

A democratic and strategic dissonance in India-German ties

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Whether the Prime Minister of India's visit to Germany changed the perception about India's stand on Ukraine assumes critical importance.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Germany on May 2 came at a critical time, shaped by the ongoing Ukraine war. In recent times, New Delhi has been at its assertive best. Even as the United States and the European nations have applied sanctions on Moscow and provided military aid to Ukraine, New Delhi has refused to play ball. It has not only avoided condemning Moscow by abstaining in the United Nations (UN) on critical votes on the war but has also continued to engage with Moscow to increase its import of cheap crude. Its long-standing and traditional defence links with Russia remain intact. Such moves have raised eyebrows and attracted some amount of criticism from the West. New Delhi, however, insists that its position on the war is non-partisan and should be appreciated by its allies and friends.

For a nuanced stance

However, assertive media and conference statements by India's External Affairs Minister notwithstanding, there is growing recognition in India's strategic circles that New Delhi has to bring in more nuance to its approach with Europe. Given India's stature, being completely isolated by the West is certainly not a best-case scenario. However, with an assertive China on the world stage and in particular, at the border with India, New Delhi needs to manage a delicate balancing act while asserting its right to pursue its national interests and strategic autonomy in foreign policy. Mr. Modi's three-nation Europe tour (May 2-4) needs to be contextualised with these factors in the backdrop.

There is a clear, albeit delayed, move toward a unified response vis-à-vis Russia in Europe. Its significant reliance on Russian gas and crude notwithstanding, condemnation of Moscow's moves in Ukraine is near unanimous in Europe. Not surprisingly, India's abstention in the UN votes and its continuation of its relationship with Russia have raised quite a few hackles in Germany. In private as well as public discussions, India's role as a major power and largest democracy are being brought to the forefront and there is a growing expectation that India needs to make a shift from its position on Russia and join hands with the European countries and the U.S. in protecting democracy in need. Amidst these expectations and pressure tactics, whether the Prime Minister's visit to Germany helped change the perception and bridge the gap that has been growing, assumes critical importance.

Mr. Modi's visit took place during the first term of the German Chancellor, Olaf Scholz. Prior to Mr. Modi's visit, the Chancellor had visited Japan, in his first visit to Asia. This is construed as a sign of Germany reaching out to other Asian powers and building on democratic alliances as an outcome of its Indo-Pacific guidelines. These two meetings had raised, albeit mistakenly, expectations among some analysts here in Germany of a democratic dividend that may lead to a convergence of views and possibly policies on Russia between the two countries. As proved by the Ukraine war, however, New Delhi has chosen to prioritise its interests over pursuing a policy that is shaped by common democratic values that define Germany, Japan and India.

The China factor

In fact, for several years now, Indian policies have resisted promoting democracy in the neighbourhood and have instead opted to deal with de facto powers. Afghanistan, where India is still reluctant to do business with the Taliban, is probably an aberration. On the other hand, India's policy towards Myanmar's junta is defined by this pragmatism. Therefore, the democratic rationale of a convergence of interests to protect democratic values is hardly a strong binding chord between India and Germany. The geopolitical convergence of countering the rise of China particularly in the Indo-Pacific seems to be a more compelling necessity rather than the ideational and normative aspects of protecting democratic norms and values.

Engagement with Europe

New Delhi's objective is multifaceted as far its relations with Europe in general and Germany in particular is concerned. So far, it has not revised its position on Russia and Ukraine, by continuing to underline its unequivocal condemnation of the violence. However, unlike the West, India makes it clear that irrespective of its position on a solitary issue of geopolitical relevance, which the former may find difficult to reconcile with, the bilateral engagement with countries such as Germany, France and Denmark remains at the top of its priority. The purpose of such a policy is clearly to present itself as not being isolated but as a swing power that can move deftly on the geopolitical and diplomatic chessboard.

Towards this direction, the holding of the sixth India-Germany Inter-Governmental Consultations (IGC), a biennial format which India conducts with Germany, assumed critical importance. India attaches significant importance to the 'long-standing commercial ties' with Germany, an important pillar of the 'Strategic Partnership', which the two nations entered into in 2000. The idea, therefore, is to highlight a convergence of issues of economics, technology and climate change (low hanging fruits), in spite of the intensifying dissonance on democratic and strategic issues. That remains the crux of the Indian approach.

There is room for full ties

It remains a fact that India-Germany relations have yet to achieve their full potential. One of the factors for that, possibly, is the lack of understanding of each other's strategic cultures and domestic politics. It is doubtful that Mr. Modi's visit changed any of that, particularly in the absence of any media interaction and strategic communication. Germany has invited Mr. Modi to the G-7 meeting in June this year, construed as a bid to wean India away from its position on Russia. However,

while the attempt may not be successful, it is certainly a pointer to the emerging multipolarity in the international system, which provides space for major powers such as Germany and India to play a greater role in bringing peace and stability in other theatres, particularly in Afghanistan and the Indo-Pacific. In times of shifting geopolitical alliances and realignments, India and Germany can emerge as important poles in shaping the new world order.

GS World Team Input

IN THE NEWS

India- Germany Relations

Why in news?

- Recently, Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Germany in the first leg of his three-nation tour of Europe. He held bilateral talks with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Berlin.
- Also participated in the 6th India-Germany Inter-Governmental Consultation (IGC) with Mr. Modi Scholz.
- Meanwhile, the two countries signed a number of agreements focused on sustainable development, under which India will get 10.5 billion dollars in aid by 2030 to promote the use of clean energy.

Importance of India to Germany

- Free and inclusive trade: It is important for Germany that trade routes through the Indo-Pacific remain open and that disputes be resolved peacefully based on international law. India is a maritime superpower and a strong supporter of free and inclusive trade – and therefore, a primary participant in that mission.
- Footprint in the Indo-Pacific: Germany has realized that the political and economic center of gravity of the world is shifting to the Indo-Pacific region. Therefore, it seeks to make its presence felt as a strategic partner and long standing democratic friend with India.

Why is the Indo-Pacific region important to Germany and Europe?

- Population: The Indo-Pacific region is home to approximately 65% of the global population and 20 of the world's 33 megacities.
- Economy: The region accounts for 62% of global GDP and 46% of the world's merchandise trade. More than 20% of German business is conducted in the Indo-Pacific neighbourhood.
- Climate cooperation: The Indo-Pacific region is also the source of more than half of all global carbon emissions. This makes countries in the region like India key partners in tackling global challenges such as climate change and sustainable energy production and consumption.
- Germany is supporting the construction of a massive solar plant in Dhule (Sakri), Maharashtra. With a capacity of 125 MW, it serves 2,20,000 households and generates annual CO2 savings of 155,000 tonnes.

Culture

- ➔ India and Germany have a long tradition of academic and cultural exchange.
- ➔ Max Mueller was the first scholar of Indo-European languages to translate and publish the Upanishads and the Rigveda.
- ➔ German interest in Indian philosophy and languages resulted in the establishment of the first Chair of Indology at the University of Bonn in 1818.
- ➔ The Government of India has so far funded 31 Short Term Rotating Chairs for Indian Studies in German Universities.
- ➔ In Germany there is a growing interest in Indian dance, music and literature as well as the motion picture and TV industry.
- ➔ Indian films and artists regularly participate in the Berlin International Film Festival and Indian film festivals held in other parts of Germany.

Expected Question (Prelims Exams)

Q. Consider the following statements-

1. Indian Navy and German Navy conducted joint exercises for the first time in 2008.
2. Germany is the 7th largest foreign direct investor in India since April 2000.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- (a) Only 1 (b) Only 2
(c) Both 1 and 2 (d) Neither 1, nor 2

Expected Question (Mains Exams)

Q. In the uncertain phase of the Ukraine-Russia war, explain the relevance of Indo-German relations in the geopolitical order.

(250 Words)

Note: - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC main examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.