India–EU Trade Relations and Strategic Autonomy in an Emerging Multipolar World Order

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Abstract
India–European Union relations have moved beyond a mainly economic relationship and are Increasingly shaped by wider strategic concerns. Trade remains an important foundation of this Partnership, but its meaning is changing as supply-chain resilience, technology, critical minerals, Economic security and geopolitical competition become more important. This paper examines Whether deeper India–EU trade relations can contribute to strategic autonomy for both India and The European Union and, at the same time, support a more balanced multipolar world order. The Study uses qualitative analysis of academic literature, official policy documents and recent Developments in India–EU economic relations. It argues that trade can strengthen strategic Autonomy by diversifying markets, suppliers, investment sources and technology partnerships. However, trade alone cannot create full autonomy because both India and the EU remain deeply Connected to wider global markets and major powers. The paper therefore understands strategic Autonomy as greater freedom of policy choice rather than economic isolation. It concludes that India–EU cooperation has the potential to become an important pillar of a more diversified global Economic order, provided that both sides manage differences in regulation, market access, Sustainability standards and foreign-policy priorities.

Keywords: India–EU relations; trade; strategic autonomy; multipolarity; geoeconomics; economic Security; global order

Introduction

The international system is undergoing a period of significant change. Economic and political power is Becoming more widely distributed among established and emerging powers, while competition among Major actors is increasingly visible in trade, technology, finance and supply chains. The rise of China, the Continuing influence of the United States, the growing importance of India and the European Union's Efforts to strengthen its own capacity for action are all part of this wider transformation. In such an Environment, economic relations can no longer be treated as separate from international politics. Trade Agreements, investment flows, technology partnerships and access to critical resources increasingly have Strategic consequences.

India and the European Union are particularly important in this context. Their relationship was upgraded To a Strategic Partnership in 2004, and cooperation has gradually expanded into trade, investment, Climate policy, technology, connectivity, security and global governance (Jain & Sachdeva, 2019). India Views Europe as an important source of investment, technology and markets, while the EU sees India as A major economic and political partner in the Indo-Pacific. The relationship has therefore developed from A primarily economic engagement into a broader strategic partnership. Trade remains at the centre of this relationship. The European Commission reports that EU–India trade in Goods was about €120 billion in 2024, while trade in services reached €59.7 billion in 2023. Negotiations For an India–EU Free Trade Agreement were concluded on 27 January 2026, although the agreement still Requires the relevant legal and institutional steps before it becomes binding (European Commission,2026a, 2026b). This development gives the economic relationship a new strategic significance.

At the same time, both India and the EU are seeking greater strategic autonomy. For India, strategic autonomy means maintaining the freedom to take independent decisions on major national and international issues while working with different partners. It is closely related to India's tradition of non-alignment and its more recent policy of multi-alignment. For the EU, strategic autonomy has developed partly in response to economic vulnerabilities, geopolitical uncertainty and concerns about excessive dependence on external actors. The concept does not necessarily mean independence from all external relationships. Instead, it can be understood as increasing the capacity to make choices and reducing dangerous forms of dependence.

The central question of this paper is therefore: How can India–EU trade relations contribute to strategic autonomy in an emerging multipolar world order? The paper argues that stronger India–EU economic relations can increase strategic space for both sides through market diversification,supply-chain resilience, technology cooperation and investment. However, the partnership should not be presented as a substitute for relations with other major powers. Its greater value lies in creating another important centre of economic and technological cooperation.

The paper is based on qualitative research using secondary sources. Academic books and journal articles are used to develop the conceptual and analytical framework, while official Indian and EU documents are used to examine policy developments and recent trade relations. The paper first reviews the literature, then explains the concepts of strategic autonomy, multipolarity and geo-economics. It next examines the development and current dynamics of India–EU trade, before analysing its implications for strategic autonomy and the emerging global order.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 India–EU Strategic Partnership

Early scholarship on India–EU relations focused heavily on the economic basis of the relationship.Sachdeva (2008) argued that economic ties had formed the core of the partnership but also pointed to the Need to broaden cooperation into political and security areas. Bava (2010) similarly examined the Movement from engagement towards a strategic partnership and showed that the relationship had Developed beyond a narrow economic framework. These studies are useful for understanding the Historical foundation of the relationship.

Later research examined the strategic partnership more critically. Jain and Sachdeva (2019) highlighted Both convergence and limitations in India–EU relations. They noted that strategic partnership was linked To India's strategic autonomy and multi-alignment, while also identifying differences in global governance And the difficulty of completing the earlier trade negotiations. Gieg et al. (2022) brought together a wider Range of studies on the strategic partnership, including trade, climate, development cooperation,Multilateralism and the EU’s approach to India.

More recent work shows that the strategic context is changing again. Vinodan and Kurian (2024) explain India’s strategic autonomy through the idea of hedging, in which India avoids becoming fully dependent On any single major power. Their analysis is important for this paper because it shows why diversified Partnerships matter for Indian foreign policy. Recent EU policy documents also place greater emphasis On economic security, resilient supply chains, technology and cooperation with India (European External Action Service [EEAS], 2025a).

2.2 Literature on India–EU Trade

The economic literature has generally examined market access, trade integration and the difficulties Surrounding the India–EU trade negotiations. Khorana (2022) shows the importance of economic Relations within the strategic partnership, while Loganathan et al. (2021) examine the trajectory of India–EU trade integration and its future possibilities. Kumar et al. (2024) demonstrate that changes in the EU’s preferential trade treatment can affect specific Indian sectors even when the wider macroeconomic Effect remains limited.

A major limitation of earlier literature is that much of it was written when the India–EU trade agreement Was still under negotiation. The conclusion of FTA negotiations in January 2026 changes the empirical Context. The current question is no longer only why negotiations were delayed, but also what the Emerging trade framework may mean for economic resilience and strategic cooperation. This creates Space for a new analysis that links trade with strategic autonomy.

2.3 Literature Gap

Existing research has provided valuable explanations of India–EU relations, strategic partnership and Trade negotiations. However, fewer studies connect these three areas through the concept of strategic Autonomy in the context of an emerging multipolar order. The gap is especially relevant because trade is Increasingly connected with technology, supply chains, critical minerals and economic security. This Paper addresses the gap by treating trade as both an economic relationship and a source of strategic Capacity.

3. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

3.1 Strategic Autonomy

Strategic autonomy refers to the ability of an actor to make and implement important decisions without Being excessively constrained by another actor. In India’s case, the concept has developed from the older Principle of non-alignment into a more flexible approach often described as multi-alignment. India seeks Cooperation with different major powers while retaining freedom of action. This approach allows India to Work with the United States, Europe, Russia, Japan, countries of the Global South and other groupings Without becoming permanently tied to one strategic bloc (Vinodan & Kurian, 2024).

For the European Union, strategic autonomy has a somewhat different history. It is connected to the EU’s Ability to act effectively in foreign, security, economic and technological affairs. In trade policy, the related Idea of open strategic autonomy combines openness to international trade with efforts to reduce Vulnerabilities and strengthen resilience. The European Commission’s trade strategy places emphasis on Diversification, resilience and the capacity to respond to economic pressure (European Commission,2021).

In this paper, strategic autonomy is therefore understood in an economic as well as political sense.Economic strategic autonomy does not mean producing everything domestically. It means having enough Alternatives in markets, suppliers, technologies, finance and investment to avoid a single external Dependency becoming a serious constraint on policy choices.

3.2 Multipolarity

Multipolarity refers to an international system in which power is distributed among several significant Actors rather than concentrated in one dominant power. Contemporary multipolarity is not simply a matter Of military power. Economic size, technology, financial capacity, control over critical resources and Institutional influence also shape international power. India and the EU can both be understood as Important poles or potential centres of influence within this wider transformation.

India and Europe have themselves used the language of a multipolar world. The EU–India leaders' statement of February 2025 described the two sides as having a shared interest in shaping a resilient Multipolar global order and linked this ambition to trade, supply-chain de-risking, investment and critical Technologies (EEAS, 2025b). This provides direct policy support for examining India–EU trade through a Multipolarity framework.

3.3 Geoeconomics

Geoeconomics helps explain why trade can have strategic effects. States and regional organisations Increasingly use economic tools to pursue political and security objectives. Tariffs, investment rules, Technology controls, supply-chain partnerships and access to critical resources can affect the distribution of international power. India–EU trade therefore has significance beyond the value of goods and services exchanged.

3.4 Analytical Framework

Economic Relationship	Strategic Effects
Trade expansion	Greater market diversification
Investment cooperation	More sources of capital and technology
Supply-chain cooperation	Lower concentration risk
Technology cooperation	Greater technological capacity
Critical-mineral cooperation	Greater resource security
Combined effect	Greater strategic space within a multipolar order

4. Evolution of India–EU Trade Relations

4.1 From Economic Engagement to Strategic Partnership

India established diplomatic relations with the European Economic Community in the early 1960s. The Relationship expanded after the end of the Cold War, when both sides had stronger reasons to develop Economic and political cooperation. The 1993 Joint Political Statement and the 1994 Cooperation Agreement provided an institutional basis for deeper relations. The first India–EU Summit in 2000 created A regular high-level political framework, and the relationship was upgraded to a Strategic Partnership in 2004 (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 2025).

The strategic partnership reflected a growing recognition that India and the EU could cooperate on more than trade. Yet economic relations remained the most consistent part of the relationship. Trade and Investment created practical incentives for continued engagement, even when political differences Remained. This explains why economic cooperation has often acted as the foundation on which wider Strategic cooperation has been built.

4.2 Trade Negotiations and the FTA

Negotiations for a broad trade and investment agreement began in the late 2000s but faced difficulties Over tariffs, market access, services, investment and regulatory questions. The negotiations were Relaunched in 2022 alongside separate negotiations on investment protection and geographical Indications. After further negotiations and political engagement, the FTA negotiations were concluded on 27 January 2026 (European Commission, 2026a).

The negotiated outcome is significant in scale. The European Commission states that the agreement Provides for broad tariff liberalisation, with overall liberalisation coverage of 96.6% for India and 99.3% for the EU when full and partial liberalisation are considered (European Commission, 2026c). However,Conclusion of negotiations does not mean that the agreement is already fully in force. The published texts are subject to legal revision and the agreement will become binding only after the required internal Procedures are completed (European Commission, 2026b).

4.3 The Trade and Technology Council

The India–EU Trade and Technology Council has added a new strategic layer to economic relations. Established in 2022, it provides a mechanism for cooperation at the intersection of trade, technology and Security. The second ministerial meeting in 2025 focused on economic security, supply-chain resilience,Semiconductors, artificial intelligence, high-performance computing, 6G and green technologies (EEAS,2025c). This development shows that the meaning of trade relations is expanding beyond traditional tariff Negotiations.

5. Current Dynamics of India–EU Trade

The European Union is India's foremost trading partner, representing €92 billion in trade in 2018, which constitutes 12.9% of India's overall commerce, surpassing China (10.9%) and the United States (10.1%). The trade of goods between these two entities surged by 72% over the past decade.

% Share in India's exports to the E.U.

Category	**FY18**	**FY25**
Minerals fuels and oils	6.8	19.8
Pharmaceuticals	2.9	3.9
Electrical and electronic equipment	4.0	14.8
Aerospace	1.5	2.1
Optical and medical instruments	1.5	1.7
Iron and Steel	7.0	4.0
Apparel	10.7	6.0
Gems precious metals, Jwellery	6.6	3.3
Iron and steel articles	3.3	2.4
Automobiles and outoparts	4.9	2.9
Organic chemicals	7.3	6.7
Machinary and Mech equipment	8.1	6.6
Rubber products	1.8	1.7
Leather Goods, travel articles	2.7	1.5
Other textile articles	2.4	1.5

Table1.0, Source :Times of India

% Share of India's imports from the E.U

Category	FY18	FY25
Automobiles and outoparts	3.7	3.4
Plastic and plastic products	4.6	3.9
Iron and steel articles	1.9	1.5
Organic chemicals	4.5	3.8
Minerals fuels and oil	2.4	1.4
Gems precious metals, Jwellery	10.3	3.8
Machinary and Mech equipment	19.8	21.4
Electrical and electronic equipment	9.3	15.5
Iron and Steel	2.4	2.5
Coper and products	0.8	1.9
Airospace (aircraft and parts)	9.3	10.3
Aluminium and products	1.1	1.5
Optical and medical instruments	5.4	6.3
Pharmaceuticals	1.9	2.3
Other chemicals	2.5	2.7

Table 2.0, Source: Times of India

5.1 Trade in Goods and Services

The EU is an important trading partner for India. According to the European Commission, bilateral trade in Goods reached about €120 billion in 2024. Trade in services reached €59.7 billion in 2023, almost twice the 2020 level. These figures show that the relationship is not limited to traditional merchandise trade and Increasingly includes services and knowledge-intensive economic activity (European Commission,2026a).

The structure of trade also creates opportunities for complementarity. India has strengths in Pharmaceuticals, information technology, business services, textiles, engineering and other sectors, while European economies offer capital, advanced machinery, specialised technology and access to large Consumer markets. The FTA can reduce some tariff barriers and make commercial exchange more Predictable, although actual benefits will depend on implementation, standards, rules of origin and firms' ability to use the agreement.

5.2 Investment

Investment is an important part of the strategic economic relationship because it creates longer-term links Than trade alone. European firms bring capital, technology, managerial experience and access to International production networks, while Indian firms increasingly seek opportunities in European markets. A stronger investment relationship can therefore support industrial development and technology diffusion In India and create new commercial opportunities for European firms.

5.3 Technology and Innovation

Technology cooperation has become one of the most important new dimensions of India–EU relations. Cooperation in semiconductors, AI, digital public infrastructure, 6G and clean technologies can connect

India's growing digital and manufacturing capabilities with Europe's research, regulatory and industrial Strengths. The Trade and Technology Council provides an institutional channel for this cooperation (EEAS, 2025c).

6. India–EU Trade and Strategic Autonomy

6.1 Trade Diversification

The first way in which trade can strengthen strategic autonomy is through diversification. Dependence on A single market, supplier or technology source can create vulnerability when political relations deteriorate Or when supply is disrupted. Stronger India–EU trade provides both sides with an additional major Economic partner. For India, Europe offers a large and relatively stable market. For the EU, India provides Access to a large and growing economy and an alternative partner in the Indo-Pacific.

Diversification does not require India or Europe to reduce all trade with the United States or China. The Objective is to avoid excessive dependence on any one actor. In this sense, India–EU trade can support Strategic autonomy through a wider portfolio of economic relationships.

6.2 Supply-Chain Resilience

Recent disruptions have shown that global supply chains can be affected by geopolitical conflict, Pandemics, transport disruptions and export restrictions. Both India and the EU have therefore placed Greater emphasis on resilient supply chains. Their cooperation can be particularly useful in Pharmaceuticals, electronics, batteries, clean energy technologies and other strategic sectors. The February 2025 leaders' statement explicitly linked India–EU cooperation with de-risking and supply-chain Resilience (EEAS, 2025b).

The strategic value of this cooperation lies in reducing concentration risk. If firms can source components, Technologies or raw materials from more than one trusted partner, a disruption in one location is less likely to become a systemic problem. India–EU cooperation can therefore support economic resilience without requiring complete economic separation from China or other major economies.

6.3 Technology and Strategic Autonomy

Technology is now closely connected with national power. AI, semiconductors, telecommunications,advanced computing and digital infrastructure affect economic productivity as well as national security.Cooperation between India and the EU can provide benefits to both sides because their strengths are partly complementary. India has a large technology workforce, a strong digital ecosystem and growing manufacturing ambitions, while Europe has advanced research institutions, industrial capabilities and experience in technology regulation.

The strategic objective should not be to create a completely separate India–EU technology system. Such an approach would be unrealistic and costly. A more practical objective is to create trusted partnerships that give both sides more choices. This is consistent with the idea of open strategic autonomy.

6.4 Critical Minerals

Critical minerals are another area where trade and strategic autonomy overlap. Batteries,Renewable-energy systems, electronics and defence technologies require reliable access to a range of minerals and processed materials. India and Europe both face vulnerabilities in global mineral supply chains. Cooperation on exploration, processing, recycling, technology and investment could reduce some of these vulnerabilities. This is especially important because strategic autonomy depends not only on final products but also on access to the inputs needed to produce them. India–EU cooperation in this area could therefore contribute to a more diversified global supply chain.

7. India–EU Trade and the Emerging Multipolar World Order

7.1 Beyond a Traditional Trade Relationship

The strategic meaning of India–EU trade becomes clearer when viewed against the changing distribution of global power. India and the EU are not forming a military alliance, nor are they seeking to create a closed economic bloc. Their cooperation is better understood as an effort to increase the number of meaningful choices available to both sides.

This is relevant to multipolarity because a more diversified global economy reduces the concentration of economic influence. If India and Europe develop stronger trade, investment and technology links, they can become more significant centres of economic power in their own right. This does not automatically produce a multipolar world, but it can strengthen the economic foundations of one.

7.2 India–EU Cooperation amid US–China Competition

US–China competition is one of the main forces shaping the current international environment. India has deepening relations with the United States but continues to maintain relations with Russia, China and other major actors. The EU also seeks to manage its relationship with both the United States and China while strengthening its own capacity for action. This creates space for India–EU cooperation based on strategic diversification rather than bloc politics.

India–EU cooperation can therefore be seen as part of a broader pattern of multi-alignment and risk reduction. The partnership does not need to be directed against China or the United States to have strategic value. Its purpose can instead be to create additional economic and technological options.

7.3 Global South Dimension

India's position in the Global South gives the India–EU relationship another dimension. India can communicate the concerns of developing economies while also working with a major developed regional organisation. Cooperation in infrastructure, clean energy, digital technologies, development finance and connectivity can extend beyond bilateral trade and create wider benefits. The EU and India have already explored cooperation in third countries, which shows that the relationship can have an external dimension (EEAS, 2025d).

However, India and the EU do not always share the same understanding of global economic rules.Questions related to development, climate policy, trade standards and regulatory requirements can create differences. A meaningful partnership therefore requires dialogue and compromise rather than assuming that strategic convergence exists in every area.

8. Challenges and Limitations

The argument that India–EU trade can support strategic autonomy should not be overstated. Several limitations remain. First, economic interdependence creates mutual benefits but also mutual vulnerability. Greater trade with Europe will not remove India's dependence on other major markets, just as stronger trade with India will not remove Europe's links with China or the United States.

Second, regulatory differences remain important. European standards on environment, data, labour and product safety can create adjustment costs for Indian exporters. The EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism also illustrates how environmental policy can affect the competitiveness of Indian exports. At the same time, India seeks policy space for development and industrialisation. Managing this difference will be essential for the long-term success of the partnership.

Third, strategic autonomy has different meanings for India and the EU. India places strong emphasis on freedom of foreign-policy choice and multi-alignment. The EU's approach is more closely linked to collective capacity, resilience and the ability of the Union to act in a competitive international environment. These concepts overlap, but they are not identical.

Fourth, trade does not automatically create political trust. Differences over Russia, China, human rights, climate policy and other issues can continue even when economic relations expand. The strategic partnership will therefore depend on whether both sides can manage disagreement without allowing individual disputes to block wider cooperation.

Finally, the FTA itself should not be treated as the final stage of India–EU economic relations. The negotiated texts still require legal and institutional processes before the agreement becomes binding. Its actual strategic value will depend on implementation, business utilisation, investment growth and the development of complementary cooperation in technology and supply chains (European Commission,2026b).

9. Opportunities and Future Prospects

The next stage of India–EU relations should focus on turning the broad strategic partnership into practical cooperation. The FTA can provide a stronger economic base, but it should be supported by investment,technology and industrial partnerships. This is particularly important in sectors where both sides face common strategic challenges.

Semiconductors are one such area. Cooperation in research, skills, investment and supply chains can help both sides reduce vulnerabilities. Artificial intelligence and digital technologies offer another opportunity. India and the EU can work together on trustworthy AI, research, digital infrastructure and standards while respecting their different regulatory approaches.

Green technologies also offer considerable potential. Cooperation in hydrogen, renewable energy, electric mobility, battery recycling and clean industrial production can combine India's scale and manufacturing potential with European technology and investment. Critical minerals and recycling can further strengthen the resilience of these sectors.

The partnership can also become more relevant to the Global South. India and the EU could cooperate in third countries on infrastructure, renewable energy, health, digital connectivity and climate adaptation. Such cooperation would give the partnership a wider international role and could help connect India's global South priorities with European development resources.

10. Findings and Discussion

The analysis leads to three main findings. First, India–EU trade is acquiring a stronger strategic character. The relationship is no longer limited to tariffs and market access. Supply-chain resilience, technology, Investment and economic security have become part of the economic relationship. The Trade and Technology Council is an important example of this change. Second, India–EU trade can contribute to strategic autonomy mainly through diversification. Neither India nor the EU needs complete economic independence. What matters is the availability of alternatives. More trade and investment between the two sides can reduce the risks created by excessive dependence on a Small number of external actors.

Third, the partnership can contribute to multipolarity, but it cannot create multipolarity by itself. A multipolar order depends on wider changes in economic, political, technological and institutional power. India–EU cooperation can nevertheless strengthen one important part of that process by creating a stronger connection between two major economic actors outside a simple US–China framework.

The central argument can therefore be stated clearly: India–EU trade is most valuable strategically when it increases choices rather than creating another form of dependence. This understanding provides a realistic link between trade and strategic autonomy.

11. Conclusion

India–EU trade relations are entering a new stage. The relationship has developed from economic engagement into a broader strategic partnership, and the changing international environment has increased the importance of this transformation. Trade now intersects with technology, supply-chain security, investment, critical minerals and economic resilience. The conclusion of FTA negotiations in January 2026 provides a major opportunity to deepen these links.

The paper has argued that stronger India–EU trade can support strategic autonomy by giving both sides greater economic and technological choices. Its importance does not come from reducing all external dependence, but from reducing excessive dependence and building additional sources of markets, investment, technology and supply. This makes the partnership relevant to the broader movement towards a more multipolar international system.

At the same time, the relationship has clear limits. India and the EU have different strategic priorities, regulatory systems and approaches to some international issues. Economic cooperation cannot remove these differences. The future of the partnership will therefore depend on practical implementation, institutional coordination and the ability to manage disagreement.

In this sense, India–EU relations should not be viewed as an alliance against another power. They are better understood as a partnership that can expand strategic choices for both sides. If supported by successful FTA implementation, technology cooperation, resilient supply chains, critical mineral partnerships and wider cooperation with the Global South, India–EU economic relations can become an important component of a more balanced and diversified multipolar world order.

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