grow, the Middle East has become increasingly important as a provider of energy, as home to six to seven million Indian citizens, as a source of religious extremism and as an arena for anti-Indian terrorist networks (Joshi 2015, 251–3). India has correspondingly deepened relations with both Iran and the United Arab Emirates, and expanded its naval presence in the Western Indian Ocean. Meanwhile,

several European powers are actively involved in military operations against Islamic State, with the UK and France deepening ties to their own partners in the Gulf Cooperation Council. While European nations are closer to Arab states and India is closer to Iran, both nonetheless seek a balanced relationship with both sides of the sectarian divide. European states have eagerly sought access to Iran's post-sanctions economy, while India sees Iran as an important conduit to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Both Brussels and New Delhi oppose the Trump administration's efforts to unpick the Iranian nuclear deal, and will find common cause should Washington repudiate the agreement. In recent years, as the India–Israel relationship has grown in importance, with the first visit by an Indian prime minister to Israel occurring in 2017, India has also shifted towards a more balanced position on the Israel–Palestine dispute, in the direction of the European stance.

On Afghanistan, both sides have a stake in the survival of the Afghan government against the growing insurgency. European states have been major contributors to the US-led war in Afghanistan, and many—notably Italy, with over 1,000 troops; Germany, with over 900; and Romania, with almost 600—remain so (NATO 2017). India has also expanded its own security cooperation with Kabul, providing officer training and attack helicopters (Krishnamurthy 2017). President Trump's August 2017 decision to increase troop levels in Afghanistan is likely to create pressures on both Europe and India to increase their own involvement, although both will prefer to do so through non-military means.

In recent years, European countries and India have been on the periphery of the most important diplomacy surrounding the Afghan war—such as the Quadrilateral Coordination Group, and direct talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban—but they have maintained a close interest in these processes. The EU hosted the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan in October 2016 (European Council 2016a), while India has played a role in the six rounds of the Heart of Asia—Istanbul Process held so far (Nanda 2016). With greater uncertainty around the position of the US, and both Iran and Russia moving closer to the Taliban, there is scope for the EU and India to consult more closely on their approach to any political settlement, including provisions for human rights, the rule of law and democracy.

Beyond these regional issues, there may also be scope for greater EU–India cooperation on other traditional and emerging security issues. One such issue is non-proliferation. With India's nuclear programme having been 'normalised' over the past decade, and New Delhi joining several arms control regimes, such as the Missile Technology Control Regime, many of the old obstacles to EU–India cooperation have diminished or fallen away. Both sides wish to keep the Middle East free of nuclear weapons, to limit North Korea's nuclear programme and to prevent any transfer of Pakistani nuclear technologies to third countries. However, the ongoing objection of the EU member states of Austria and Ireland to Indian membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group is likely to be a continued irritant (Williams 2016).

Conclusion

Over the past decade, Europe has been mired in its own economic and security challenges. It is no longer viewed as a credible and cohesive future 'pole' of the international system, on a par with the US, China and other great powers, as it was in the 2000s. However, Europe's major powers retain large and growing interests in Asia, with the UK and France emphasising maritime security, and Germany and Italy retaining a substantial footprint in Afghanistan. As a bloc, the EU has also engaged with Asian security issues, framing China's behaviour in maritime disputes as a matter affecting the rules-based international order. At the same time, India is growing more active in areas of European concern, including the Middle East and Central Asia.

The challenge is translating these overlapping interests into concrete forms of cooperation. At a time when Europe is having to deal with a wave of Islamist terrorist attacks on the continent, an ongoing war in Ukraine and a continuing migrant crisis, is Asian maritime security of sufficient importance to drive a credible European response, several thousands of miles away, such that it would force India to take Europe seriously as a security partner, as it does Australia or Japan? And despite the weakening bonds of the India–Russia relationship, New Delhi continues to place value on Russia as a source of defence technology, a counterbalance against China and a hedge against the vagaries of American policy. There will therefore be a gap between Europe's approach to India's principal challenger (China) and India's to Europe's (Russia): while Europeans may play a role, albeit a modest one, in upholding (or influencing) Asian security, India is unlikely to play an equal role in the European region.

Nevertheless, it is in Europe's interest that Asia remains secure and stable. This interest relates to a number of issues, including avoiding a war on the Korean peninsula and preventing a collapse of the Afghan state. However, most European states agree that China's rise, and the way it pursues its interests, is perhaps the largest and most complex challenge in this regard. Although India perceives a direct security threat from China in a way that Europeans do not, there is a shared desire to shape Beijing's behaviour to ensure that it is stable, responsible and rule-bound.

Europe has only limited surplus military capacity to contribute to the loose balancing coalitions currently taking shape in Asia, such as the US–India–Japan trilateral (or, with Australia, quadrilateral). One of the most important forms of influence, the sale of high-end armaments, will remain vested in national governments, with France and the UK vying for commercial opportunities in India. But Europe can have a larger impact through coordinated policies, such as joint European freedom-of-navigation patrols during moments of elevated tension, and the use of wider EU resources. With Britain's impending departure from the EU, coordinating the policies of Europe's most Asia-focused powers will be increasingly difficult—but all the more important.

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