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Higher education cooperation in the EU's strategy towards India: shifting rationales and unfulfilled potentials¹

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the years, higher education cooperation between India and Europe has become a prominent part of the partnership agenda. This growing interest in higher education cooperation with India is not surprising. With a young and growing population of over 1.3 billion people and with the third largest higher education system of the world, India is becoming one of the pivotal actors in the internationalisation of education. Yearly hundreds of thousands of India's young and bright go abroad for graduate or post-graduate training. It is for this reason that the EU's strategy on India, presented in 2018, put considerable emphasis on the need for higher education cooperation as a way to deepen ties with India as an emerging economic and geopolitical power.

This policy brief examines the shifting rationales behind the EU's strategy to foster higher education cooperation with India. It observes that the need for more HEC with India is increasingly seen through the lens of a knowledge-based economy. Other geopolitical considerations for the need to strengthen cooperation, like increasing soft power or building epistemic communities, play a less prominent role. For a truly strategic account of the potential of HEC with India, these perspectives deserve further consideration. A strategic use of HEC would look beyond the economic gains and contributions to Europe's knowledge economy and understand it also from an epistemic perspective.

INTRODUCTION

In July 2020, during a high-level summit, the EU and India decided to further strengthen their strategic partnership and adopted 'A Roadmap to 2025' to guide cooperation over the next five years. Among the several dimensions and fields in which the EU and India aim to foster cooperation, higher education is one of the recurring themes. The

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partners announced they would strengthen cooperation in the area of education and research, improve awareness of study and scholarship opportunities in the EU and India, and promote the mobility and exchange of students and academic staff. Over the years, higher education cooperation between India and Europe has become a prominent part of the partnership agenda. This growing interest in higher education cooperation with India is not surprising. With a young and growing population of over 1.3 billion people and with the third largest higher education system of the world, India is becoming one of the pivotal actors in the internationalisation of education. Yearly hundreds of thousands of India's young and bright go abroad for graduate or post-graduate training. It is for this reason that the EU's strategy on India, presented in 2018, put considerable emphasis on the need for higher education cooperation as a way to deepen ties with India as an emerging economic and geopolitical power.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE STRATEGIC USE OF HIGHER EDUCATIONAL COOPERATION IN GEOPOLITICS

The rise of HEC as a theme in the EU-India relationship fits a larger pattern. The internationalisation of higher education has in the past decades firmly entered the foreign relations discourses becoming part of the toolbox of association agreements, strategic partnerships or other institutionalized forms of international relations. In geopolitical analyses, though, the issue of higher education is often eclipsed by other and 'harder' foreign affairs issues in the economic and security domain, while scholarship into the internationalisation of education often overlooks the political dimension of the phenomenon.² Nevertheless, several theoretical perspectives point to its significance in a geopolitical context. This policy brief discusses three theoretical lenses through which higher education cooperation can be assessed.

In Joseph Nye's theory of soft power, higher education cooperation is considered an important element in a country's diverse set of instruments to gain influence in the geopolitical domain. Nye famously introduced the concept of soft power as the ability to get what one wants through attraction rather than through coercion or payment. Since the Cold War, academic and student exchange and cooperation have been an important resource for America's soft power, Nye argued in a 2004 article.³ By attracting, yearly, hundreds of thousands of students from all over the world, the education system forms an important instrument for the US in diffusing its cultural and

² Rajendra K. Jain and Gulshan Sachdeva, "India-EU Strategic Partnership: A New Roadmap; Gulshan Sachdeva, "India and the European Union: Broadening Strategic Partnership Beyond Economic Linkages,"; Emilian Kavalski, "The EU-India Strategic Partnership: Neither Very Strategic, nor Much of a Partnership,"; Lara Klossek, Shounak Set, and Tomasz Lukaszuk, "Breaking Glass Ceiling? Mapping EU-India Security Cooperation,".

³ Joseph Nye, "Soft Power and Higher Education," 2005, 4; Other recent works that used the soft power concept to study internationalisation of education are: Philip G. Altbach and Patti McGill Peterson, "Higher Education as a Projection of America's Soft Power,"; Jack T. Lee, "Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy: Emerging Education Hubs in Asia,"; William J Jones, "European Union Soft Power: Cultural Diplomacy & Higher Education in Southeast Asia,"; Aidarbek Amirbek and Kanat Ydyrys, "Education and Soft Power: Analysis as an Instrument of Foreign Policy,".

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political values. US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, once remarked: ‘I can think of no more valuable an asset to our country than the friendship of future world leaders who have been educated here.’⁴

Another analytical angle for understanding the geopolitical dimension of higher education cooperation can be found in the work of Peter Haas. In his constructivist approach of international relations theory, he pointed to the importance of networks of knowledge-based experts – epistemic communities – in the complex process of international policy coordination.⁵ Haas argues that national behaviour in the international system is not only determined by state-level factors, such as the national interests, but is shaped by how actors and groups of policy-makers identify their interest through an epistemic structure. Higher education cooperation, in this light, can be an important factor in constituting such epistemic communities.⁶ Professional training provides the technical knowledge and normative beliefs to policy makers and political actors, and subsequently becomes the interpretative lens through which they identify problems and solutions. Higher education cooperation can be used strategically, to foster the emergence of cross-border expert networks that share a language for international policy coordination and problem solving.

The geopolitical dimension in the internationalisation of higher education is furthermore understood from the perspective of human capital or knowledge economy theories. In particular, international organizations like the IMF and the World Bank have used this approach to encourage an intensification of academic and educational exchange across borders. In the context of EU policy-making, several reports have been produced that draw from this approach.⁷ From this perspective, higher education cooperation is considered as an essential public and economic resource that fosters national (and global) economic growth. Higher education is itself seen as a productive factor in the cumulation of capital, either as a business product or as a production asset. Interstate rivalry, in this perspective, is no longer a territorial issue, but focusses on the globalised flows and streams of talent, money and ideas.⁸ Higher education forms a critical instrument in a global ‘talent race’ that is crucial for building innovative and technologically advanced economies.

On what theoretical premises is the EU’s strategy of fostering higher education cooperation with India built? A brief analysis of policy documents exposes an interesting shift in the rationale in the past decades.

⁴ As cited in: Nye, “Soft Power and Higher Education,” 13.

⁵ Peter M. Haas, “Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination,”.

⁶ Hovey, Rebecca, “Study Abroad, Global Knowledge and the Epistemic Communities of Higher Education,”.

⁷ A good example of a report that follows a human capital approach in the context of the EU’s higher education policy is: Christal Morehouse et al., *How to Keep a Competitive Edge in the Talent Game: Lessons for the EU from China and the US*:

⁸ For an excellent critical discussion on the geopolitical dimension in higher capital theory and higher education, see Sami Moisiu, *Geopolitics of the Knowledge-Based Economy*.

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THE RATIONALE BEHIND FOSTERING HEC IN THE EU'S STRATEGY TOWARDS INDIA

The formalisation of the relation between the EU and India started with a cooperation agreement in 1994. Although the economic dimension dominated the political agenda at that time⁹, the agreement set the broad aim of strengthening ties in respect of 'technical, economic and cultural matters.'¹⁰ The treaty text included two brief articles on science and technology and cultural exchange that provided a framework for initiating joint research projects and an 'exchange and trading of scientists and researchers.'¹¹ To a certain extent, the agreement followed the example or template of other EU agreements with third (often neighbouring) countries that mushroomed in the early 1990s. The rationale behind enhancing cooperation in science and technology was a combination of cultural diplomacy and a developmental agenda with the aim to assist India in modernizing its society. In 2001, India and the EU followed up on this clause with a separate EU-India Agreement on scientific and technological cooperation, which allowed the two parties to constitute cooperative activities under the EU's Framework Programmes.¹² The agreement has been renewed three times, most recently in 2020 for a new period of five years and is still one of the main pillars of EU-India research cooperation.

In 2000, the EU and India started a series of summits bent on deepening their relationship, which led to a 'strategic partnership' in 2004. The focus was widened and included not only economic but also security and sustainable development issues. Academic cooperation was mentioned under the section of 'economic partnership', and they reconfirmed their commitment to building 'synergies in technology and science.' The partnership agreement also included a statement on fostering 'academic contacts and exchanges,' for which the partnership built on the instruments set up by the European Commission.¹³ This dimension of the partnership was further emphasized in 2008, when the European Commission and the Government of India signed a Joint Declaration on Policy Dialogue in Education during a visit by the European Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Youth to New Delhi.¹⁴ With the declaration, the parties agreed to a continuous dialogue on the modernization of higher and vocational education and started working to establish a convergence of quality assurance mechanisms.

⁹ Kavalski, "The EU-India Strategic Partnership."

¹⁰ European Community, "Cooperation Agreement between the European Communities and the Republic of India on Partnership and Development," August 27, 1994.

¹¹ European Community, paras. 14 and 15.

¹² The EU-India Agreement on scientific and technological cooperation was considered a success and therefore renewed in 2007, 2015 and 2020.

¹³ Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament and the European Economic and Social Committee, "An EU-India Strategic Partnership," June 2004, 9.

¹⁴ European Commission, "Press Release: European Commission and Government of India Sign Joint Declaration on Policy Dialogue in Education," November 12, 2008.

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On the heels of the 2008 global recession, in the period from 2010-2016, the partnership between the EU and India lost some of its momentum. The negotiations on a free trade agreement, which had started in 2008, came to a deadlock and were suspended in 2014. After the election of Narendra Modi as the prime minister in that same year, the two parties worked to rejuvenate the strategic relationship. In 2016, a new summit was organized in Brussels – after a gap of four years. The relationship made some significant developments around this period.¹⁵ In 2017, India and the EU for the first time in any statement described each other as ‘natural partners’ in terms of shared values and belief.¹⁶ The strategic partnership put more emphasis on other dimensions, especially in the field of security and the sustainability development agenda. In this new context, the limelight was also once again placed on cooperation in the field of education and research - this time less from a developmental angle and based more on an equal footing.

This development is reflected in the EU’s India strategy that was presented in 2018, in which India was recognized as an important emerging economic and geopolitical power. The strategy envisioned a strong partnership with India to ‘jointly contribute to preserve peace and stability, promote prosperity and sustainable development and strengthen the rule-based order.’ HEC took a more prominent role than before, and it became a recurring theme in the strategy text. Under the rubric of the ‘modernisation partnership’, education and research were highlighted as crucial factors in ‘unlocking India’s economic and demographic potential.’¹⁷ Research and innovation cooperation was furthermore mentioned as contributing to the ‘EU’s scientific excellence and competitiveness.’¹⁸ The implicit message was that the EU hoped to attract bright researchers and students with its current research framework programmes. Under the rubric of ‘Investing in talent and innovation’, the strategy highlighted the aim to build an increased exchange among students, researchers and professionals, and argued that the ‘EU and India share a mutual interest in reciprocal mobility of talent’.¹⁹ The strategy stated that highly qualified Indian workers would be welcomed and invited to help the ‘EU to maintain [its] technology-based leadership,’ it states. In another paragraph, the strategy argued that the EU had an interest in promoting the participation of more Indian students, researchers and higher education staff in EU programmes, as this supported the EU in its ambition to become a centre for the ‘best talent, knowledge and resources in the world.’

¹⁵ Jain and Sachdeva, “India-EU Strategic Partnership.”

¹⁶ The term “natural partners” to describe the EU and India was coined by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2006, and was included in the official discourse of EU-India relations in 2017. Kavalski, “The EU–India Strategic Partnership,” 193.

¹⁷ European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, “Elements for an EU Strategy on India,” November 20, 2018, 3,

https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/jc_elements_for_an_eu_strategy_on_india_-_final_adopted.pdf.

¹⁸ European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 4.

¹⁹ European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 8.

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The 2018 EU strategy towards India exemplified a gradual shift in the rationale behind the need for HEC. Whereas in the 1990s this was framed in terms of a developmental agenda and technological cooperation, it is today mostly understood as a necessity to keep the EU states competitive in the globalized market. Indian educational space is described as an attractive pool of talent that can be tapped to support the EU in its drive for excellence and competitiveness. In this respect, the EU strategy towards India builds mainly on a knowledge-economy perspective regarding higher education, while other perspectives are granted a minor role. The need for cultural diplomacy is mentioned as well in the strategy, but it limits the scope exclusively to exchanges in the cultural and creative sectors. The soft power lens of HEC does not play a significant role in the EU strategy towards India. The aim to foster cross-border expert communities with problem-solving capacities for pressing global issues is present in the proposal for increased scientific and research cooperation in the fields of nuclear science and sustainable development, but it is not considered at a macro-level in relation to HEC.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

The EU's current India strategy underlined India as a 'natural partner' in geopolitical terms that is committed to the same values of democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms. India is recognised as a global power in which Europe sees a partner for upholding a rule-based global order centred on multilateralism. In this context, higher education is seen as an important dimension in which the relationship between Europe and India can be strengthened. With a fast-growing educational system, India is developing into an educational giant with an enormous potential for the EU to expand academic and educational ties. An analysis of the EU's objectives and aims behind the strategy to foster HEC with India also gives reason for criticisms. The need for more HEC with India is increasingly seen through the lens of a knowledge-based economy. The EU is enmeshed with what is described as 'the talent game' – a global competition over human resources that underpins a country's economic and political status in the rapidly globalized world.²⁰ India will play a pivotal role in this international competition due to its demographic composition and its relatively high-quality educational system. Other geopolitical considerations for the need to strengthen cooperation, however, play a minor role. Several theoretical perspectives have pointed to the geopolitical role of higher education, either as an instrument for soft power or in building trans-national epistemological communities. For a truly strategic account of the potential of HEC with India, these perspectives deserve further consideration.

²⁰ CEPS Task Force on the Quantity and Quality of Human Capital in Higher Education, *How to Keep a Competitive Edge in the Talent Game*.

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