

Defence and Space Cooperation: Emerging Frontiers in India-Europe Relations

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Introduction

The relationship between India and Europe has evolved far beyond trade and cultural exchange to encompass strategic cooperation in defence and outer space. In recent years, these domains have emerged as pivotal frontiers of engagement shaped by shared concerns over global stability, technological sovereignty, and multipolarity in world affairs. India's strategic autonomy and Europe's quest for a stronger global role have converged, particularly amid shifting security architectures in the Indo-Pacific and the aftermath of the Russia–Ukraine conflict. This article examines the trajectory of India-Europe defence and space cooperation, tracing its historical roots and recent developments.

Historical Background of India–Europe Strategic Engagement

The historical contours of India-Europe relations were initially defined by colonial legacies and post-independence trade partnerships. During the Cold War, strategic engagement remained minimal as Europe's security architecture revolved around North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) while India pursued non-alignment.

The EU-India Cooperation Agreement (1994) constituted the initial move toward formalised political engagement, creating a concrete base that later facilitated broader strategic interaction.¹ The establishment of the EU-India Strategic Partnership in 2004, along with subsequent Joint Action Plans, identified security cooperation as an area of mutual interest, although tangible outcomes remained limited due to divergent strategic perspectives.²

A more pronounced transition followed the Lisbon Treaty (2009), which enhanced the European Union's external policy coherence through the consolidation of the European Union External Action Service. Concurrently, the expansion of India's defence manufacturing capabilities attracted European defence companies such as Airbus, Matra BAE Dynamics Alenia, Thales, and British Aerospace Systems to explore industrial partnerships aligned with Make in India and *Atmanirbhar Bharat* (Self-reliant India).³

Emerging Frontiers in Defence Cooperation

Country / Countries	Exercise Name	Service Involved	Start Year	Brief Focus
Held with specific Countries				
France	Varuna	Navy	2001	Maritime security, carrier operations, interoperability
France	Garuda	Air Force	2003	Air combat, force integration, air defence
United Kingdom	Konkan	Navy	2004	Naval tactics, surface warfare
United Kingdom	Indra dhanush	Air Force	2006	Air defence, offensive counter-air missions, and tactical air operations
France	Shakti	Army	2011	Counter-terrorism, joint tactical operations
United Kingdom	Ajeya Warrior	Army	2015	Infantry skills, counter-insurgency
Spain	India–Spain Naval Exercise	Navy	2022	Maritime security, sea-lane protection
Multilateral Participation with European Nations				
Hosted by India	MILAN	Navy	1995	Multinational Maritime Cooperation
Hosted by France	La Pérouse	Navy	2019	Maritime Cooperation
European Union	India–EU Naval Exercise (EUNAVFOR)	Navy	2021	Counter-piracy, maritime domain awareness

Table 1: India's Military Exercises with European Nations

Source: Press Information Bureau⁴

Along with the above exercises, India has conducted Passing Exercises (PASSEX) with several European countries, including France, the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Greece, and Denmark. PASSEX are conducted between the navies of two or more countries when their ships pass through the same maritime area.

Through the Military exercises held over the last three decades, following developments have come to light: -

- France and the United Kingdom remain India's most institutionalised European defence partners, covering all three services.
- Naval cooperation dominates due to Indo-Pacific maritime security priorities.

- India's participation in European-hosted multilateral exercises (INIOCHOS, La Pérouse) signals growing India-Europe strategic convergence beyond bilateral ties.
- The India-EU Naval Exercise (2025) is strategically important—it reflects bloc-level military cooperation, not just bilateralism.

Strategic Convergence and Indo-Pacific Outlook

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as a geographical and strategic anchor for India–Europe cooperation. The EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy (2021) explicitly recognised India as a key partner for maintaining regional stability. The document underscored joint interests in freedom of navigation, maritime domain awareness, and countering coercive behaviour in sea lanes.⁵ The establishment of the EU-India Security and Defence Consultations (2023-24) institutionalised this strategic dialogue, focusing on military-to-military exchanges, counterterrorism, and hybrid threats.⁶ The second consultation, held in New Delhi in May 2024, reaffirmed mutual commitments to expanding collaboration in peacekeeping, capacity building, and technology transfer.⁷

France, as a key defence actor in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific, has been central to this engagement. Franco–Indian cooperation—anchored in defence sales such as the Rafale jets and Scorpène submarines—has evolved into joint production and research partnerships. The 2025 India–France Strategic Dialogue expanded the focus to defence technology sharing, drone systems, and artificial intelligence for military use.⁸

Italy and Germany have also deepened engagement through co-development of advanced naval systems and cybersecurity frameworks.⁹ The India–Italy Joint Action Plan 2024–28 highlights defence and connectivity as core pillars, linking Europe's maritime strategies with India's Indo-Pacific priorities.¹⁰

Defence Industrial Collaboration and Technology Transfer

A key shift in the India-Europe defence equation lies in industrial cooperation. The EU has recognised India as a vital partner to diversify its defence supply chains amidst geopolitical uncertainties. European firms have increasingly localised production in India, leveraging its engineering expertise and cost-effective manufacturing base.¹¹

Joint ventures such as Airbus–Tata (for C-295 transport aircraft) and Thales–Bharat Electronics (for radar systems) exemplify a new phase of technological cooperation. India's defence export ambitions, combined with Europe's technological sophistication, create a mutually reinforcing dynamic. The European Defence Fund's 2025 proposal to explore partnerships with non-EU democratic partners, including India, could serve as a platform for collaborative research in next-generation military technologies, unmanned systems, and cybersecurity.¹²

Furthermore, maritime security has become a central pillar. The fourth EU-India Maritime Security Dialogue (Mar 2025) emphasised operational cooperation between the Indian Navy and European counterparts in the Indian Ocean, focusing on anti-piracy, logistics sharing, and interoperability.¹³

Expanding Cooperation in Space Technology

- **Historical Context.** India's engagement with Europe in space cooperation dates back to the early phases of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) in the 1970s, when European launch vehicles were used for India's early satellites. Over the years, ISRO and the European Space Agency (ESA) have maintained data-sharing and Earth observation partnerships. However, the contemporary phase of cooperation is driven by mutual strategic interests—climate monitoring, satellite navigation, and security applications. ESA and ISRO have collaborated on missions such as Copernicus and Galileo, aligning with India's Gaganyaan human spaceflight program and Earth observation satellites.
- **Recent Developments and New Initiatives.** In 2025, ESA and ISRO announced a renewed framework for cooperation focusing on satellite-based climate observation, navigation interoperability, and planetary exploration.¹⁴ The agreement includes joint use of ground stations, technology sharing for small satellites, and scientific collaboration on space debris monitoring. The revival of the EU-India Space Dialogue in 2024 marked a renewed focus on the strategic use of space capabilities. Discussions placed particular emphasis on maritime domain awareness, the development of dual-use technologies, secure communication systems, and the application of space assets for disaster management and emergency response. A notable outcome has been progress towards interoperability between Europe's Galileo and India's Navigation with Indian Constellation, enhancing technological autonomy and reducing vulnerability to external disruptions in positioning and navigation services.¹⁵ At the bilateral level, cooperation with individual European states has continued to expand. France's Centre National d'Études Spatiales has remained India's most consistent partner, reflected in joint missions such as Megha-Tropiques and Satellite with ARGOS and ALtiKa, and ongoing engagement on future Earth-observation initiatives. Germany's Deutsches Zentrum für Luft- und Raumfahrt (German Aerospace Centre) and Italy's Italian Space Agency have strengthened collaboration in satellite technologies, scientific research, and support for astronaut training.¹⁶ These developments indicate a broader shift in India–Europe relations, where space cooperation is increasingly viewed as a key pillar of strategic resilience, disaster preparedness, and national security.¹⁷

Challenges and Limitations in Defence and Space Cooperation: India-Europe

- **Divergent strategic priorities.** Europe's defence outlook is shaped by NATO commitments and the Ukraine conflict, while India prioritises strategic autonomy and regional stability. These differing threat perceptions slow alignment on long-term defence planning and joint missions.¹⁸
- **Export controls and technology transfer restrictions.** Strict European export regulations and third-party controls on dual-use technologies limit meaningful technology transfer. This clashes with India's emphasis on indigenisation and co-production under Make in India.¹⁹
- **Industrial and procurement mismatches.** European defence firms and Indian manufacturers operate under different cost structures, certification standards, and procurement timelines. These mismatches restrict smooth industrial collaboration and scaling of joint projects.²⁰
- **Geopolitical and third-party pressures.** Sanctions regimes, alliance politics, and global strategic competition constrain cooperation choices for both sides. External dependencies can abruptly disrupt defence supply chains and space partnerships.²¹

India-Europe Defence and Space Cooperation: Why It Matters for India

Stronger defence and space cooperation with Europe enhances India's strategic autonomy, military interoperability, and technological self-reliance. Defence engagement with European partners improves operational skills and maritime security in the Indo-Pacific, while supporting defence indigenisation through technology transfer and co-development.²²

In space, cooperation between the ESA and the ISRO strengthens Earth observation, navigation resilience, and disaster management via Copernicus data and engagement on Galileo.²³ Overall, such cooperation boosts India's security capacity and global standing without compromising policy independence.

Conclusion

The India-Europe relationship has been redefined by growing collaboration in the defence and space cooperation. Initially, this cooperation has been limited to dialogues, but now it is covering industrial and technological domains as well. As both actors navigate a volatile global order, their partnership represents a model of democratic technology cooperation emphasising in shared interests and mutual respect. Strengthening these ties will not only increase regional stability but also position India and Europe as key architects of a balanced and secure global future.

Endnotes

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