

ANALYSIS 2/2024

Strategic Convergence Under the Radar

Europe and India After Russia's Invasion

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Among countries of the so-called Global South, India is a particularly relevant player. Thus, the EU and several of its member states have been enhancing their efforts to deepen ties with New Delhi over the past several years. Then, Russia's war on Ukraine revealed differences between India and Europe over perceptions of the international order on the whole and how to deal with Moscow in particular. Many Europeans began to worry that the war had exposed the limits of closer cooperation with New Delhi. Under the radar, however, the strategic challenges that both Europeans and Indians face and the lessons both sides have drawn from this conflict, remarkably, have converged since the beginning of Russia's war. Survey data collected for the Munch Security Index 2024 highlights three areas where strategic overlap is particularly pronounced and can serve as the basis for enhanced Indo-European cooperation and greater mutual strategic empathy.

The assessment that India is a desirable strategic partner for the European Union (EU) and its member states has been reflected in recent years by strategic documents and political statements issued by the EU and various individual EU countries. Such a determination is based as much on India's growing economic and political clout in the international order – with India set to become the world's third largest economy by 2030 and perceptions of it being both an emerging counterweight to China and potential bridge between the West and countries of the Global South¹ – as it is based on the reasoning that Europe and India share not only a commitment to key values but also a similar outlook on many global

challenges.² In its conclusions on the “EU Strategy on India” from 2018, the European Council highlighted the “increasing role and responsibility of India on the global stage,” emphasizing the relevance of closer cooperation on strengthening the rules-based global order and on a range of other global issues.³ The assessment by the capitals of Western EU members states reads quite similar: The French Indo-Pacific strategy highlights India as a pivotal partner among the “like-minded countries in the region,” with whom France seeks to jointly address the “profound

1 “India to Be World's Third-Largest Economy by 2030 – S&P Global Ratings,” Reuters, December 5, 2023; Nick Alipour, “Germany Woos India to Tackle Trade Dependence With China,” *Euractiv*, July 20, 2023; Baru Sanjaya, “India Can Still Be a Bridge to the Global South,” *Foreign Policy*, March 2, 2023.

2 This emphasis on shared values has so far persisted, despite growing concern about what the rise of Hindu nationalism spells for Muslim Indians; see Ashutosh Varshney and Connor Staggs, “Hindu Nationalism and the New Jim Crow,” *Journal of Democracy* 35:1 (2024), 5–18.

3 “Council Conclusions on the EU Strategy on India,” Brussels: Council of the European Union, December 2018, <https://perma.cc/45H4-FFGC>.

strategic changes” that are occurring there.⁴ German decision-makers have likewise acknowledged India’s role as a “key partner in the [Indo-Pacific] region.”⁵ Meanwhile, Italian leaders have stated a desire “to build a strategic partnership” between India and Italy, highlighting the “high degree of convergence in the political, economic, and strategic interests of the two countries.”⁶

Against this backdrop, European leaders became concerned about the effect Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine would have on Indo-European relations. In their perception, the war and the way both India and Europe responded to it exposed fundamentally different views not merely regarding how to deal with a revisionist Russia but also the desirability of the existing international order as such, which Europeans perceive to be under Russian attack. They worried Russia’s war had exposed the limits of closer cooperation and strategic convergence with India. Europeans were taken aback when New Delhi refused to condemn Russia’s war at the United Nations and instead ramped up its import of discounted Russian crude oil. Meanwhile, Indians were frustrated that Europeans framed Russia’s war as a global threat and expected India and others to come to their aid. From New Delhi’s point of view, this request was highly inconsistent with Europe’s routine disregard for the revisionist threats confronting India. This perception of double standards was aptly expressed by India’s Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar when he argued that “Europe has to get out of the mindset that Europe’s problems are the world’s problems but the world’s problems are not Europe’s problems.”⁷

Yet, the focus on frictions and disagreements overlooks the remarkable similarities in the strategic challenges that European countries and India have both begun to face since Russia started its war – and in the lessons they have drawn from it. These similarities are also reflected in survey data from three Western EU member states and India, polled between October 24 and November 16, 2023

for the Munich Security Index 2024.⁸ Three areas are particularly pronounced: the recent pivot in both sides’ perceptions of the threat posed by powerful neighbors, the three EU countries’ and India’s new concern about unsustainable foreign dependencies, and the growing disquiet about their future ability to conduct independent foreign policy. This, of course, does not mean that Europe’s and India’s strategic outlooks and foreign-policy preferences are now totally in sync. Disagreement persists on various topics – including among the Europeans themselves. And some of these differences have profound consequences for the ability of India and European countries to jointly shape the future international order. But if the EU and its member states on the one side and India on the other do indeed seek to build a stronger partnership – a mutually declared goal – they would do well to acknowledge the extent to which their foreign-policy concerns have converged.

Revisionist Neighbors

Since Russia started its war, not only Europeans but also Indians have watched security deteriorate in their neighborhoods. The perception of freedom and peace that many Europeans had fervently been clinging to had already been debunked in 2014 by Russia’s annexation of Crimea and military intervention in eastern Ukraine. Yet, in Western EU countries, it took Russia’s full-scale invasion to fundamentally transform their perception of their security environment and the threat posed by their neighbor to the East. For France, Germany, and Italy, among others, the conviction that European interstate wars were a thing of the past collapsed on February 24, 2022. The return of war to the continent forced them to (once again) abandon the widespread belief that European security could be attained together with Russia rather than only achieved against it.⁹

India never had the privilege of a peaceful neighborhood. For New Delhi, Beijing has been a long-term strategic concern, and simmering tensions with Pakistan have repeatedly boiled over into armed hostilities. Yet India has seen a recent spike in concern about Chinese intentions. Overall, New Delhi has come to see Beijing as a threat to India’s influence in the Indo-Pacific region, to its economic opportunities, and even to its territorial integrity. It has been particularly alarmed by what it sees as China’s

4 “France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy: Summary,” Paris: Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of France, July 2021, <https://perma.cc/F859-LWYS>. While the strategy was published in 2021, an earlier version of it, published in 2018 by the French Defense Ministry, contained similar language about India as a “strategic centre [...] of gravity”; see “France and Security in the Indo-Pacific,” Paris: Ministry of the Armed Forces, May 2019, <https://perma.cc/PA7Q-JQP2>.

5 “Germany and India: Pulling in the Same Direction on Security Policy Issues,” Berlin: Federal Foreign Office, November 1, 2019, <https://perma.cc/F45T-PKDP>.

6 “India-Italy Joint Statement and Plan of Action 2020–2024,” Rome/New Delhi: Ministry of External Affairs of the Republic of India, November 6, 2020, <https://www.mea.gov.in/virtual-meetings-detail.htm?33171/IndiaItaly+Joint+Statement+and+Plan+of+Action+20202024>.

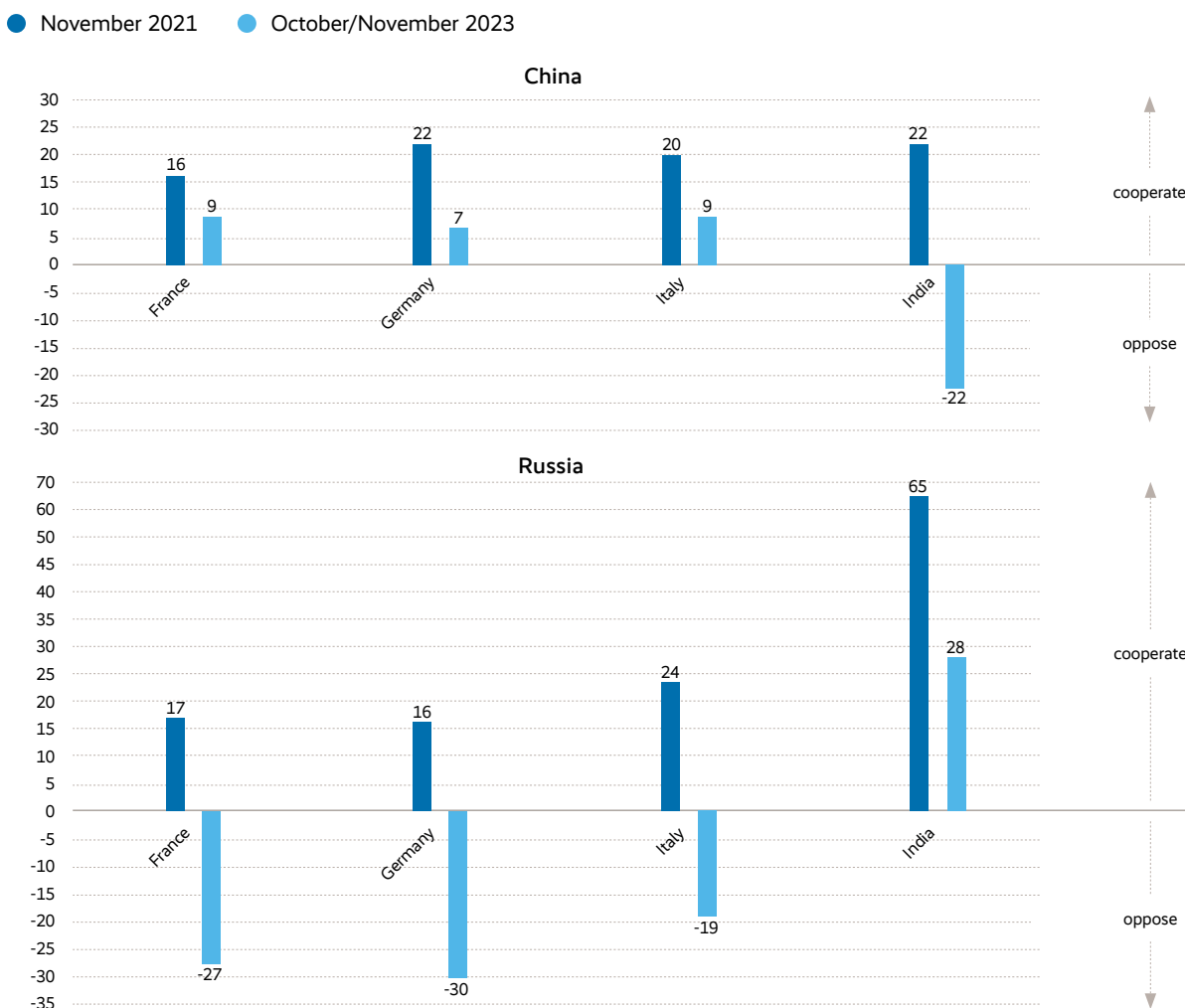
7 “EAM S Jaishankar Goes Viral for Savage Reply to Question About India’s Stance on Ukraine,” News 18, June 3, 2022, <https://perma.cc/Y86Y-8SUZ>.

8 Since 2021, the Munich Security Conference and Kekst CNC have collected data for the Munich Security Index (MSI) to answer core questions that help understand global risk perceptions. Surveys are based on representative samples of 1,000 people from each G7 country, Brazil, China, India, and South Africa, and, since 2022, Ukraine. For more information about the index and the methodology used, see Tobias Bunde, Sophie Eisentraut, and Leonard Schütte (eds.), *Munich Security Report 2024: Lose-Lose?*, Munich: Munich Security Conference, February 2024, <https://doi.org/10.47342/BMQK9457>, 26–45.

9 Tobias Bunde and Sophie Eisentraut, “Zeitenwende for the G7: Insights From the Munich Security Index Special G7 Edition,” Munich: Munich Security Conference, Munich Security Brief 3, June 2022, <https://doi.org/10.47342/JDIE4364>.

Figure 1

Peoples’ preferences for their country’s response to China/Russia, share saying their country should cooperate with China/Russia economically minus share saying their country should oppose China/Russia economically, November 2021 and October–November 2023, percent



Data: Kekst CNC, commissioned by the Munich Security Conference. Illustration: Munich Security Conference¹³

attempt to “encircle India both economically and strategically”¹⁰ – economically through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the pursuit of China’s Belt and Road Initiative in India’s immediate neighborhood; strategically through the construction of military facilities like the Chinese base in Djibouti and ports that India fears could be turned into naval facilities. And although standoffs between Chinese and Indian troops along a disputed border stretch have happened before, the last one, which resulted in a clash that killed 20 Indian soldiers, initiated a profound change in India’s perception of China as “an imminent and acute challenge.”¹¹

On the question of how to deal with China, Indians’ opinions have thus pivoted just as many Europeans’ have

vis-à-vis Russia, as evidenced by opinion data collected for the Munich Security Index 2024 (Figure 1). While in the fall of 2021, decisively more people in France, Germany, and Italy were still convinced that their countries should cooperate with Russia rather than oppose it economically, by October and November 2023, majorities in all three countries opposed economic cooperation with Moscow.¹² Similarly, at the end of 2021,

¹⁰ “Winning Friends and Buying Influence: How China Is Encircling India,” *Times of India*, Jul 30, 2021.

¹¹ Tanvi Madan, “China Has Lost India,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 4, 2022. Four Chinese soldiers also died in the 2020 border clash.

¹² In October and November 2022, this opposition was even more pronounced; see Tobias Bunde et al., “Munich Security Report 2023: Re:vision,” Munich: Munich Security Conference, February 2023, <https://doi.org/10.47342/ZBJA9198>, 26.

¹³ In answer to the questions “Economically, what do you think your country should do in response to the rise of China as a military and economic power?” and “Economically, what do you think your country should do in response to Russia as a military and economic power?” respondents were given the following options: “fully cooperate with X,” “somewhat cooperate with X,” “stay neutral,” “somewhat oppose X,” “fully oppose X,” and “don’t know.” The figure shown is calculated from the net responses “cooperating” and “opposing.”

a plurality of Indian respondents still preferred economic cooperation with Beijing; two years later, however, this has become a minority view – rendering India the country with the strongest opposition to economic cooperation with China among all twelve countries surveyed.

Yet, neither Europeans nor Indians seem fully aware of the extent to which the other feels their national security interests have come under threat. Both sides would clearly benefit from greater sensitivity to each other's security concerns – if Europeans were to acknowledge the way they view Russia is not much different from the way many Indians see Beijing, and if India recognized Europeans' fear of Russia to be based on the same existential threat that many Indians perceive China to be.

Unsustainable Dependencies on Each Other's Major Rivals

Not only for Europeans but also for Indians, Russia's war has highlighted the risks of excessive foreign dependencies. Both have grown more concerned about their dependence on the respective others' main rival: Europe about its economic dependence on China and India about its military reliance on Russia. Rising suspicion about Sino-Russian alignment, which has accelerated since Moscow started its war, is one key reason for this spike in concern. Among both Indian and European respondents, majorities now state that they see closer military cooperation between China and Russia as a "high" risk to the world.¹⁴ In India, 62 percent of respondents state this view, while in France, Germany, and Italy, it is 56, 61, and 58 percent, respectively. Moreover, India is well aware that a country waging an all-out war against another – and whose defense sector is targeted by Western sanctions – is an unreliable provider of much-needed military equipment.¹⁵ Meanwhile, with Russia, Europe has experienced first-hand that economic overdependence on autocratic states bears excessive risks, especially in strategic sectors.

For now, however, the more immediate threats both sides face – India from China and European countries from Russia – are turning efforts to reduce their harmful dependences into difficult balancing acts. Fearing it could imperil its military preparedness at a time when the perceived threat from China is growing, India is cautious to wind down its arms imports from Russia prematurely. Although Russia's share of India's arms imports has indeed fallen over the past several years and is bound to continue in view of New Delhi's declared goal of diversifying and indigenizing its defense supplies, for

¹⁴ In response to the question "How great a risk do the following things pose to the world: China and Russia cooperating more closely militarily?," respondents were able to answer on a scale from 0 ("very small risk") to 10 ("very high risk"). The percentage of respondents who think the risk is "high" are those who gave an answer greater than 6 out of 10.

¹⁵ Happymon Jacob, "Russia Is Losing India," *Foreign Affairs*, September 22, 2022.

now, India remains highly dependent on Russian military technologies and equipment.¹⁶ With a share of 45 percent of Indian defense imports between 2018 and 2022, Russia remains India's biggest arms supplier.¹⁷ Moreover, India is concerned that a globally isolated Russia would no longer serve as a counterweight against China; rather, Russia risks "slipping ever deeper into Beijing's orbit."¹⁸ Its worst-case scenario would be an anti-India coalition of the nuclear-armed powers China, Pakistan, and Russia. Thus, while views of Russia have also deteriorated among Indians surveyed for the Munich Security Index, they clearly prefer to continue cooperating with Russia both militarily and economically (Figure 1).

Europe's balancing act with China does not look much different. At a time when European economies are still coping with the fallout of a hasty decoupling from Russian energy, there is little appetite for cutting ties with yet another country with whom European economies are closely intertwined. While European governments have become much more clear-eyed about the risk posed by economic cooperation with China and many are now trying to "de-risk" their economies from Beijing, data collected for the index shows that in France, Germany, and Italy, those who prefer to continue economic cooperation with China still outnumber those who do not (Figure 1). For now, many Europeans prefer to simultaneously define China as a partner, competitor, and rival – a triad introduced by the EU in 2019 that is difficult to understand for New Delhi, for whom the dimension of rivalry clearly dominates. India and European countries would mutually benefit

” *Russia's war has realigned Europe's security outlook to mirror the foreign-policy realism of India.*

from more strategic empathy for the balancing acts they each face. More importantly, however, they would benefit from greater assistance in reducing their strategic vulnerabilities. For India, closer defense cooperation with European countries would help it modernize its defense industry and diversify its acquisition of military equipment. Europeans, in turn, would profit from more closely cooperating with India when it comes to diversifying trade, investment, and supply chains away from Beijing.¹⁹

¹⁶ Akriti Kalyankar and Dante Schulz, "Continental Drift? India-Russia Ties After One Year of War in Ukraine," Washington, DC: Stimson, March 9, 2023, <https://perma.cc/TEN2-7SDK>.

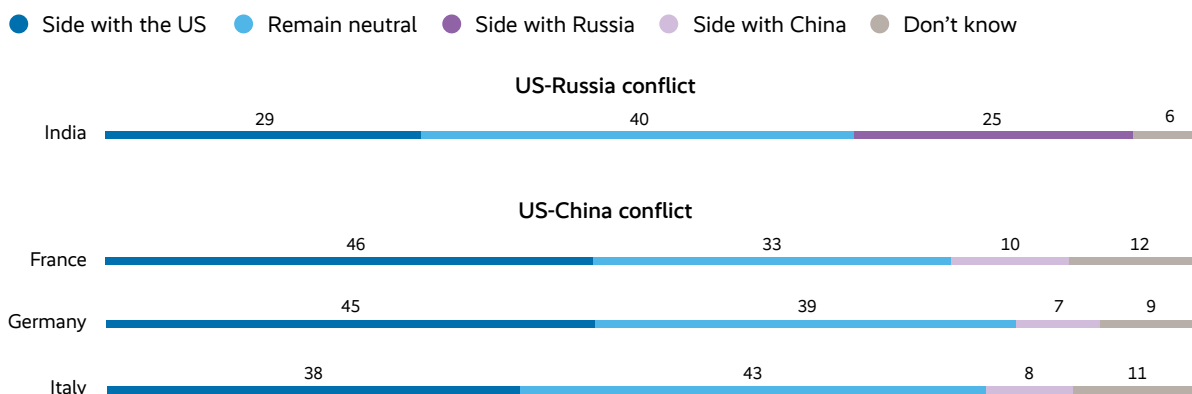
¹⁷ Pieter D. Wezeman, Justine Gadon, and Siemon T. Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2022," Stockholm: SIPRI, SIPRI Fact Sheet, March 2023, <https://perma.cc/Z55D-LT2R>, 6.

¹⁸ Frédéric Grare, "A Question of Balance: India and Europe After Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," ECFR, Policy Brief, May 16, 2022, <https://perma.cc/7M98-BQWV>.

¹⁹ See "India and the European Union in 2030: Building a Closer Economic Relationship," New Delhi/Paris: Observer Research Foundation; Jacques Delors Institute, June 2023, <https://perma.cc/DX97-W4Z2>.

Figure 2

Views on who to side with in a US-Russia or US-China conflict, October–November 2023, percent



Data: Kekst CNC, commissioned by the Munich Security Conference. Illustration: Munich Security Conference²²

Strategic Sovereignty at Risk

As Russia's war has accelerated great power competition, it has also raised concerns in New Delhi and in many European capitals about how to preserve their strategic sovereignty in a climate of intense geopolitical rivalry. Although EU member states are far from aligned on how they interpret or approach the notion of strategic sovereignty, many Europeans share India's desire to retain as much as possible of their "ability to make independent economic and strategic choices."²⁰ Moreover, neither Europe nor India wants to get caught in the wheels of growing geopolitical confrontation between the US on one side, and China or Russia on the other. This also includes a desire for strategic neutrality in the case that rivalries escalate. Data from the index shows that key European countries are just as reluctant to choose sides in a potential US-China contingency as Indians are in a potential conflict between Russia and the US (Figure 2). In India, 40 percent – a plurality of respondents – prefer to remain neutral in a US-Russia conflict. Similarly, in a conflict between China and the US, a plurality of Italians (43 percent) and more than a third of respondents in Germany and France (39 and 33 percent, respectively) would prefer to remain neutral – although more German and French respondents (45 and 46 percent, respectively) say they would rather side with the US.²¹

In order to strengthen their agency in foreign policy, both India and Europe would benefit from closer collaboration with each other and with like-minded middle powers in other parts of the world. For India, as for many other influential countries in the Global South, closer cooperation with the EU and individual member states could be part of a broader strategy of diversifying their relationships in an effort to "expand their strategic autonomy and maximize their options."²³ Forging stronger ties with India and other rising middle powers could also serve a series of Europe's stated goals: 1) to "counter the emergence of new blocs,"²⁴ 2) revive multilateral problem-solving in an era of great power paralysis, and 3) increase Europe's leverage – and thus agency – vis-à-vis both China and the US.²⁵

Limits of Convergence

While the merits of greater strategic empathy and the benefits of closer collaboration become clear in light of the challenges shared, these similarities must not raise unrealistic expectations. Dialogue can certainly help increase understanding of one another, but Europeans should not expect Indians to acquiesce to the predominant European view of Russia's war as a global threat. As data from the Munich Security Index highlights, more Indians still agree rather than disagree with the depiction of the war in Ukraine as a problem solely for Europeans – even if this perception has somewhat receded over the past 12 months (Figure 3).

²⁰ Aslı Aydıntaşbaş et al., "Strategic Interdependence: Europe's New Approach in a World of Middle Powers," ECFR, Policy Brief, October 3, 2023, <https://perma.cc/A8FS-SCMF>.

²¹ An ECFR poll conducted in April 2023 that asked who people wanted to side with in a potential conflict between the US and China over Taiwan found an even stronger desire for neutrality among German, French, and Italian respondents; see Jana Puglierin and Pawel Zerka, "Keeping America Close, Russia Down, and China Far Away: How Europeans Navigate a Competitive World," ECFR, Policy Brief, June 7, 2023, <https://perma.cc/Y93Y-TJYB>.

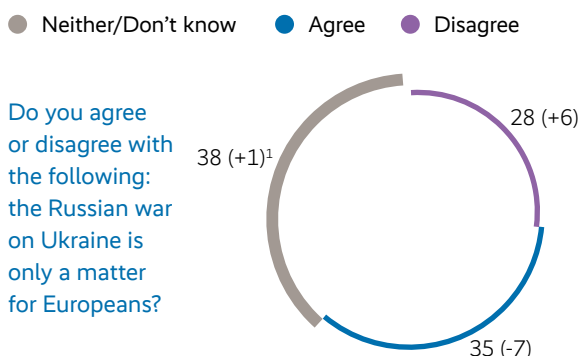
²² The figure is based on responses to the question "Whose side should your country take in a conflict between the following countries?"

²³ William J. Burns, "A World Transformed and the Role of Intelligence," Ditchley Park: Ditchley Foundation, July 1, 2023, <https://perma.cc/3XES-FARN>.

²⁴ The Federal Government, "Robust. Resilient. Sustainable. Integrated Security for Germany: National Security Strategy," Berlin: Federal Foreign Office, June 2023, <https://perma.cc/WP4C-8SW5>.

²⁵ Theodore Murphy, "Neither America Nor China: How Europeans Can Shape a New Order With the Global South," ECFR, May 18, 2023, <https://perma.cc/SMB7-EGWC>.

Figure 3
Indians' views on Russia's war,
October–November 2023, percent



¹ Numbers in brackets indicate change in percentage points since October–November 2022

Data: Kekst CNC, commissioned by the Munich Security Conference.
 Illustration: Munich Security Conference²⁶

Similarly, while both sides stand to benefit by helping each other to reduce their strategic vulnerabilities and to mutually increase their political room for maneuver, Europeans should not assume that India will use its growing foreign policy agency for cooperating on the type of policies – let alone the type of international order – that many Europeans desire. Most importantly, they should not expect that India's reduced dependence on Moscow would yield a more principled stance against Russia's aggression. For New Delhi, not taking sides – what political scientists would call hedging but India prefers to call balancing²⁷ – is not simply a rational response to a concrete conflict of interest. It is a useful approach to maximize India's policy options, increase its strategic autonomy, and ensure that in cooperating with other countries throughout the world India is not pushed into an inferior position. From that perspective, turning against another country shrinks New Delhi's policy options, while allegiance with others “diminishes” India.²⁸ Foreign Minister Jaishankar vigorously defended this multi-alignment policy at the Munich Security Conference 2024, arguing that “if I am smart enough to have multiple options, you should be admiring me.” In short, while Europeans are hedging out of necessity, India is hedging out of conviction.

²⁶ Respondents were given the following options: “strongly agree,” “slightly agree,” “neither agree nor disagree,” “slightly disagree,” “strongly disagree,” and “don't know.” Figures shown here combine the net responses agreeing and disagreeing, with the gray area representing the rest.

²⁷ “EAM Jaishankar on Policy Shift Pre and Post-Modi Era: ‘New Way of Thinking,’” *The Economic Times*, January 6, 2024.

²⁸ Christopher S. Chivvis and Beatrix Geaghan-Breiner, “India in the Emerging World Order,” Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 6, 2023, <https://perma.cc/K5C7-C4AN>.

Moreover, decision-makers in New Delhi and several European capitals are exploring the concept of multipolarity as an alternative to bloc confrontation, but the multipolar world India chooses to pursue might not have much in common with the multipolarity Europe desires. For many Europeans, the notion contains the hope that a world with multiple power centers is a world still governed by established rules and principles.²⁹ As German Chancellor Olaf Scholz argued before the UN General Assembly in September 2023, “order in a multipolar world” still requires commitment to key universal principles and it demands “all of us” rising to defend them whenever such rules are breached.³⁰ For India, a multipolar world is a world much less shaped by the West, where powerful countries like India can pursue multi-alignment to maximize their interests.³¹ It is thus far from evident how India's view of multipolarization, where hedging is the norm and the merit of partnerships often judged by whoever offers “the best possible deals,”³² can be squared with Europe's preference for rules-based multilateralism.

A Partnership Built on Strategic Overlap

Russia's war against Ukraine has accelerated and accentuated a remarkable convergence in threat perceptions between European countries and India. On a more fundamental level, the war has forced Europeans to adjust to a new security environment where its neighbors use violence to achieve political aims, where borders matter but never feel secure, and where any thought of strategic sovereignty is futile if not backed up by credible military force. At the Munich Security Conference 2024, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell highlighted that Europeans are “not able to play a geopolitical role if we cannot defend ourselves.” While European countries still have to translate this conclusion into actionable policies, Russia's war has realigned their security outlook to mirror the foreign-policy realism of India, which never experienced a peace dividend and had always been at home in a region shaped by hard power politics. But the war has aligned European countries and India on a series of other strategic concerns as well. These include growing Sino-Russian cooperation and its consequences for the geopolitical balance in Europe and the Indo-Pacific, the strategic risks that come with excessive dependencies on unpredictable states, and the difficulty

²⁹ Jo Inge Bekkevold, “No, the World Is Not Multipolar,” *Foreign Policy*, September 22, 2023.

³⁰ Olaf Scholz, “Speech by Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz at the 78th General Debate of the United Nations General Assembly New York, Tuesday,” New York: UNGA, September 19, 2023, <https://perma.cc/8V2Q-SZN5>.

³¹ Roger Cohen, “Russia's War Could Make It India's World,” *The New York Times*, December 31, 2022.

³² “‘Europeans Needed a Wake-Up Call to Understand...’ Jaishankar on a New World Order,” *Times of India*, January 4, 2023.

of preserving one's ability to conduct an independent foreign policy in a world marked by pronounced great-power rivalry.

While shared strategic interests are not the only factor that informs countries' decisions to deepen ties with one another, in times of growing geopolitical tensions they are increasingly relevant to consider. Greater awareness of strategic similarities is thus indispensable for efforts to build a stronger Indo-European partnership. Clearly, EU countries and India would benefit if the other side showed greater sensitivity to their security concerns. And deepening cooperation could help each side better address the threats they face, reduce the strategic vulnerabilities that put them at risk, and build overall resilience in the face of a more challenging geopolitical climate. Greater strategic empathy is also the best foundation for engaging each other in those areas where differences remain. For Europe, this includes open questions about how China's revisionist ambitions can be tamed at all if Beijing continues to witness the wider international community's unwillingness to impose costs on Russian revisionism, about how political hedging can be squared with the necessary defense of cherished international rules and principles, and about the rules and norms India envisions as the stabilizing foundations of a more multipolar world.

Key Points

- 1 Russia's war on Ukraine revealed differences between India and Europe over perceptions of the international order on the whole and how to deal with Moscow in particular.
- 2 Yet, under the radar, the strategic challenges that both Europeans and Indians face and the lessons both sides have drawn from this conflict have converged since Russia started its war.
- 3 Since the beginning of Russia's invasion, both Europeans and Indians have watched security deteriorate in their neighborhoods, have become more concerned about unsustainable foreign dependencies, and have come to feel growing disquiet about their future ability to conduct independent foreign policy.
- 4 Greater awareness of these strategic similarities is indispensable for efforts to build a stronger Indo-European partnership – a mutually declared goal.
- 5 Greater strategic empathy is also the best foundation for engaging each other in those areas where differences remain, including some with profound consequences for the ability of India and European countries to jointly shape the future international order.

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