



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

FOCUS EUROPE

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FOCUS EUROPE

This monthly publication analyses strategic developments in Europe and India's relations with the EU and major European powers and is authored by Amb. Ruchira Kamboj, Senior Fellow for International Security and Global Affairs and Awantika Singh Sengar, Research Associate, DPG. Your comments and feedback may be addressed to the author at ruchira@dpg.org.in. To subscribe, please [click here](#).

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1. President Ursula von der Leyen delivering the State of the Union address; September 16, 2026. Source: [European Commission](#)
- 2 PM Modi meeting with the Prime Minister of Belgium, Mr. Bart De Wever at Hyderabad House, in New Delhi on September 03, 2026. Source: [PIB](#)
3. President Ursula von der Leyen, Kaja Kallas, Antonio Costa and UN Sec-General during the UNGA; September 20, 2026. Source: [European Council](#)

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Focus Europe

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Focus Europe

by

Ambassador Ruchira Kamboj & Awantika Singh Sengar

State of the Union Address (SOTEU)

President Ursula von der Leyen delivered the 2026 SOTEU on 16 September, making defence, AI, partnerships and resilience the central pillars of her address. Notably, the speech contained no new headline financial pledge for Ukraine, a deliberate choice given that the €6.1 billion defence package approved just five days earlier, and the existing €90 billion Ukraine Support Loan¹, already gave her a substantive support figure to point to. Instead, von der Leyen leaned on the promise of the EU's "strongest-ever" winter support & stronger air defence, signalling continuity of commitment rather than escalation of spend, a framing that lets Brussels claim resolve without opening a fresh budgetary fight among member states. That framing was borne out within days: on 18 September, the Commission disbursed a further €3.3 billion to Ukraine for defence procurement, the fourth tranche under the Loan's defence window, taking 2026 disbursements to nearly €15 billion, suggesting the "strongest-ever" language was less rhetorical flourish than a description of payments already in motion.

Security dominated the speech, reflecting the backdrop of an active war and a rising tempo of hybrid incidents across the continent. Von der Leyen proposed an Emergency Security Protocol², explicitly modelled on NATO's Article 4, under which a single member state facing a hybrid attack could trigger EU-wide consultations. The comparison to Article 4 rather than Article 5 is telling: it is designed to sit below the threshold of collective defence, giving the EU a coordination tool for grey-zone aggression (sabotage, cyberattacks, drone incursions) that NATO's own machinery isn't built to address quickly. She went further, arguing that "given the nature and scale of risks," a European Security Council should become a reality, bringing in partners like the UK, Canada, Norway, and Ukraine, non-EU states whose inclusion underscores that Brussels sees the threat environment as bigger than the bloc's own membership³.

The announcement of a new European Instrument for Strategic Enablers, covering air and missile defence, strategic transport, space and cyber, followed the same logic: build out European capability, but keep it "fully aligned with NATO." Taken together, these proposals read less as a bid for strategic autonomy from NATO and more as an

¹"Commission disburses €3.3 billion in defence funding to Ukraine", *European Commission*, 18 September 2026. https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/commission-disburses-eur33-billion-defence-funding-ukraine-2026-09-18_en

²2026 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen, *European Commission*, 16 September 2026. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_26_1868

³Ibid.

attempt to fill the gaps NATO structurally can't cover, while being careful not to appear to compete with it. Notably, as of the most recent EU ministerial discussions, the protocol remains a proposal under development, with no enforcement mechanism or implementation timeline yet specified, worth flagging as a thread to watch rather than a settled outcome.

The biggest surprise of the speech was von der Leyen's offer to make Canada the EU's first associate member. Canadian PM Mark Carney attended in person, the first foreign head of government ever to do so, and von der Leyen, addressing him directly, said the EU wants to bring the relationship "to the highest possible level," covering AI, critical minerals, defence, energy, and technology. The move is notable less for its content (much of this cooperation could arguably deepen under existing frameworks like CETA) than for its symbolism and its procedural novelty: "associate member" has no legal precedent or rulebook, and von der Leyen's own aides had reportedly been sceptical of the idea beforehand. That ambiguity, and reported unease among some member states about deepening ties with a "distant third country" while enlargement to closer neighbours remains unresolved, suggests this is more a strategic signal of intent than a settled institutional plan. It fits a broader pattern this month of Europe reaching for new partnerships and layered security arrangements as a hedge against an uncertain transatlantic relationship.

The ambition on display in SOTEU immediately ran into Europe's oldest fault line: who actually controls it. On 1 September 2026, High Representative Kaja Kallas, who heads the EEAS, announced the establishment of a new high-level group on defence at an informal defence ministers' meeting in Wicklow, Ireland⁴. The group was to include senior political and military leaders from European states, including the UK and Ukraine, tasked with generating new ideas on the future of European defence. Within a week, however, the proposal was withdrawn. Kallas cancelled the group's planned Brussels launch the day before it was due to take place, after France, Germany and Italy all withheld support⁵, reportedly over a dispute on candidate names and concerns that the group would duplicate Commissioner Andrius Kubilius's existing defence-industry brief.

The episode is revealing precisely because of how little the group actually proposed to do: it carried no budget, no legislative authority and no control over forces or procurement; its sole output was to have been a single advisory report. That even this modest, non-binding initiative couldn't survive member-state resistance says more about the underlying power balance than a more ambitious proposal would have.

That balance is the real story. The European Commission, with its large financial and policy tools, exercises outsized influence even in areas nominally outside its remit,

⁴Informal Meeting of EU Defense Ministers, EEAS, 1 September 2026.

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/informal-meeting-eu-ministers-defence-press-conference-high-representative-kaja-kallas_en

⁵Carl Cohen and Eddy Wax, *Rapporteur*, 6 September 2026.

<https://www.rapporteur.com/news/exclusive-france-germany-shoot-down-new-kallas-led-defence-group/>

including foreign policy. As one diplomat put it, in today's world "diplomacy cannot be separated from trade, tech policy and industrial policy, and all these are in the hands of the Commission"⁶. Kallas wants a stronger EEAS; the Commission under von der Leyen has simultaneously expanded its own footprint in security, defence and foreign policy; and member states, for their part, remain reluctant to cede control of their foreign policy to Brussels in any form. The larger question the EU now faces, sharpened, not created, by this episode, is how much diplomacy and security should be coordinated collectively and how much should remain firmly in the hands of nation states.

Greenland

On 7 September 2026, von der Leyen visited Greenland. The visit is significant due to the ongoing geopolitical tensions, the strategic location of Greenland, especially with new sea routes opening up due to the melting of ice in the Arctic, and the EU updating its Arctic policy. During her visit, von der Leyen called Greenland a "strategic ally and trusted friend,"⁷ and said that Europe has made a choice to be "more present and more engaged in Greenland and the Arctic"⁸. A new €200 million Global Gateway Partnership Package with a focus on connectivity, clean energy and critical raw materials was announced during the visit. The three sides, Greenland, Denmark and the EU, also signed a joint declaration⁹ to enhance cooperation. The timing was not incidental: the visit fed directly into the broader ongoing process to update the Arctic strategy (the last Arctic strategy was released in 2021), for which EU leaders met at the European Arctic Summit¹⁰ on 13-14 September in Finland. Kaja Kallas said that the new strategy will be released by October and would have "security at its core," pointing to growing Chinese and Russian activities in the north. Antonio Costa similarly said at the summit that "Arctic security is European security."¹¹

Greenland, therefore, is becoming increasingly important for the EU as new shipping lanes and navigation channels are opening up due to the melting of ice in the Arctic, making it geopolitically important too. Kaja Kallas, therefore, called Greenland a "core pillar"¹² of the EU's Arctic strategy. This reflects a broader shift from the EU's

⁶Nicholus Vinocur and Jacopo Barigazzi, "Why the EEAS is fighting for its future", *Politico*, 29 June 2026.

<https://www.politico.eu/article/european-external-action-service-eeas-fight-future-kaja-kallas-ursula-von-der-leyen/>

⁷European Commission, 7 September 2026.

<https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/news/eu-and-greenland-strengthen-partnership-and-engagement-backed-eu200-million-eu-investment>

⁸European Commission, 9 September 2026.

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ac_26_1824

⁹Joint Declaration by the EU, Greenland, and Denmark, European Commission, 7 September 2026.

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/el/statement_26_1804

¹⁰DW News, 14 September 2026. <https://www.dw.com/en/finland-eu-leaders-meet-to-forge-new-arctic-policy/a-79256956>

¹¹Remarks by President Costa at the press conference following the European Arctic Summit, European Council, 14 September 2026. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2026/09/14/remarks-by-president-antonio-costa-at-the-press-conference-following-the-european-arctic-summit/>

¹²Arctic Frontiers Conference, EEAS, 3 February 2026. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/arctic-frontiers-conference-remarks-high-representative-kaja-kallas-joint-press-conference-espen_en

development-based approach to a more strategic approach towards the Arctic, combining defence, economic partnership and resource resilience. Taken together, the Nuuk visit and the Rovaniemi summit show the EU trying to translate Arctic access into Arctic agency, not just a development partner to Greenland, but a strategic actor there in its own right.

That ambition met a far starker reality just over a week later. On 22 September 2026, the Greenland-Denmark-US Agreement¹³, signed on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, amended the 1951 US-Denmark Defence Agreement, expanding US military access in Greenland while also explicitly recognising the sovereignty of Denmark and Greenland's right to self-determination. The deal is significant, as it follows a period of strained relations between the two sides after Trump's remarks about acquiring Greenland.

The agreement allows the US to modernise Pituffik Space Base and establish additional defence areas at Narsarsuaq and Mestersvig, while also giving the US greater freedom of movement in Greenland, at the same time prohibiting non-NATO states from establishing military installations or having a persistent military presence in Greenland.¹⁴ This move places Washington and NATO back at the centre of Arctic security and could be seen as a move to strengthen the transatlantic bond, even as it is, pointedly, a bilateral-plus-one arrangement rather than an EU one, underscoring that Brussels' Arctic ambitions still run on a parallel, not overlapping, track to Washington's.

Similarly, on the investment front, the agreement has proposed a screening process wherein the US, Denmark and Greenland must approve investments by non-NATO, non-NATO partner or non-EU member states in sensitive sectors.¹⁵ This makes the US more involved in Greenland's internal affairs. For Europe, this is significant, as Brussels too is trying to deepen its ties with the High-North countries as part of its broader Arctic strategy, while also having doubts about the US, as Europe does not see Washington as a reliable security provider anymore.

It was against this backdrop that, at an event organised by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs¹⁶ on the same day, 22 September 2026, Mark Rutte, Secretary General of NATO, responding to a question about how America benefits from a stronger Europe and a stronger NATO, said that the US itself benefits substantially from Europe's military infrastructure and capabilities, as "NATO is one big platform of power projection." He supported his argument by saying, "...it would have been impossible to do Operation Epic Fury without having Europe as a power projection

¹³Paragraph 4, Greenland-Denmark-US Agreement, The White, House, 22 September 2026. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/2026/09/agreement-between-the-government-of-the-united-states-of-america-and-the-government-of-the-kingdom-of-denmark-together-with-the-government-of-greenland-to-amend-and-supplement-the-agreement-of-27-apri/>

¹⁴Paragraph 9, Ibid.

¹⁵Paragraph 10.

¹⁶Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 22 September 2026. <https://globalaffairs.org/chicago-council-global-affairs-invites-you-conversation-natos-future-secretary-general-mark>

platform for the US. 5000 planes have taken off from European bases in support of Epic Fury since 28th February this year." It is worth noting that Epic Fury refers to the US-Israel military campaign against Iran, not the war in Ukraine. Rutte's argument was about Europe's broader strategic value to Washington, not Ukraine support specifically. Following this, he also underscored the need for a stronger Europe in order to address issues like the ongoing tensions in the Middle East, calling the region "Europe's backyard" and not the US's backyard, and reiterating that "what you get from a stronger NATO is that Europeans can take care of their own backyard."

The push by the Europeans, therefore, is to make Europe a stronger pillar within NATO, while also making it capable enough to take care of its own security without relying on external powers. Read together, the month's Greenland and NATO threads expose the same tension running through SOTEU and the EEAS episode: Europe wants to act as a strategic actor in its own right: in the Arctic, in defence, in diplomacy, but keeps running into the limits of its actual leverage, whether that's member states blocking Kallas's defence group, Washington signing its own Greenland deal on a faster track than Brussels' strategy rollout, or NATO's own chief having to make the case for Europe's continued relevance to American power projection.

Migration

Migration was not just one line in the SOTEU speech, it has become a defining issue in European politics more broadly. The rise of far-right and nationalist forces has pushed immigration, national identity and "remigration" to the centre of political debate across the continent. While migration refers simply to the movement of people across borders, "remigration" has increasingly been used in far-right political discourse to mean the forced return or removal of migrants, ethnic minorities or people with migrant backgrounds. As anti-immigration parties, mostly on the far right, have gained popularity, mainstream parties have come under growing pressure to adopt stricter policies themselves, a dynamic that has sharpened concerns around discrimination, identity & belonging.

The underlying numbers help explain why this pressure has built. According to a report by the Rockwool Foundation Berlin, the number of foreign-born residents in the EU rose from around 40 million in 2010 to a record 64.2 million in 2025.¹⁷ In response, EU policy has shifted decisively toward border control and returns: the Pact on Migration and Asylum, which came into application on 12 June 2026, establishes common rules for screening, asylum and returns across the bloc.¹⁸

This is the backdrop against which the Ceuta crisis of 30 July landed with such force. An estimated 80,000 people crossed irregularly from Morocco into the Spanish enclave within roughly 48 hours, the largest such crossing in the territory's history, prompting

¹⁷"The Immigrant Population in the European Union", Rockwool Foundation, Berlin; April 2026.

<https://www.rfberlin.com/cream-report/03-2026/>

¹⁸European Commission Website, 11 June 2026. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum_en

an emergency EU meeting at which ministers called for stronger border controls, faster returns and closer cooperation with third countries.¹⁹ The episode fed directly into SOTEU: von der Leyen told Parliament that "Ceuta's border is a European border" and that "the only solution is a European solution,"²⁰ tying the crisis to stronger Frontex support, early-warning mechanisms and full implementation of the Migration Pact. She pointed to a genuine policy win: a 55% reduction in illegal arrivals over the past two years. But the message was double-edged: progress on the numbers hasn't translated into resilience against sudden shocks, and Ceuta exposed exactly that gap.

What ties the SOTEU and Ceuta threads together is a single underlying question: can Brussels build crisis-response capacity without simply hardening the external border further? That's Europe's real challenge going forward, a balancing of border security against its long-standing commitments to human rights and dignity.

Israeli settlements in West Bank

On 8 September 2026, the UK, France and Canada announced measures to restrict imports from Israeli settlements in the West Bank in a joint statement of twelve countries that also included Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Norway, Poland, Sweden, Portugal and Spain, stating that the actions of the Israeli government in the West Bank are "undermining the possibility of a two-state solution."²¹ While the UK, France and Canada banned imports from the "illegal" Israeli settlements, the other nine countries pledged to support further action. Israel, in response, ordered the UK to close its consulate in East Jerusalem within thirty days, a sharp signal that Israel intended to treat the move as a diplomatic rupture, not a symbolic gesture.²²

The EU itself, however, remains unable to match that coordinated outside action with action of its own. Countries like Germany and Hungary, which maintain close economic and political ties with Israel, have resisted punitive measures, while others, like Ireland and Spain, strongly oppose Israel's settlement policy. Ireland, which currently holds the Council's rotating presidency, pushed for EU-wide trade restrictions on settlement goods at the informal Gymnich meeting earlier in September, but the bloc could not reach the unanimity such measures require.²³

¹⁹Jamie Whitehead and Tinshui Yeung, BBC, 1 August 2026. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cz7d17r455go>
²⁰2026 SOTEU, European Commission.

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/ov/SPEECH_26_1868

²¹Joint Foreign Ministers' Statement on the Two-State Solution, Government Offices of Sweden, 8 September 2026. <https://government.se/statements/2026/09/joint-foreign-ministers-statement-on-the-two-state-solution/>

²²Al Jazeera, 9 September 2026.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/9/9/israel-tells-uk-to-close-east-jerusalem-consulate-within-30-days>

²³"EU FM's fail to break deadlock over Israel and Ukraine," Al Jazeera, 3 September 2026. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/9/3/eu-foreign-ministers-fail-to-break-deadlock-over-israel-and-ukraine>

The result is a telling asymmetry: it took individual countries acting outside the EU framework, rather than the EU itself, to produce the first real trade consequences for Israel's settlement policy, even as the bloc holding the presidency and most explicitly pushing for collective action watched its own initiative stall. For an EU that routinely presents itself as a unified foreign-policy actor, this is a reminder of how much weight individual member states still carry when consensus fails, and how exposed that leaves Brussels on an issue it has struggled to resolve for over a year.

United Kingdom

On September 14, the leaders of the SNP, Plaid Cymru and Sinn Féin signed a memorandum of understanding asserting the right of their peoples to self-determination, which could ultimately translate into independence from the United Kingdom for Scotland and Wales, and Irish reunification for Northern Ireland. The MoU says that, for the first time, the First Ministers of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are all drawn from parties committed to leaving the United Kingdom, and declares that "Westminster's time is coming to an end".²⁴ The leaders met and signed the agreement in their capacity as party leaders rather than as representatives of their respective governments.

On the same day, another agreement, the Cardiff Agreement²⁵, was signed between the Welsh and Scottish Governments. It calls the UK in its current form "unjust and unsustainable" and calls for closer ties with the European Union.

For the first time, therefore, the First Ministers of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are all from parties supporting either independence or Irish reunification, making demands for self-determination more pronounced. However, none can unilaterally leave the UK, and each would follow a different constitutional path if that were to happen. Scotland and Wales would require constitutional arrangements involving Westminster, while Northern Ireland has a separate statutory route through a border poll under the Northern Ireland Act.

These two agreements are therefore politically significant, especially for PM Burnham, who has historically supported greater regional autonomy and devolution. His government has continued to advocate deeper devolution, even as he has opposed further independence referendums. Independence and greater autonomy are, of course, two very different things, and how Burnham navigates this tension will be an important political test.

Is the UK headed back towards the EU? That remains an open question, although the debate has clearly moved. In August, PM Burnham met the President of the European

²⁴John Swinney, Twitter/X, 14 September 2026.

<https://x.com/JohnSwinney/status/2099460494314648019/photo/2>

²⁵Cardiff Agreement, Scottish Government, 14 September 2026. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/cardiff-agreement-cytundeb-caerdydd-agreement-between-welsh-and-scottish-government/>

Council, António Costa, while travelling to Kyiv.²⁶ Burnham said that the UK needed to be “bolder” in getting closer to the EU and should build on already close defence and security ties between the UK and European countries.

Since then, Burnham has gone further, saying that Britain should consider a range of options for its long-term relationship with Europe, including rejoining the single market or customs union, and potentially the EU itself. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are also pressing for closer ties with Europe, while the UK government wants to deepen its post-Brexit relationship with Brussels. Clearly, Burnham has his hands full: he has, on the one hand, to manage the UK’s push for closer ties with Europe while, on the other, navigating increasingly pronounced constitutional divisions at home.

Germany

Germany, meanwhile, is caught in the crossfires of a changing political landscape. The far-right AfD (Alternative for Germany) continues to gain electoral ground, while Chancellor Merz’s Christian Democratic Union (CDU) is increasingly on the defensive. This is more than an electoral setback for the CDU: it points to a wider erosion of the political centre and a growing fragmentation of German politics. The rise of the far right is particularly sensitive given Germany’s history. According to a 2025 federal report, right-wing extremism remains the greatest threat to democracy in the country.²⁷

The AfD won 38.2% of the vote in the recent state election in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, while the CDU managed just 4.9%, according to preliminary counts.²⁸ This is the CDU’s lowest-ever result in any state election and is also below the 5% threshold needed to enter the state parliament.²⁹ Chancellor Merz called the result “a disaster”. More significantly, it follows the AfD’s sweeping victory in Saxony-Anhalt in September, where it won 43.8% against the CDU’s 17.2%. Taken together, the results suggest that the AfD’s rise can no longer be seen as an isolated regional phenomenon. Yet its ability to convert electoral strength into political power remains constrained. In Saxony-Anhalt, it fell three seats short of being able to govern on its own, while no other party is prepared to form an alliance with it, continuing the “firewall” against cooperation with the far right.

Another internal ‘problem’ is the declining popularity of the federal government and the Chancellor. According to the recent ARD-DeutschlandTREND Report 2026, only 15% of respondents were satisfied with the CDU/SPD coalition government, while

²⁶PM meeting with President Costa of the EU, GOV UK, 23 August 2026. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-meeting-with-president-costa-of-the-european-council-23-august-2026>

²⁷Protection of the Constitution Report 2025. <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/verfassungsschutzbericht-2025-2445498>

²⁸Time Magazine, 7 September 2026.

<https://time.com/article/2026/09/07/germany-saxony-anhalt-election-afd-party-far-right-ulrich-siegmund/>

²⁹Time Magazine, 21 September 2026. <https://time.com/article/2026/09/21/german-far-right-expands-gains-in-disaster-to-chancellor-merz/>

84% were dissatisfied.³⁰ This places Merz in a difficult position. He is under pressure to demonstrate that the political centre can still deliver, even as the reforms he is pursuing: greater business flexibility, lower welfare spending and tax cuts, could themselves prove politically difficult.

The challenge, therefore, is not simply to contain the AfD electorally. It is also to address the economic and political discontent that is feeding its rise, while retaining support for a reform agenda intended to revive the economy. This makes Germany's domestic political equation increasingly consequential for Europe as well.

Germany's neighbours in particular, and Europe more broadly, are watching these developments with concern. The possibility of a future Germany under far-right leadership, combined with increasing unease over Germany's growing rearmament, adds another layer of uncertainty.³¹ Germany is thus facing a convergence of economic, political and strategic pressures, and how it manages them will shape not only its domestic politics, but also its future role in Europe.

France

The French presidential elections are scheduled to take place on 18 April and 2 May 2027.³² In the run-up to the elections, the country is experiencing substantial economic pressures and political uncertainty. The current president, Emmanuel Macron, cannot run for a third consecutive term, leaving the centre, left and right competing for the presidency. The centre is struggling to maintain its influence, the left remains divided between the Socialists, the Ecologists, LFI and Place Publique, while the far-right National Rally (RN), led by Marine Le Pen, continues to gain ground. Parliament, meanwhile, remains deeply divided, with no party having secured a clear majority in the 2024 snap elections.³³

All of this is happening at a time when France is under considerable economic pressure. Public debt has reached 119% of GDP³⁴ and is projected to rise further, while the government is also struggling with a large budget deficit. Prime Minister Sébastien Lecornu presented the 2027 budget on 1 October³⁵, involving a fiscal effort of around €54 billion through spending cuts and revenue measures aimed at bringing the deficit

³⁰ARD-Deutschland Report, Infratest Dimap, September 2026. <https://www.infratest-dimap.de/umfragen-analysen/bundesweit/ard-deutschlandtrend/2026/september/>

³¹WSJ, "Germany's Military Rebuild is Making Its Neighbours Nervous", 18 September 2026.

³²Presidential Elections 2027, Government of France Website, 8 September 2026. <https://www.info.gouv.fr/actualite/election-presidentielle-2027>

³³"France Elections: Surprise win for left-wing alliance keeps Le Pen's far right from power," The Guardian, 7 July 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/07/exit-poll-shows-surprise-win-for-left-wing-alliance-in-french-election>

³⁴Reuters, 19 September 2026. <https://www.reuters.com/business/french-finance-ministry-expects-record-debt-2026-reaching-nearly-120-gdp-2026-09-19/>

³⁵France 24, 1 October 2026. <https://www.france24.com/en/france/20261001-french-pm-to-present-belt-tightening-2027-budget-including-frozen-wages-and-new-taxes>

down. Getting the budget through a deeply divided parliament, however, will not be easy.

The election will also shape France's foreign policy and its approach towards Europe. Front-runner and far-right candidate Marine Le Pen has said that France should withdraw from NATO's integrated military command³⁶ and that France can "no longer provide financial assistance to Ukraine",³⁷ although she has said that military equipment and training for Ukraine could continue. This contrasts with the current position under Macron, who has strongly supported Ukraine and pushed for a more unified and strategically capable Europe.

France is a nuclear power, one of Europe's leading military powers and a permanent member of the UN Security Council, making it one of the most important voices in European security and foreign policy. The next president's approach to Ukraine, NATO and European integration will therefore have implications well beyond France, affecting the EU's ability to coordinate and present a united front against the backdrop of a rapidly changing international environment.

Italy

Meanwhile, Italy has approved measures banning burqas and niqabs in schools and capping the number of foreign pupils in classrooms.³⁸ While Prime Minister Meloni has presented these measures as a way of facilitating integration, the broader hardening of attitudes towards migration and cultural assimilation is difficult to miss.

Taken together, these developments point to the growing influence of right-wing and nationalist politics across parts of Europe, with a stronger emphasis on national identity and sovereignty and, in some cases, greater scepticism towards deeper European integration. This growing influence could increasingly shape Europe's debates on migration, EU integration, security and national sovereignty.

India-EU

Back home, relations with the EU continue to gather momentum. On the heels of recent incoming visits, it was now the turn of Belgian Prime Minister Bart De Wever to visit India from 2–4 September. The two countries issued a joint statement and announced a series of agreements across different sectors, including a Letter of Intent on defence cooperation and an MoU on renewable energy. PM Modi and PM De Wever also launched an Investment Fast-Track Mechanism to facilitate investments on both sides and address business bottlenecks. An MoU was also signed between India's Central Bureau of Investigation and the Federal Police of Belgium on

³⁶The Print, 22 May 2026. <https://theprint.in/world/le-pen-says-france-should-quit-nato-command-structure/2939091/>

³⁷"No more Ukraine funds, says Le Pen," Politico, 24 September 2026. <https://www.politico.eu/newsletter/brussels-playbook-capitals/no-more-ukraine-funds-says-le-pen/>

³⁸Euro News, 25 September 2026. <https://www.euronews.com/2026/09/25/italy-moves-to-ban-face-coverings-and-limit-foreign-pupils-in-schools-with-new-law>

combating transnational organised crime and cybercrime.³⁹ The visit produced several defence-industry partnerships as well, including MoUs between Larsen & Toubro and Exail Robotics, SIDM and BSDI, and Kalyani Strategic Systems and FN Herstal.⁴⁰

Significantly, the two sides placed these initiatives within the wider India-EU Strategic Partnership, welcoming progress on the India-EU FTA and the Trade and Technology Council. Taken together, the agreements and partnerships show how the relationship is moving beyond trade and deepening across sectors such as defence, renewable energy, critical minerals, supply chains and security, all areas of strategic importance to both Europe and India. The sobering context of a changing world, in which both sides are seeking to de-risk and diversify, is an undeniable thread underpinning the relationship. This is less a story of Europe reaching out to India out of altruism than one of converging strategic and economic interests.

Meanwhile, the EU-India FTA moved one step closer when the European Commission sent the proposal to the Council for signature on 11 September 2026.⁴¹ Once the Council approves the agreement, it will go to the European Parliament for consent. The agreement has thus entered the EU's formal legal and approval process, moving from negotiation towards implementation, and could enter into force in early 2027. The scale of what is at stake is worth noting: once approved, this will be the largest trade agreement either side has ever concluded, eliminating or reducing tariffs on over 90% of goods traded.

The FTA is therefore part of a much larger unfolding geo-economic script. Europe is diversifying markets and supply chains, reducing strategic dependencies and looking for reliable partners in an increasingly fragmented global economy. India, with its scale, growth and strategic weight, fits squarely into that calculation. Importantly, this is reciprocal self-interest: India too is diversifying its markets and partnerships. That may, in fact, make the relationship more durable than one based on generosity.

Partners for Multilateralism (P4M)

On 21 September, the Partners for Multilateralism (P4M) initiative was jointly launched on the margins of the UN General Assembly High-Level Week by seven initial co-sponsors. The EU and India once again co-partnered, but the grouping also includes Australia, Barbados, Brazil, Canada and Kenya, as co-sponsors.⁴² Its purpose is to bring together countries committed to peace, stability, inclusive and sustainable

³⁹India-Belgium Joint Statement, Ministry of External Affairs, 3 September 2026. https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents?dtl/41736/IndiaBelgium_Joint_Statement_on_the_visit_of_the_Prime_Minister_of_Belgium_to_India

⁴⁰Embassy and Consulate of Belgium to India, 3 & 4 September 2026. <https://india.diplomatie.belgium.be/en/list-outcomes>

⁴¹The EU-India Trade Agreement, European Commission. https://commission.europa.eu/topics/trade/eu-india-trade-agreement_en

⁴²EAM's remarks at the inaugural P4M Summit, 21 September 2026. https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements?dtl/41811/EAMs_remarks_at_the_inaugural_Partners_for_Multilateralism_International_Law_Peace_and_Prosperty_P4M_Summit_on_the_sidelines_of_UN_High_Level_Week_in_New_York

development, shared prosperity, human dignity and rights for all, while reforming and strengthening the multilateral system at a time of profound global transformation.⁴³

European Council President António Costa described it as a “global network for dialogue, coalition-building and practical cooperation”, with the UN at its core.⁴⁴ The initiative is timely in its unequivocal defence of multilateralism. The test, however, will be whether it can add practical value to an already crowded plurilateral landscape, through coalition-building and concrete cooperation, or whether it risks becoming yet another forum for meetings on the margins of High-Level Week.

⁴³European Council, 21 September 2026. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2026/09/21/declaration-of-the-partners-for-multilateralism-p4m-summit-21-september-2026/>

⁴⁴Antonio Costa, Twitter/X, 22 September 2026. <https://x.com/eucopresident/status/2102294833146601945>



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