

# India, the Inevitable?

## How the War in Ukraine Shapes EU-India Energy Relations

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of global energy shortages that were triggered or intensified by the Russian war in Ukraine, the search for reliable and sustainable resources is intensifying. Consequently, both new energy partnerships and the expansion of existing agreements are pushed by EU member states. In this article, we examine these trends with a particular eye on green hydrogen and its role in the cooperation between India and the EU. Not only in this context is this 'fuel of the considered' a climate hope and an economic miracle cure and therefore it increasingly takes on a central role in the apparently growing overtures of the EU to its partners in the Indo-Pacific in general, and India in particular, especially in, but not limited to, the field of energy. With India's growing geopolitical stature and confidence, which is most visible in its focus on strategic autonomy and neutrality in regard to the war in Ukraine, as well as its – at times – increasingly divergent political values in comparison to some of its European partners, the content and scope of the currently underdeveloped partnership continues to be in question.

KEYWORDS

energy, security, India, European Union, hydrogen

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## ENERGY SECURITY IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

Energy security is a central goal of all governments; and for most countries, but especially those in the Global South, a stable and affordable energy supply is one of the most important yet volatile factors (if not the single most important one) for economic development. Yet, the pursuit of energy security at all costs is often seen to stand in conflict with the pursuit of good environmental and climate policies. The little progress made in the past three decades in negotiations on the global climate regime, for instance, is seriously threatened by new pressures resulting from a sequence of certain events and disasters, including the COVID-19 pandemic and, above all, the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine.

One prominent example in this regard is Germany's attempt at *Energiewende* (energy transformation), which was hit at a sensitive point: the so-called transitional energy sources, which are mainly made up of Russian natural gas. With the economic sanctions on Russia and the resulting end of supplies of natural gas, the resulting emergency purchases of Germany and other members of the European Union (EU) on the global spot market to secure national energy supplies contributed to turning the regional crisis into a global (energy) crisis. Countries such as Bangladesh have experienced blackouts at regular intervals due to the lack of affordable energy, while many others are suffering under high energy prices <sup>(ISLAM – JANJUA 2022)</sup> and their spill over into food production – for example, Egypt, which faced skyrocketing food inflation rates of up to 31% in November 2022 <sup>(IFPRI 2022)</sup>.

Furthermore, the emergency fossil fuel purchases, especially by European nations as self-proclaimed leaders in the area of climate change <sup>(EUROPEAN COUNCIL 2023)</sup>, were accompanied by considerable political reputational costs in the Global South. Yet, the crisis also offered other (unintended) effects for some, including the two Asian great powers, India and China. While Russia was hit by Western sanctions, India persistently abstained from all related votes at the UN General Assembly to condemn the Russian invasion, while China voted against Russia's suspension from the UN Human Rights Council <sup>(UN 2022A)</sup> and abstained from the non-recognition vote regarding Russia's proclaimed annexations <sup>(UN 2022B)</sup> as well as from a call to withdraw from Ukrainian territory on the eve of the start

of second year of the invasion <sup>(UN 2023)</sup>. With their refusals to outspokenly blame Russia, both states created the basis for the continued and significantly increased imports of Russian gas and oil <sup>(MURTAUGH – CHAKRABORTY 2022)</sup> to them at extremely discounted prices.

The shortage of Russian gas supplies to the EU since the outbreak of the war has in turn made the EU more determined not to become directly dependent again on only one supplier of its key energy resources, particularly with China in mind, as it currently dominates the market for key inputs for batteries, solar panels, and other components that are necessary for a shift to renewable energies. The resulting diversification of trade relations focuses on reinforcing ties with established partners, including Canada, but also on strengthening ties to partners in Asia and Latin America. India has become a focal point in this regard, both as a partner of the EU in general, and specifically as a participant in Germany's drive for several newly concluded economic and (renewable) energy cooperation agreements <sup>(DELLATTE 2022)</sup>.

This feeds into India's self-perception as a leader in the field of solar power, among others, but also into its overall strengthened position in the global order and its growing confidence on the world stage. One might say that India has become an inevitable (energy) partner. In addition to its many domestic projects, India's leadership ambition is expressed in the creation and maintenance of international forums such as the International Solar Alliance (ISA). In this context, both sides like to cultivate a rhetoric of "natural partners" who come together as the world's largest democracies. However, this requires an increased willingness on the part of the EU to look the other way on issues of rule of law and human rights. For instance, there has been little to no public criticism so far of the Indian practice of buying Russian discount oil, which has been referred to as "*not our business*" by the German Ambassador in New Delhi <sup>(NDTV 2023)</sup>. At the domestic level, India has been declared an electoral authority in V-Dem's Liberal Democracy Index, ranked 97 out of 197 countries in terms of their levels of liberal democracy, and branded as "*one of the worst autocratizers in the last 10 years*" <sup>(V-DEM INSTITUTE 2023)</sup>. Concerning press freedom in India, Reporters Without Borders ranked the country in the 150<sup>th</sup> place in this regard out of 180 states in 2022 <sup>(RSF 2023A)</sup>, compared to its being in the 131<sup>st</sup> place in 2012 <sup>(RSF 2023B)</sup>. More recently, the shrinking of spaces for civil society in

India has become globally visible in the growing number of think tanks and NGOs, including Oxfam India and the Centre for Policy Research, which have lost their Foreign Contribution Regulation Act licence (HINDUSTAN TIMES 2022). Two other examples of this shrinking of civil society spaces are the tax raids on the BBC offices in Delhi shortly after their broadcast of a critical documentary on PM Modi (CNN 2023), and the increasingly sharp rhetoric against ‘outsiders’ that allegedly try to influence Indian domestic affairs – for instance, by the foreign minister (INDIA TODAY 2023). It appears that against the backdrop of this growing self-confidence of India and the European need to find partners, any critique of India by the EU may be rather muted.

The key reason for what could be described as a strategic “tolerance” or “pragmatism” in this case is certainly the Russian war in Ukraine and its repercussions for the EU as a whole as well as its individual member states. The seemingly stable European peace order has been shattered by some states’ clear deviation from some of its core principles, including the violent attempt to change borders. In addition, and to the surprise of many, the war has been regarded as mostly a “European” problem rather than a global one in many parts of the world. This not only had serious repercussion for Europe’s self-image as a normative power with global reach, but also very concrete consequences for its trade relationships, as it strives to become less dependent on potential norm violators; and this specifically includes China with its looming threat to Taiwan, in addition to Russia. A renewed focus was given to so-called “value partners”, especially when it comes to ensuring the EU’s energy security. Germany, for example, has just concluded an energy partnership and a hydrogen alliance with Canada. Yet, this push to diversify has also led to a certain level of “strategic pragmatism” when it comes to human rights and other high-held norms and values. An example of this is the energy supply agreement with Azerbaijan, particularly after it recently went to war with Armenia, a country that has partner status with the EU, over Nagorno-Karabakh, and this war is flaring up on a regular basis. As said above, democratic backsliding is also on the advance in India, yet it is a highly desirable partner for the EU in many areas of concern, as it expands its weight, for instance, in the field of renewable energy but also in that of (green) hydrogen,<sup>1</sup> a field in which the Modi government wants to become a global leader. Yet, while the Ukraine war has given new impetus to these dynamics, many foundations for an expanding energy and specifically a hydrogen partnership between

the EU and its member states on the one side and India on the other, were already laid before 24 February 2022.

## EXPANSION OF ENERGY AND HYDROGEN PARTNERSHIPS BEFORE FEBRUARY 2022

Hydrogen, especially green hydrogen, is an example of contemporary developments at the intersection of conflict, climate change and energy security; it is considered both a climate hope and an economic miracle cure. Even before the Russian invasion in Ukraine, the EU had expanded its hydrogen relations with partners in the Indo-Pacific but also other regions. Green hydrogen has great (but also so far largely unfulfilled) promise in this regard. These international partnerships on hydrogen often involve industrialized nations in the Global North and emerging or developing countries in the Global South. While industrialized nations secure their own energy supply in this way, in theory, actors in the Global South may benefit from investments in sustainable development in their economies but also in expanding their own energy supply. Yet, this model has also come under scrutiny for setting up new dependencies, specifically if local benefits, especially in terms of energy supply, are not secured. Such cooperation efforts and agreements, besides those with India, are primarily those that the EU has with Namibia, Brazil, Egypt, and Morocco (LINDNER 2022); and in the absence of a broader governance framework for hydrogen relations (VAN DE GRAAF ET AL. 2020) this is something that needs to be carefully considered.

Overall, however, the race for global hydrogen sources and associated markets is booming across the globe, and new agreements are negotiated in multiple bilateral or multilateral partnerships. In addition to joint research projects, these agreements also include, for instance, concrete trade intentions between the countries involved as well as related national development strategies that place hydrogen at the centre of their own future national economies. Globally oriented hydrogen strategies exist, for example, in the EU, the US, Canada, and the UK, but also in India and China.

The EU, for example, has developed its strategy on hydrogen in 2020 as one way of substantiating the European Green Deal. It envisions the creation of a European hydrogen economy, including an expansion in

research and innovation, and scaling up production and infrastructure. Twenty action points were listed, of which all had been implemented by the first quarter of 2022. Furthermore, the overarching economic strategy is flanked by publicity measures such as the European Hydrogen Week 2022 or the Clean Hydrogen Partnership Awards 2022. To link industrial interests and involve relevant stakeholders, the European Clean Hydrogen Alliance was created in July 2020 to form a bridge between industry representatives, public authorities, civil society, and other relevant groups for the large-scale deployment of clean hydrogen technologies by 2030

(EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2022A).

India, for its part, launched its National Hydrogen Mission in August 2021 as the primary framework for managing national demands and achieving its self-set climate targets. The mission aims to standardize and bundle national hydrogen activities and bring science and industry closer together. Potential areas of green hydrogen use for India include fertilizer, steel, and petrochemicals as well as transport and industry schemes (MNRE 2022). At the same time, the mission aims to develop India as a global hub for the whole value chain of hydrogen and fuel cells technology, which could contribute not only to reaching the BJP government's target of Indian energy independence by 2047 (IBID.), but also to India complying with its overarching climate targets (including reaching net-zero by 2070) and simultaneously assuming a position of leadership in a market that global competitors are also striving to lead.

## ENERGY PARTNERSHIPS IN TIMES OF WAR

While emergency purchases and conservation efforts characterized the European energy winter of 2022–2023, and widespread blackouts have been avoided, EU member states will likely have to manage their energy demand without any Russian gas supplies at all for the foreseeable future. In its Energy Outlook 2022, the IEA assumes that the Russian war of aggression will drive up investments in and the subsequent shift towards renewable energy sources from \$1.3 trillion in 2022 to more than \$2 trillion annually by 2030 (IEA 2022). Considering the increased efforts to promote national and global hydrogen economies, it thus can be assumed that bi- or minilateral hydrogen-related alliances will increase both in number and in quality. On the part of the EU, in the REPowerEU plan, published

in May 2022, the Commission proposed to establish a global European hydrogen facility and import-oriented green hydrogen that, in their duality, are intended to ensure a level playing field between EU production and third-country imports (EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2022B).

India has become a partner at the forefront of these endeavours, and this has led to an increased diplomatic and political courtship that expanded and diversified an – in theory – strategic partnership that has existed since 2004 (MEA 2021). One of the most notable expressions of these aims is the resumption of negotiations on a free trade agreement with India in June 2022, as these negotiations had previously been stalled (EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2022D). And while previous EU-India collaborations in the energy sector focused on offshore wind energy, solar roof tops and solar parks, integration of renewable energy and storage, smart grids, biofuels and energy efficiency in buildings, in September 2022, Energy Commissioner Kadri Simson travelled to Delhi for deepening the EU-India cooperation in the area of hydrogen, among others, guided by the EU-India Green Hydrogen Forum. The combination of diplomatic attention that India receives from the EU and the corresponding provision of financial resources for projects is in fact currently unparalleled on this scale. These expanding relations between the EU and India are cushioned by a rhetoric that emphasizes mutual appreciation and cooperation. At the same time, both sides are pursuing ambitious and potentially competitive goals, with the EU, for example, aiming for a boost of the hydrogen share in its energy mix to 14 percent of its final energy demand by 2050 (POLITICO 2022).

As per usual, however, the policy directives of the EU Commission at least partially overlap or even conflict with interests of individual member states, which could play into the hands of external partners such as India or China. One example is the German foundation H2Global, which was set up by the Federal Government with a mandate to increase investment in hydrogen for the German market. The foundation is explicitly focussed on non-EU countries and Germany aims to support this mechanism with more than €4 billion (KURMAYER 2022). Germany thus considers India a key partner for its own sustainable energy transition, but also for containing the carbon-emitting economic growth of emerging economies. To substantiate their partnership, extensive German-Indian governmental consultations were held in May 2022 and have subsequently been deepened

by concretized projects on renewable energies and energy efficiency as well as climate-resilient urban development, climate-friendly mobility, and the sustainable management of natural resources <sup>(BMZ 2022)</sup>. These initiatives significantly expand existing bilateral formats, including the Indo-German Environment Forum, the Indo-German Energy Forum, and the Indo-German Green Hydrogen Task Force, among others. In addition to the cooperation on PV solutions, a hydrogen economy between them should be developed jointly <sup>(THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT 2022A)</sup>. So far, however, the Indo-German projects have primarily served as technical implementation projects, without any global political glamour. The ISA, on the other hand, was heavily promoted by France and India in international forums, and this promotion included personal statements by President Macron and PM Modi. Competitive and partnership entanglements in the energy sector therefore exist not only between global political players themselves, but also within the EU and third parties such as India.

It has become clear that India can significantly benefit from this new level of attention and support, yet it also has sufficient leverage to insist on its strategic autonomy when it comes to its positioning on the war in Ukraine and warding off critique of its domestic politics, for instance.

## **CONCLUSION: THE EU-INDIAN PARTNERSHIP ON SHAKY GROUNDS?**

Overall, India serves the EU and its member states not only as an important and emerging trading partner, but also as an anchor in the newly solidified understanding of the Indo-Pacific as a strategically important region. Alongside the ASEAN states, India is seen as a bulwark against the all-encompassing dominance of the People's Republic of China, even though all three actors stand for conflicting and partly overlapping interests. India's vital role as an EU value partner for the maintenance of the rules-based order is repeatedly stressed in strategically goal-oriented documents such as the German Indo-Pacific Guidelines <sup>(THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT 2022B)</sup> and the related progress reports or the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific <sup>(EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2021)</sup>.

India is also a key partner with infrastructural development potential, for instance within the framework of the EU's Global Gateway Strategy,



and is in a primary position for investments, which should also include the hydrogen sector (DELEGATION OF THE EUROPEAN UNION TO INDIA AND BHUTAN 2022). This has been primarily manifested in the India-EU Connectivity Partnership, launched in late 2022, which mainly intends to expand, diversify, and renew the EU-Indian trade relations, and serves to build a global narrative which is, above all, in competition with the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (PANDA 2022). Much rhetoric in the EU reinforces this value partnership by using the standard trope of the EU and India as the two largest democracies in the world that together can strive for human rights and environmental safeguarding, along with trade, security, and research cooperation. If we compare this to the situation of Brazil under the right-wing populist Jair Bolsonaro, who was mostly shunned by European partners (Bolsonaro was the only Brazilian President without a single bilateral visit to Europe – with the exception of a short visit to Hungary in 2022) (STUENKEL 2022), the EU's very different approach to India is noticeable in times in which autocratization tendencies in India persist and are growing. India has witnessed an increase in civil society and political restrictions under the Modi government. Moreover, India's stance on the war in Ukraine has caused, at least initially, substantial irritation in the EU. Yet, this potential for conflict has since been actively played down, presumably as a consequence of the even more difficult relations with China and the fear of alienating a still democratic state that has assumed a significant role on the geopolitical stage.

The deepened European-Indian hydrogen cooperation can therefore be interpreted as the dawn of a new, shared and positive energy future imaginary. It is – at this point – indeed an imaginary, as India still heavily relies on domestic and imported coal for its expanding energy needs, and the EU has dealt with the sudden breakdown of Russian gas supplies by developing new fossil-fuel based partnerships elsewhere in the world. Examples include the construction of new LNG terminals at the German coastline and the conclusion of long-term supply agreements with states such as Qatar (THE GUARDIAN 2022).

By courting India, the EU clearly tries to pursue a comprehensive approach that aims to combine the issues of energy security, global climate protection and increasing geopolitical relevance with calculated strategic partnerships, especially with states of the Global South. More importantly, however, this new attention to India is driven by avoiding new

dependencies on China at all costs. This puts the metaphorical ball distinctly in India's court, and gives it considerable leeway despite its setbacks to democracy, despite its profiting from cheap Russian oil and despite its increasingly questionable human rights record. An all-encompassing value match is therefore not to be expected from the new EU-India partnership. Rather, it is changing geopolitical realities that make India an inevitable port of call for the EU.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Hydrogen exists in several 'colour' variants, which represent the respective degrees of sustainability in its production. A grey colour, the currently predominant variant, means that it is created from natural gas or methane, using steam methane reformation without carbon capturing; blue hydrogen also stems from gas but the resulting emissions are captured and stored. Green hydrogen is produced exclusively from renewable energies.

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