**European Union Foreign Policy in the Eyes of  India**

The development of India’s relations with the European Union (EU) has been a slow and graduated affair over the past four decades. India’s linkages with mainland continental Europe in the wake of its independence in 1947 were somewhat tardy in developing as the region was accorded a relatively lower priority by decision-makers in New Delhi. The only exception was Britain with whom India had deep ties for historical reasons and which New Delhi decided to continue even after independence on political and economic grounds.

It was the British decision to join the European Community (as it was known then) in 1961which acted as a catalyst in the evolution of a multi-faceted relationship between the EU and India over the next four decades. The formal relationship with the EU was established in 1962 and a modest beginning in establishing a trade relationship was made in securing improved access for Indian products in the Community’s markets when the EU agreed to suspend at zero its tariff on tea in bulk and on certain spices and skins. Two bilateral agreements on jute and coir were signed and the EU agreed to open duty-free quotas for Indian exports of silk and cotton handloom fabrics and handicrafts.

After Britain  joined the EU in 1973, India’s trade relationship with the Community grew at a steady pace and during the course of the 1970s, 1980s and the 1990s the EU became India’s largest trading partner. The EU also became a major development partner of India in social and economic sectors and India too began to receive large overseas  aid from the EU. The end of the Cold war in the early 1990s also transformed India’s political, economic and foreign policy profile. With increasing liberalization and globalization of India’s economy, the country began to register impressive economic growth rates, and improvement of its foreign relations along with the acquisition of nuclear weapons in 1998 turned India into a potential global player which was recognised by the EU even though some of its members strongly disapproved India declaring itself a nuclear weapon state. Setting aside their mutual initial indifference, India and the EU began to recognise each others’ political and security potential. A Joint Statement on Political Dialogue was signed in 1994 and it sought to achieve ‘a closer and upgraded relationship’ and expressed the desire to reinforce their mutual relations in the political, economic, technological and cultural fields. The following years saw the institutionalisation of their partnership with the establishment of a Joint Commission and Sub-Commissions and troika meetings which were being held since 1982. Regular bi-lateral exchanges between the two sides at the official and ministerial levels culminated in an annual summit being held at the top level alternately in Europe and India since 2000.

A Joint Declaration was issued after the first annual summit held in June 2000. It stated that the EU and India should build ‘a new strategic partnership’ in the 21st century, founded on shared values and aspirations. The European Commission’s Communication, An EU-India Strategic Partnership, issued in June 2004, proposed to develop a strategic partnership with India in four key areas: a) Co-operation, especially in multilateral forums, on conflict prevention, the fight against terrorism and non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; b) strengthened economic partnership through strategic policy and sectoral dialogues ; c) development co-operation; and d) fostering intellectual and cultural exchanges.

It is in the backdrop of the evolution of an EU-India strategic partnership that the Indian perception of EU in general and EU foreign policy in particular that has to be evaluated. What needs to be understood at the outset is the fact that the Indian elite’s perceptions of the EU is essentially conditioned by the Anglo-Saxon media which prevents a proper understanding of the intricacies of the institutional functioning of the dynamics of European integration and the way the EU works. There is a clear lack of understanding in New Delhi of what the EU is and what it is seeking to achieve. There is a better understanding of the national bilateral frameworks in so far as New Delhi’s relations with Paris, London and Berlin are concerned. This phenomenon is also present on the EU side where a conscious effort is hardly made to understand India and its problems. (Rajendra K. Jain: 225).

The Indian view of EU foreign policy is also further conditioned by the fundamental differences between the two sides on many issues because of the facts that the two are at different levels of development, because they come from two vastly different regions and that they have different geopolitical priorities. Indian perceptions are conditioned by the fact that its historical experiences and realities are unique and that it inhabits in a very dangerous and unstable neighbourhood surrounded by failed or failing states and faces a variety of external threats and challenges. In spite of sharing values of democracy and human rights, there has been very little co-ordination between the two sides on attaining their goals in
this regard. (R. K. Jain :227 ) As has been spelt out by experts and analysts in spite of its many inadequacies, the EU has been able to evolve a fairly sophisticated frame of Common Foreign and Security Policy. During the course of the past decade, India has had occasions to interact with the EU on issues of foreign policy. India has noted the emergence of the EU as an important international actor. However that is not to say that India has viewed the EU as a united and coherent foreign policy actor. New Delhi has primarily viewed the EU as “an emerging new actor in international politics” which does not have much to offer India from the military-strategic perspective. This is particularly so when viewed against India’s pre-occupation with its strategic partnership with the United States and its complex and uneasy relations with immediate neighbours, particularly China and Pakistan. Viewed against this backdrop India has, if anything, been somewhat indifferent towards advancing further its strategic partnership with the EU.

To put the matter in its proper context India has a very high regard for Europe as an “economic superpower”, for its technological prowess and the unique success of its integration process. The EU is much lauded for its status as a “trading superpower”. However Indian policy makers make a substantial difference between the relatively unified and cohesive economic policy of the EU and its divided and inconsistent foreign and security policy (CFSP). While it is recognised that the EU is the world’s most successful regional integration, it is also noted that the Union is struggling to define its own identity and to design and implement its CFSP. Under the circumstances, it cannot aspire to play a more important political and security role in South Asia which goes beyond the influence derived from its economic and financial prowess. (Daniel Novotny :99). In spite of its aspirations to play a global role in the 21st century
Indian foreign policy concerns remain to a great extent regional especially so because of Pakistan and China, two of India’s neighbours with whom New Delhi has had a conflict-prone relationship in the past. The EU’s approach to these two countries has, in India’s views, been ambivalent to say the least. While Brussels has gone out of its way to court China primarily due to its economic and commercial interests, the EU has also, until recent past, viewed Pakistan and India on the same plane. Till not so long ago, the EU exhorted India to negotiate with Pakistan to resolve the bilateral disputes including that of Kashmir.

India has repeatedly pointed out to the EU that Pakistan is waging a proxy war against India through the zehadi elements based in Pakistan and this proxy war has to end for a successful negotiation on bilateral disputes. India’s concern is that Brussels has been somewhat impervious to this aspect of Pakistan’s behaviour in recent times. While India receives better understanding from the larger EU member states such as the United Kingdom, France and Germany with whom New Delhi shares a robust relationship, this is less so with regard to the smaller member states. A particular example is the divergent attitudes of the different EU member states who are members of the Nuclear Suppliers Group(NSG) to the Indo-US Nuclear Agreement in 2008 in regard to the “waiver” to be given to India to accommodate civilian
nuclear trade with that country. Eventually, US pressure ensured a decision in India’s favour. On the issue of the Indian nuclear status too, the EU is divided. While France and the UK display a better understanding of the Indian nuclear dilemma, some other EU member states such as Austria, Sweden, Greece, Denmark and Ireland are more ‘intrusive and preachy’ in view of the fact that India has not signed the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT).

Yet another issue which divides the EU with regard to India is the question of New Delhi’s aspiration to become a permanent member of the Security Council of the United Nations. While Britain, France  and Germany have endorsed India’s aspiration in this regard, other member states are more ambivalent. As a matter of fact, the EU itself is a divided house on the question of restructuring of the United Nations and especially the reform of the Security Council.

As things stand at present, India does not take the collective identity of the EU at face value. Hence it deals directly with the EU Commission on issues relating to trade and commerce. On the other hand  New Delhi has long maintained robust bilateral relations with the large EU member states such as the UK, France and Germany on political-security questions. Brussels simply lacks necessary instruments to ensure the kind of unity required in the political and security fields. Therefore, the EU is perceived as an incoherent and inconclusive political and security actor. This perception of disunity is largely a baggage from the past derived from the two Iraq wars of 1991 and 2003and the disastrous Yugoslav conflict of the early 1990s. More recent examples relate to Afghanistan and relations with Russia. On Afghanistan, the European Union is not directly involved in peacekeeping or combat operations which is directly the charge of individual European countries as part of the NATO forces stationed there under the leadership of  the United States Nevertheless, India perceives a degree of ambivalence in the European position. On the one hand the Europeans sense a serious security threat from terrorism in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region to Europe and have deployed troops in the Af-Pak to counter it. On the other hand, the war in Afghanistan is unpopular in Europe and hence there is a clamour to withdraw troops at the earliest possible opportunities. As of now the Western troops are scheduled to withdraw from Afghanistan by the end of 2014. Some European troops have already been withdrawn and others are likely to follow suit by 2013 and 2014. New Delhi is apprehensive about the fate of Afghanistan after the Western withdrawal especially in view of the fact that the Taliban have not been vanquished and would pose a serious threat after 2014 to the Hamid Karzai regime. The fate of Afghanistan simply hangs in balance and the post-2014 outlook appears anything but rosy. On Russia too the EU appears to lack unity though
this is not a direct Indian concern. Some EU member states see Russia as a threat especially after the return of Vladimir Putin as President. Other EU member states see Russia as a partner in combating terrorism, weapons of mass destruction and the Iranian nuclear issue.

In order to understand the Indian approach  to the issue of EU foreign policy, it is necessary to appreciate the transition of Indian foreign policy from an ‘idealist’ perspective as prevalent through much of the Nehru era to one of a ‘realist’ hard power perspective. As already mentioned New Delhi is particularly mindful of China’s current rapid economic growth and global diplomatic offensive. India is therefore acutely aware of the need to engage simultaneously all  the major powers to be capable of responding to china’s rising clout sfrom a position of strength. However in such engagements the EU is not seen as comparable to the United States as a major military power or a serious global geo-political player. Most of the EU’s diplomatic energies are seen to be focussed on trying to handle the problems of
EU integration and expansion. India also takes note of the fact that the EU itself emphasises more on its ‘soft’ power which it seeks to increase with the new political identity by the CFSP. The EU has been able to create a force structure which is modest and is able to respond to conflicts in the European neighbourhood. The most important recent example is the EU peacekeeping role in Bosnia-Herzegovina. So far as India is concerned the EU presents two contrasting visions. On the one hand the EU has presented a successful process of integration and a desire to actively promote European norms and values around the world. On the other hand inter state relations in Asia especially South Asia is heavily affected by threat perceptions, mutual enmities and historically determined distrust between states. The EU foreign policy instruments of ‘soft’ power is incompatible with the strategic thinking of the Indian elite that places a high value on the utility of realpolitik, military capabilities and balance of power.

However the aforesaid analysis does not seek to convey the impression that India takes the partnership with the EU lightly. There is more common ground on strategic issues between the two sides especially on the questions of weapons of mass destruction, maritime security, terrorism and weak states. India has a sense of Linguistic and cultural affinity with the West in general and Europe in particular with which it shares a historical bond dating back some 500 years. India cherishes many of the norms and values espoused by Europe. This is so notwithstanding occasional EU criticism of Indian human rights record. The EU too sees India as a rising global actor which is one of the nine strategic partners the Union has around the World. Indeed India and the EU constitute a new pole in a multi-polar world. Despite the EU’s somewhat lacklustre role in the field of political security issues so far,India desires to see a greater degree of co-operation in political areas going beyond trade and investment. There is hope that a post-Lisbon EU will demonstrate greater cohesion and unity in its political and security strategy which will make it more worthwhile for New Delhi to seek to forge a meaningful political partnership with the Union. With lessons learnt from the past the two sides would be better able to understand and appreciate each other blending norms with realism.

However there are apparent impediments to the partnership reaching its full potential. Prospects for ground level security co-operation appear difficult since it is the member states, especially the larger ones, who have the assets and competences and not the Union. The EU also complains about the inadequate resources of the Ministry of External Affairs of the Government of India which is faced with the post-Lisbon European External Action Service as an extra peg to deal with. The appointment of Herman Van Rompuy as the President of the European Council and Catherine Ashton as the EU foreign policy chief is a clear signal that the CFSP is to remain firmly in the hands of the member states especially France, Germany and the UK. The recent sovereign debt crisis in the Eurozone has considerably dented the EU’s image worldwide as also in the eyes of India. The solidarity and cohesion of the European Union faces perhaps the sternest test yet and it remains to be seen how the EU manages to overcome the crisis it faces at present.

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Dr. Purusottam Bhattacharya

Professor of International Relations

Jadavpur University,

Kolkata, India