

# Von Der Leyen Visit: “Strategic Priority” enters EU-India Ties

March 7, 2025



EU Chief Ursula von der Leyen visited India on February 27–28, accompanied by her College of Commissioners. The high-profile visit featured a meeting between Von der Leyen and PM Modi, along with meetings of the Commissioners with their Indian counterparts.

The visit attracted significant scrutiny, drawing early attention to India’s stakes in the growing trans-Atlantic rift. The shifting dynamics of great power competition drew significant focus, drawing scrutiny on how the visit would navigate ongoing volatility surrounding the U.S., Russia, and

China, alongside the Ukraine war.

The headline news was a political commitment to conclude the EU-India Free Trade Agreement (FTA) this year, alongside focus on the Trade and Technology Council (TTC), India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), and defense cooperation. Other notable developments include a Security of Information Agreement (SoIA), EU joining the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), and India joining projects under the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) for defense production.

The visit serves as a useful checkpoint to evaluate the EU-India relationship as it readjusts to the shocks of Trump 2.0. Von der Leyen's remarks projected a forceful pragmatism, reinforcing the visit's symbolic significance with a realistic acknowledgement of what is at stake for Europe. She emphasized interests over the usual focus on "shared values," material gains, or routine rhetoric that is often reserved for EU-India ties. Defense and security featured centrally, shifting from the traditional focus on development and normative cooperation. Though light on tangible outcomes, the visit has reinforced the EU's designation of India as a "strategic priority," strengthened by hard power cooperation and strategic convergence.

**On the drawing board: FTA, TTC and IMEC**

The FTA has been the centerpiece of the visit, reflecting the EU's primary motivation in deepening ties with India—securing a strategic economic partnership essential for its future economic security and competitiveness. The political commitment to finalize the deal this year—the largest of its kind in the world, according to Von der Leyen—is significant, though fraught with challenges. Recent [reports](#) suggest that the EU is unlikely to grant India concessions on the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), which will take effect on January 1, 2026, regardless. A MERCOSUR-style arrangement, such as the proposed 'rebalancing mechanism,' is likely under discussion, though its alignment with CBAM and the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) remains uncertain.

Meanwhile, the TTC and IMEC have lagged in EU-India ties. The TTC took center stage during the visit, buoyed by the broader emphasis on trade and critical technology. However, concrete deliverables within its framework remain elusive, despite some optimism around elements like DPI and semiconductors. The mood surrounding IMEC has also been tempered by skepticism, as ongoing conflict in the Middle East continues to pose significant disruptions. Despite Jaishankar's recent flurry of [agreements](#) in the region and reiterated statements of support from various European partners, its execution remains a distant prospect.

Overall, the visit included nearly 20 ministerial-level

meetings across different sectors. India has traditionally preferred bilateral engagements with European countries and remained largely skeptical of EU-wide engagement. This visit signals outreach to change that, with the full roster of Commissioners meeting their Indian counterparts—a scale of administrative mobilization rarely undertaken in bilateral visits.

## Geopolitical fray

Most notably, the leaders' joint statement mentioned "support for a just and lasting peace" in Ukraine, a language shift on India's part. It takes on additional importance in the context of the recent UN vote where EU members pushed back against a US resolution calling for lasting but not "just and comprehensive" peace in Ukraine. The language in the India-EU leaders' statement echoes one of the three amendments that France introduced in the resolution, which called for a just, lasting, and comprehensive peace in Ukraine that respects the United Nations Charter and the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. The US had abstained from the resolution following the above amendment. This relatively "concessional" move by India was accompanied by a broader conciliatory tone from both parties, projecting consensus on peace efforts.

In turn, despite earlier [comments](#) by EU officials that Russia sanctions would be discussed, MEA officials [said](#) there had been "no discussion on sanctions" against Russia during the Von der Leyen-Modi meeting. Von der Leyen did not mention Russia (or Ukraine) during her official comments alongside Modi, instead addressing the topic earlier in the day in a [keynote address](#) to the European diplomatic corps, media, and strategic community. The visit reflects Europe's ongoing shift away from using Russia as a point of criticism against India, with the American U-turn likely sealing the change.

In the same address, she alluded to recent American hostility, though her remarks could just as well extend to the broader trio of dependencies the EU faces alongside American defense—its reliance on Russian energy and the Chinese market. She remarked, “We have all seen how countries are weaponising their sources of strength against each other whether natural resources or new technologies, or economic and military coercion.”

Coming to China, Von der Leyen avoided any explicit mentions altogether. However, she frequently alluded to the issue, hinting at the commonalities between Indian and European concerns and leveraging the growing unease in New Delhi. [Noting](#) that “authoritarian states are getting bolder, ignoring borders, threatening peace at sea.” She [referred](#) to the broader implications of a failed Ukraine, noting that other countries “are watching very closely whether there is any impunity if you invade a neighbour or violate international borders. Or whether there are real deterrents.” She also reaffirmed the EU’s commitment to the Indo-Pacific, signaling strategic alignment even as India grows wary of a potential European retreat from the region. As it stands now, the issues tabled by the EU demonstrate a [heightened sensitivity](#) to China’s economic assertiveness, likely sharpened by the reality check delivered by the US. However, it remains separate from an EU presence in this part of the world, which India would likely expect as a reciprocal gesture.

## **Intent and Ambition amidst Global Fragmentation**

The EU Commission’s visit has been received with greater seriousness than widely expected within New Delhi’s strategic community. While U.S. adventurism plays a major role, it also highlights the increasing prominence of India-EU ties.

The faltering FTA has gained political momentum, though it may take a slightly less ambitious [form](#), focusing on tech and industry deals while sidestepping contentious areas such as agriculture and dairy. It will be interesting to see if concessions emerge on [automobiles](#)—an area of key concern for Europe, especially Germany, as it struggles to compete with China. An EU official was [quoted](#) saying “I would even go as far as saying that without a substantive commitment on cars, there will not be a trade agreement between European [Union] and India”.

Experts have [noted](#) a hint of “desperation” to the delegations’ efforts. But India will likely appreciate the extended hand as it grows wary of Western fragmentation complicating its exercise of strategic autonomy. While India has traditionally been less attached to the existing (and rapidly fading) multilateral world order than Europe, given a choice between the old and the emerging one, it is more likely to choose the former. If the disruptive/ policy shifts of the Trump era continue, the EU and other “well wishers” of the existing order will likely find a sympathetic India.