

# INDIA AND THE CHANGING GEOPOLITICS OF CENTRAL EUROPE

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## **WEBINAR REPORT**

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# INDIA AND THE CHANGING GEOPOLITICS OF CENTRAL EUROPE

WEBINAR HOSTED BY COUNCIL FOR STRATEGIC AND  
DEFENCE RESEARCH & KONRAD-ADENAUER-  
STIFTUNG

## PANELISTS



*Prof C Raja Mohan  
(Moderator)*



*Dr Garima Mohan*



*Dr Adrian Haack*



*Dr Csaba Barnabás  
Horváth*



## BACKGROUND

Recent momentum in India's ties with Europe has been accompanied by a calibrated outreach by India towards other regions in the continent beyond its traditional ties with Western Europe. The Indian government has stepped up its engagement with the Nordic states, Greece and Italy in the South, as well as Central & Eastern Europe. The India-CEE relationship in particular, just before the pandemic, in 2019, witnessed a peak of diplomatic visits and outreach. India's foreign ministers, Sushma Swaraj and S. Jaishankar visited Bulgaria and Serbia respectively, its president travelled to Slovenia, and its vice president undertook the first high-level government visits to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, laying the foundation for political dialogue. Since then, the war in Ukraine has raised pertinent questions about how India's ties with Russia, and the US, are viewed in Central and Eastern Europe with its distinct security and threat perceptions from Western Europe. This panel seeks to explore the current moment in India-CEE relations—the evolving nature of ties set against the backdrop of Central & Eastern Europe's changing geopolitics and the potential it holds across avenues such as trade, investment, education, innovation, and cultural exchanges.

Against this backdrop, this webinar will explore the following leading questions/discussion points:

- In the next 10 years, what are the potential areas of cooperation critical to improved India-CEE relations?
- Which are some individual countries in the CEE region of particular interest and potential?
- What are the geopolitical considerations, if any, in play in light of the CEE region's changing geopolitics?
- How big a mobilizing factor is China in driving India's engagement with the CEE region?

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Central Europe has historically been a blind spot in India's worldview, despite playing a pivotal role in shaping world history during the two World Wars and the Cold War. However, the last few years have seen a positive shift, with India showing a growing interest in Europe beyond the EU.
- Central Europe holds a significant geopolitical position and is considered the heart of Europe. As a collective, it is also a major economic entity. There is a lot to gain for India in terms of technology and innovation from Central Europe. At the same time, India has many things to offer to the countries of Central Europe. Therefore, India should initiate a serious and focused engagement with Central European countries.
- The changing dynamics and varying positions within Europe, particularly among Poland, Ukraine, and Hungary, highlight the need for India to understand and respond strategically to regional geopolitical shifts.
- The collaboration between Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and India has great economic potential. The historical absence of disputes, along with India's participation in the QUAD and growing ties with the US offers opportunities for economic cooperation that won't conflict with existing alignments.
- India's global partnerships are constantly evolving, with a growing emphasis on the country's economic focus on Europe. This can be seen in the ongoing negotiations for advanced Free Trade Agreements (FTAs). The webinar highlighted the importance of sustained dialogue, particularly about the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Additionally, it showcased the potential for increased cooperation between India and Central Europe.

## VIEWS EXPRESSED

Prof Raja Mohan began the webinar with an introduction to the subject. Central Europe has been a historical blind spot in India's worldview. He emphasized that Central Europe played a pivotal role in shaping world history during the two world wars and the Cold War. Despite this, India struggled to develop an insightful understanding of the region. However, the last few years have witnessed India's growing interest in Europe, recognising its diverse regions beyond the EU. Prof Raja Mohan highlighted concerns in Central Europe regarding India's stance on the Ukraine war. He underscored the evolving dynamics and varying positions within Europe, especially between Poland, Ukraine and Hungary. The region's geopolitical significance and its potential impact on India were stressed.

Dr Haack provided a nuanced perspective on the Ukraine situation. On the positive side, he emphasized Europe's unity in supporting Ukraine, expecting an EU agreement soon. He also highlighted Poland's crucial role in the conflict. However, Dr Haack expressed concerns about debates on negotiations and Putin's recent speech, indicating challenges to finding a diplomatic solution. On the role of India in this war, he stressed that India could not significantly influence the war in one or the other direction for the past 21 months.

In the context of the Ukraine conflict, Dr Horváth underscored the strategic importance of Ukraine for European security, particularly for Hungary, as it acts as a buffer between Europe and Russia. He emphasized the necessity of maintaining Ukraine's position as a security buffer. Turning to the prospects for collaboration between Central and Eastern Europe and India, Dr Horváth identified two key factors fostering optimism – first, the absence of historical disputes facilitates economic relations, trade and investments between India and the CEE region and second, India's participation in the Quad and its growing ties with the US present an opportunity for CEE countries to diversify their economic connections globally without conflicting with their alignment with the US.

Dr Haack and Dr Horváth discussed the economic potential of Central and Eastern Europe. Dr Haack pointed out that despite being a blind spot for many countries, including India, these countries are economic tigers, offering significant opportunities for collaboration, especially for Indian businesses. Dr Horváth highlighted the economic advantages within the EU, such as lower labour costs. Additionally, he suggested potential cooperation opportunities given the agricultural strength of the CEE region.

Dr Mohan discussed the momentum in India's outreach to individual European states, citing visits by the Indian Foreign Minister in 2019. She highlighted the changing European perception of India post-2020, emphasizing the Indo-Pacific approach and increased attention to Central Europe. Regarding the economic partnership between India and CEE, she assessed that India is intensively considering Europe as a key economic partner, evident in the advanced Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations. This strategic focus on the West signals a keen interest in economic opportunities and highlights the evolving dynamics of India's global partnerships.

## IMPRESSIONS

Prof Raja Mohan initiated the Q&A session by highlighting the possibility of enhanced defence collaboration between India and Central Europe in case the differences with Russia are resolved. He further discussed the sustainability of European unity regarding the Russia issue during a prolonged war, the implications of Trump's potential re-election on the European strategy, and the ways to minimize the Russian question as India and Central Europe strengthen their relations.

Dr Haack expressed his concerns that European unity should be focused on enhancing industrial capacities rather than individual countries.

Furthermore, she highlighted that the Ukraine war has fostered increased interaction between India and the CEE nations, with the latter expressing a genuine interest in understanding India's position on Russia and exploring alternative partnerships, particularly in the defence sector.

He suggested that gaining support from influential countries like France could significantly impact the effectiveness of the Ukraine contact group. Dr Haack emphasized that unity within the Ukraine contact group is crucial. Additionally, India's neutral stance on Russia could be beneficial for maintaining positive relations with countries that are dependent on Russian arms.

To address Russia's current limitations, joint ventures may be considered, with China emerging as a key player in the low-price arms segment.

Dr Horváth expressed that the lack of a coherent U.S. strategy, especially regarding tank supplies for the Ukrainian counter-offensive, raises questions about the future of the war. He drew a parallel between India's views on Russia and CEE's view of China. While India perceives opportunities in Russia and has no direct experience with Russian expansionism, CEE tends to view China similarly, focusing on opportunities rather than potential risks. This rational approach underscores the nuanced dynamics shaping diplomatic engagements in these regions.

Dr Mohan has expressed that if Trump is re-elected in the upcoming US election, then Europe may have no choice but to pursue greater strategic autonomy. India's strategic approach to the movement of people involves bilateral agreements on migration and mobility with each member state. This strategic choice effectively delineates concerns related to immigrants, especially focusing on skilled immigration from India. To minimize differences with Russia, a sustained dialogue with Central Europe on Russia-China dynamics is essential, considering the potential regional and global implications in the Indo-Pacific and Europe. She has also emphasized the need for India to engage with the NATO and explore opportunities for collaboration.

Dr Mohan added that the convergence of views between India and Europe on China issues is only increasing and this has impacted engagement in Europe and India as well.

On a question posed by Mr Patryk Kugiel (Analyst, Asia-Pacific Programme, Polish Institute of International Affairs), Dr Haack highlighted that India's burgeoning interest in CEE is primarily driven by the prospect of expanding economic relations. With the Indian economy increasingly pivoting toward export-oriented strategies over the next two decades, the EU and the CEE region are anticipated to emerge as crucial markets for Indian companies. Dr Horváth identified agriculture as a significant strategic factor influencing India's interest in the region. The agricultural potential of CEE becomes pivotal, presenting a unique opportunity for India to meet its food demands as consumption rises with economic growth and population expansion.

Dr Mohan explored the increasing interest of Indian companies in Europe, specifically through greenfield investments. The ample potential and cost-effectiveness of investing in these countries, coupled with the desire to counter Chinese influence, contribute to the growing appeal for Indian businesses to engage with CEE nations.

On another question posed by Mr Kugiel, Dr Horváth acknowledged that although the Three Seas Initiative is not as prioritized by the current Polish government as it was by its predecessor, practical geopolitical factors will compel them to maintain the initiative. Dr Mohan underscored the potential for India's deeper engagement with Central Europe through its association with the NATO.

Dr Mohan advocated for a nuanced approach that moves beyond traditional concerns, encouraging India to view the NATO from a different lens.

On a question posed by the audience, she responded that the US factor serves as a unifying element between CEE and India. She emphasized the strength of India-US ties, extending beyond security and defence into a comprehensive partnership.

Dr Mohan suggested that increased encouragement from the US on both sides could accelerate the development of perceptions between Europe and India. A trilateral dialogue holds the potential for linking security challenges in Europe with those in the Indo-Pacific, with the US playing a crucial role in facilitating such connections.

The webinar concluded with a call for deeper engagement between India and Central Europe, leveraging economic opportunities, addressing geopolitical challenges, and fostering collaboration in various sectors. The panellists expressed optimism about the potential for increased cooperation and the need for sustained dialogue to navigate complex geopolitical issues.



# ANNEX 1

**Prof C Raja Mohan** is a Senior Fellow with the Asia Society Policy Institute in Delhi — a division of the Asia Society India Centre, Mumbai. He is a Visiting Research Professor at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), National University of Singapore, and was previously the Director of ISAS. Mohan was the founding director of Carnegie India in Delhi, the sixth international centre of Carnegie Endowment for Peace. He was associated with several Indian think tanks, including the Institute of Defense Studies and Analyses, the Observer Research Foundation, and the Center for Policy Research in New Delhi. Mohan was a Professor of South Asian Studies at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, and the Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore. He served on India's National Security Advisory Board. He was the Henry A. Kissinger Chair in Foreign Policy and International Relations at the Kluge Center, US Library of Congress, Washington DC, during 2009-10. He is a columnist for Foreign Policy and the Indian Express.

**Dr Csaba Barnabás Horváth**, historian and political scientist, is a Senior Researcher at the Danube Institute. He is a member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. He was a former researcher of the MTA-ELTE-SZTE Research Group. Under different visiting research schemes, he worked at the Australian National University in Canberra, Australia, the Fudan University in Shanghai, China, and the National Chengchi University in Taipei, Taiwan. Dr. Horváth has also performed public talks in Malaysia invited by the Penang institute and the Tunku Abdul Rahman University, and in Singapore, invited by the Nanyang Technological University.

**Dr Garima Mohan** is a senior fellow in the Indo-Pacific program at German Marshall Fund US, where she leads the work on India and heads the India Trilateral Forum. Based in GMF's office in Berlin, her research focuses on Europe-India ties, EU foreign policy in Asia, and security in the Indo-Pacific. Prior to joining GMF, she was the acting team leader and coordinator for the EU's Asia-Pacific Research and Advice Network (APRAN), which supports EU policymakers on issues concerning the Asia-Pacific. She also led the Global Orders program at the Global Public Policy Institute in Berlin. She was a non-resident fellow at Carnegie India, an Asian Forum for Global Governance Fellow, and a 2017 Raisina Young Fellow. She has published widely on Indian foreign and security policy, EU-Asia relations, Germany-India ties, and maritime security in the Indo-Pacific, and is a frequent commentator for European and Indian media including NZZ, The Hindu, The Wire and Deutsche Welle.

**Dr Adrian Haack** is the Director of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS) in New Delhi. In Germany's Army, Dr. Haack served in a battle tank unit in the First Division. Years later he took the oath of duty as an officer in the Navy reserve forces. In the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Dr. Haack was involved as of the age of seventeen. In CDU's youth branch and the party itself he held numerous positions: He was the youngest member of the CDU executive board at state level and election candidate in 2021. Since 2015 he worked for the parliamentary group in the field of free trade and security policy. Most recently, he headed the CDU General Secretary's Bundestag staff for three years.