

India's Beckoning of Central Europe amid Shifting Geopolitics

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Abstract

For a long time, countries in Central Europe (CE) were caught in the structural rivalry of East and West, and Indian policy towards the region too remained passive. The end of the Cold War preoccupied India and the CE region alike, focusing on their economic transformation and recalibrating their respective foreign policies. India, however, with its rising political and economic clout, began an active pursuit of multialignment and thereby seeks a greater strategic engagement with the CE region. The shifting geopolitical landscape has made it inevitable to look at Europe beyond its traditional focus on the UK, France and Germany. Moreover, the steady growth trajectories of India and CE make a strong case for strengthening the bilateral partnership through enhanced political, economic and diplomatic investment. The paper thus explores the changing contours of India-Central Europe relations and avenues of cooperation where both sides could partner in building their domestic capacities and resilience. It argues that India needs to better its diplomatic outreach to CE and explain its distinct security and threat perceptions and strategic ambivalence on the Russia-Ukraine War. While China is a formidable rival with its expanding footprint, India can leverage its image as a safer and reliable economic partner. Likewise, the CE countries are keen to engage with India to widen their profile beyond their immediate neighbourhood.

Keywords: *India, Central Europe, foreign policy, geopolitics, Russia-Ukraine, China*

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Introduction

Walter Russell Mead's essay published in 2014 in *Foreign Affairs* described the Russian annexation of Crimea as a jolt to the false sense of security that had long comforted the US and Europe after the end of the Cold War. For what was being hailed as 'the end of history' and creation of an everlasting liberal order turned out to be a temporary post-Cold War geopolitical settlement (Mead 2014). The prophecy of liberal democracy subsuming rivalries and paving way for peace and development soon fell apart as revisionist powers like Russia and China began challenging the status quo. International politics is witnessing a revival of the zero-sum game as regional geopolitical rivalries take centre stage. Russia's armed attack on Ukraine, the war in Gaza and China's assertive moves have upset the traditional balance of military power triggering instability and creating an unpredictable landscape of risks posed to the US-led global order. Europe finds itself in a quagmire that has once again intensified debate on military preparedness. The full-scale invasion launched in February 2022 has not only caused a rift between the East and the West but also exposed the divisiveness within Europe, with Germany and France fearing a nuclear escalation while Poland and Hungary fear occupation (Krastev 2023). Central Europe has long been trying to preserve its unique culture and civilisation against conquest and invasions. Revolutions in Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia during the Cold War symbolised this fight for identity and Europeaness (Kundera 1984). The Russia-Ukraine War has vindicated the apprehensions of Central European countries (CECs) who had been forewarning this threat from Russia.

Another important development that needs attention against the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine crisis, is the role of rising and non-Western powers. Described as the new Cold War, the current security situation in Europe has pitted major powers like United States, China and Russia in an ideological confrontation and has simultaneously brought to the limelight the growing influence of powers like India, Brazil, Japan, Indonesia and Türkiye in international relations. Russia's announcement of a 'no-limits partnership' with China has led to a competition among states to seek new alignments to secure their security and economic interests in a dynamic geopolitical chessboard. These states are devising independent strategies based on the specific issue at hand, and are therefore more flexible and pragmatic in making informed policy choices through multialignment (Cohen 2023). They refuse to be bracketed within the democracy vs. autocracy coalition and are willing to shape the global agenda suited to their national objectives. Without the binding ideological constraints,

the rising powers are free to exercise their agency. These are not part of a cohort with similar characteristics, rather the common feature of their foreign policy is the use of a transactional approach aimed at maximising their sovereign interests (Aydıntaşbaş et. al 2023).

While maintaining a close alignment with the US, countries like Japan, South Korea and Taiwan also prefer de-risking rather than de-coupling their relations with Beijing because of their economic and technological dependence on China. At the same time, they are exploring options to shore up critical dependencies as their room for manoeuvre becomes limited because of the intensifying Sino-US rivalry (Aydıntaşbaş et. al 2023). The traditional allies of the US from the Gulf region, Saudi Arabi and the UAE, are keeping all options open in a multipolar order. Although Chinese investments and influence have made deep inroads in regions like Africa, Latin America and Central Asia and these countries are adopting hedging strategies to consolidate their sovereignty. Thus, in a fragmented world with complex interdependencies, states are embracing strategic partnerships with different regional actors to increase supply chain resilience and reduce their traditional dependencies amid economic uncertainties. A scramble for like-minded partners during an international crisis, their lucrative markets, a dynamic skilled workforce and rich reserves of natural resources underscore the political and economic importance of these rising powers. The shifting distribution of power has created new opportunities and provided these countries a substantial leverage to advance their strategic interests.

India's rising economic profile has garnered significant attention and has added to its geopolitical clout with the West keen to engage India for shaping the order in the Indo-Pacific region. There has been a marked shift in India's foreign policy since Narendra Modi became prime minister in 2014. He appointed S. Jaishankar as the country's foreign secretary in 2015. During his second term in office in 2019, Modi further elevated him to minister of external affairs. With Jaishankar taking over the command of India's foreign relations, there is a perceptible quest to target 'mutual interests' and embark on a path of multialignment in order to seek maximum benefits. India's assertive foreign policy anchored in strategic autonomy is articulated with the objective of 'management of differences' and 'pragmatic settlement' (Jaishankar 2020) while navigating geopolitical turbulence. In 2014, India abstained on the UN Resolutions against Moscow for its attack on Crimea. New Delhi's reticence on the issue is attributed to its long-standing relationship with Russia and thus it is deftly balancing its interests between Russia and the West.

In contemporary context, New Delhi has gained significant strategic value for the West and is on a geopolitical centre stage (Kumar 2023). India is making concerted efforts to reach out to diverse players and to expand cooperation with regional and sub-regional entities like the EU, ASEAN, Nordic Council, etc. Cen-

tral Europe has long been an area of competing influence among major powers. It serves as NATO's eastern flank, a transit hub linking Europe with the Caucasus, West Asia and Central Asia, and a logistics hub for aid to Ukraine (Czyżak & Theisen 2024). The CE region thus assumes significance amid the evolving regional and global dynamics and has acquired a renewed emphasis in India's foreign policy imagination and geostrategy. The usual tendency to treat the region as a subset of the Soviet empire eschews the possibility of harnessing its economic potential in contemporary times (Jain 2021). From once sharing a close equation during the Cold War period, both India and CE lost touch as their respective priorities made them look towards other important players. For India, it meant a gradual cosyng up to the West, and for Central Europe preoccupation with their immediate neighbourhood to improve prospects of getting EU membership became a paramount concern. The paper thus discusses the emerging contours of India's engagement with the countries of CE. It analyses the vicissitudes of India-CE relations against a historical backdrop and captures the shifts in New Delhi's posturing towards this region. The paper proceeds into the following sections: the first section provides an overview of India's pursuit of strategic autonomy by following a multi-vector foreign policy. It outlines the rationale for India's diplomacy on the Ukraine crisis and how it is trying to maintain some equilibrium in its ties with the West and Russia. The second section traces the historical dimensions of India-CE relations which at one point in time were quite vibrant but became lacklustre after the end of the Cold War due to newfound circumstances. The third section examines the Russia factor in India's engagement with the CE region. The fourth section argues that recent transformations in the international landscape have made a strong case for reinvigorating India-CE ties. The last section puts together the concluding observations.

The Ukraine crisis and India's multi-vector foreign policy

Scholars have described countries like India, Brazil, Türkiye and Indonesia as 'swing states' because of their flexible approach to the international order. These countries promise impressive economic growth and have a vital stake in the global trade and investment regime. With an expanding geographic scope of interests, they could decisively steer the trajectory of the current international order. They are expected to share new global responsibilities and thus it is in their larger interest to avoid a major upset in the existing scheme of things that arrests their momentum of steadily rising economies (Kliman & Fontaine 2012). India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar calls India a 'bridging power' who is pursuing a 'multi-vector' policy to seek like-minded partners and build a common ground on major global challenges (Peri 2024).

It is important to understand the predicament of non-Western powers who do not wish to choose sides. For them, the Western approach on the Ukraine ques-

tions speaks of double standards as the same is not applied while condemning Israel's use of brute force in Gaza. Thus, selective invocation of rules-based order does not hold ground with the non-Western powers who continue to define their national policies on their own terms. Moreover, while respecting Ukraine's right to territorial integrity, a lot of these countries haven't severed ties with Moscow. For example, Türkiye has sent arms to Ukraine and initiated the Black Sea Grain Initiative to get Ukrainian agricultural supplies to world markets without sanctioning Russia (Ero 2023).

The consequences of the Kremlin's military operation against Ukraine have reverberated far beyond the region. The structural rivalry with the West has further intensified as NATO becomes stronger with the membership from previously neutral Scandinavian states like Sweden and Finland. The CE region acquires strategic significance as a theatre of action where great powers have locked horns to hold or expand their influence. China is making deeper inroads into the region through its I7+I cooperation format and heavy aid and investments. Washington and its allies are countering this assertiveness through gathering like-minded partners who are supporters of the rules-based order. On the other, Moscow and Beijing's strategic goal is to push towards greater multipolarity in order to challenge US hegemony. India's rising global clout and its different nature of relations with Russia and China therefore puts it in a salient position to shape the emerging order.

India is treading carefully on the Ukraine issue too as it advocates for diplomatic solutions and cessation of military hostilities, while also protecting its special ties with Russia by abstaining from those UN war resolutions which mostly condemn Russia's military action (Vardhan 2024). A lot of non-Western powers like India, China and Brazil therefore did not see the logic of imposing sanctions on Russia on the pretext of rules-based international order. The G20 communiqué adopted at the New Delhi Summit in September 2023 echoed the need to secure strategic consensus among the global leaders and therefore did not mention the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Lynch & Ward 2023). For India, the rationale behind the emerging Sino-Russian entente is that Moscow has been constrained because Western sanctions made it turn towards Asia, especially China (Chakraborty 2024). Washington's portrayal of Russia and China forming an authoritarian axis therefore doesn't appeal to India (Ollapally 2022). India is therefore walking a diplomatic tightrope, balancing its interests between its all-weather friend and the regional rival. This articulation of strategic autonomy has been New Delhi's consistent approach to navigate such complex situations. It also illustrates how India is learning to craft a fine balance between sticking to the traditional tenets of its foreign policy and protecting its core strategic interests amid the shifting sands of geopolitics.

Over the past few decades, India-US relations have seen an upward momentum. However, that doesn't necessarily imply that this burgeoning partnership

comes at the cost of New Delhi's long-standing ties with Moscow. India's defence modernisation is growing leaps and bounds and that has made the country turn towards the US, France, Israel and other European players to fill the gap where Russia could not pitch in. At the same time, Russia provides platforms and technologies and does not threaten India with sanctions and restrictions under laws like Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) (Sibal 2022). The current geopolitical flux gives India a flexible policy space rather than treating bilateral relations as exclusive. India is not comfortable with China's idea of a multipolar world that is based on antagonism with the West (Panda 2022). It rather stresses inclusivity and cooperation in a multipolar global order where it wields influence and independence.

Geopolitical uncertainty has forced states to step out of their comfort zone and India is not an exception. There has been a flurry of diplomatic visits between India and CECs which underscores India's keenness to revive the dormant ties and engage on critical issues of security, economy, energy and climate change. While its traditional dependence on Russian military supplies will not completely end given the low cost of arms imports and a long-standing comfortable equation, there is surely a quest to find new countries to fill this gap. It is here that the CE region can offer interesting prospects. There has been an intense diplomatic engagement with New Delhi by most major European powers to defuse the crisis. However, the CE region is yet to make an active outreach. Representatives of Poland, Lithuania and Slovenia have only visited India as part of the Raisina Dialogue¹ (Bornio & Poojary 2022). The CECs have not been able to pay much attention to India despite the latter's elevating status in global affairs. Lack of knowledge about the complementarity of interests and potential avenues of cooperation has been an obstacle in building a robust partnership.

India and Central Europe: A historical connect

India's relations with the CE region have been shaped by several key factors such as the long-standing people-to-people connect, a synergy of political ideas and economic models, the advancement of science and technology, a vibrant business community and educational and institutional collaborations. There was a deep interest in Indology which led to the establishment of the Sanskrit Chair at Prague's Charles University in 1850 and centres for the study of the Indian culture were

1 The Raisina Dialogue is a multilateral conference organised by the Observer Research Foundation in partnership with India's Ministry of External Affairs. Hosted annually in New Delhi since 2016, the multi-stakeholder dialogue brings together heads of state, cabinet ministers and local government officials, as well as leaders from the private sector, media, civil society and academia to discuss pressing issues related to foreign policy and strategic affairs. It has become a flagship event to enhance India's diplomatic engagement.

established at Krakow, Warsaw and Budapest (Lukaszuk 2020). Nobel laureate Rabindra Nath Tagore's visit to Hungary in 1926 marked a significant milestone in the Indo-Hungarian cultural relations. Several of Tagore's literary works were translated in Hungarian and later he too hosted Hungarian scholars and artists like Ferenc Balázs, Ervin Baktay, Gyula Germanus, Erzsébet Sas-Brunner and her daughter Erzsébet Brunner² at his University in Shantiniketan (Szenkovics 2019).

Apart from a strong cultural connect, there were deep political exchanges especially during India's freedom struggle. Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had been closely following events in Czechoslovakia and was inspired by the revolutionary movement. Similarly, Czech newspapers and radio made frequent references to Gandhi and Indian National Congress (INC) (Krasa 1989). The INC too was unequivocal in its opposition to the Nazi regime and stood by their friends in Central Europe during the crisis in 1938. In 1934, with the establishment of the Indo-Czech Association in 1934, the two sides witnessed a vibrant diplomatic and cultural exchange with visits of Nehru and Subhash Chandra Bose. Further, Czech Indologist Vincenc Lesný published prolific writings on India's independence movement (Vavroušková 2008).

Following India's independence in 1947, several high-level state visits took place between India and Hungary leading to the signing of the Indo-Hungarian Exchange Programme in 1962, giving a further boost to the bilateral ties through academic and institutional networks and people-to-people contact. Institutions like the Hungarian Information and Cultural Centre (New Delhi), Amrita Sher-Gil Cultural Centre (Budapest) and the Hungarian-Indian Friendship Society have organised several literary and cultural events like film screenings, exhibitions, etc. and have thus served an instrumental role in building a cultural connect between the two countries.

During Nehru's visit to Poland in 1955, Warsaw and New Delhi endorsed the Panchsheel doctrine in their joint statement. Nehru later invited Polish economist Oskar Lange to discuss the emerging contours of the Third World development politics. Lange and other Polish economists like Michał Kalecki and Ignacy Sachs were instrumental in setting up the Warsaw Center of Research on Underdeveloped Economies in New Delhi that trained several academics and experts from Asia, Africa and Latin America and developed a global social science (Mazurek 2018: 609). Nehru was particularly fascinated by Poland's new experimentation with a market-oriented planning approach which found resonance with India's mixed economy model. For Poland, India provided a looking glass to understand the decolonising world as an intellectual site of reflection on global underdevelopment (Mazurek 2018: 599). During the late 1950s, the Soviet Union had embarked

2 Erzsébet Sas-Brunner was conferred the Padma Shri award in 1985 by the Indian government for her artistic performance.

on the de-Stalinisation of its foreign and economic policies, thus eschewing the vision of camp politics and economic orthodoxy. This was the time the Soviet bloc mooted the idea of 'peaceful co-existence' to chart an independent course that would enable a competitive yet non-aligned strategy to cope with decolonisation (James & Leake 2015). India and Poland thus found a common ground in steering the Third World development agenda and forging transnational networks to initiate a fresh discourse on modernisation. There was a mutual recognition among the Indian and Polish academic community to reflect on the developmental challenges in the decolonised nations and to search for new ways to ameliorate the conditions of rural poor around the world. There was a vibrant exchange of intellectual ideas between Indian and Polish scholars and policymakers that contributed to forging transnational circuits of knowledge, thus cutting across bloc politics and super power rivalry (Mazurek 2018: 608). With this emerging bonhomie, diplomatic relations between New Delhi and Warsaw entered into a new phase.

Nehru's reading of the Hungarian uprising in 1956 was attributed to economic woes resulting from large-scale industrialisation and skewed development that had caused unemployment and food scarcity. New Delhi abstained on several resolutions on Hungary at the UN, questioning the call for holding elections under UN supervision. It was similar to the posture India had adopted on the Kashmir question arising from the fear of foreign interference in a sovereign country that violates the UN Charter. Hungary and Poland initially did not expressly support India's stance towards the Chinese aggression in 1962. However, Moscow's attitude began gradually shifting towards New Delhi and the CECs thereby followed suit, denouncing the Chinese action against India. Later, Nehru's daughter and former Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi too refrained from condemning the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968 in the wake of the special nature of relations between India and the Soviet Union (Appadorai 1969). The military invasion of Czechoslovakia also caused a rift within the Communist Party of India. Towards the 1970s, there was a growing political and economic engagement between the East European countries and developing countries owing to Third World solidarity. The economic woes necessitated a shift in the strategy which made the rapidly industrialising Central European economies tap new markets for their exports and source cheap raw materials (Jain 2024). Several bilateral agreements were inked during this period and India's economic and technical cooperation with the CECs grew leaps and bounds in sectors such as ship-building, telecommunications, metallurgy, oil extracting and refining, coal mining and power generation (Kaushik 1985). Czechoslovakia was instrumental in extending assistance in the expansion of the Soviet-built heavy electrical plants while Romania aided the Oil and Natural Gas Commission (ONGC) in setting up an oil refinery in Assam. Bulgaria and Hungary also helped build chemical and

pharmaceutical plants (Kaushik 1985). The period also engaged dialogue between the political elites of the two sides exchanging notes on salient issues like nuclear disarmament, balance of payment crisis, etc. India and Yugoslavia, as the founding members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), also contributed to CE's favourable posturing towards New Delhi. The CECs were also supportive of India's stand during the crucial moments of the India-Pakistan conflict (Zajączkowski 2006).

The decades of mutual trust and bonhomie that India enjoyed with the CE region saw a dramatic shift in the 1990s as both India and CECs were compelled to make adjustments in their domestic and foreign policy in view of the new geopolitical realities in the aftermath of the Cold War. CECs had begun to seek a closer alignment with the European Union, leaving New Delhi bereft of the taken-for-granted approach on the political and moral support on various international issues. This growing chasm in India-CE relations was illustrated by the latter's criticism of India's nuclear tests in 1998, human rights violations in Kashmir and the insurgency in Punjab. Meanwhile, India too was recalibrating its foreign policy to improve relations with the West. With Europe, it meant elevating the predominantly development and economic cooperation to a strategic partnership. Economic cooperation remained a cornerstone of India-Europe ties as foreign direct investment and transfer of technology were key to transforming India into a free market (Zajączkowski 2006). The shifting geopolitics thus made India and CE drift away from each other as became evident from the diminishing trade and investment statistics. India was preoccupied with its Look East Policy and the CECs too confined themselves to the neighbourhood and Asia fell out of their focus area. The previous decades, which had witnessed a rich intellectual, diplomatic, cultural and economic cooperation, had now given way to a loss of mutual focus owing to new foreign policy priorities. Moreover, for both India and CE, this changed foreign policy outlook was driven by the domestic imperatives to ensure internal stability, liberalise the economy and attract foreign investors. As both were wooing the developed nations, India and the CECs in fact became competitors.

Elephant in the room: The Russia factor in India-CE relations

Towards the end of the Cold War, India-Soviet Union ties started showing signs of strain in the face of the rules of realpolitik and a fast-eroding objective base (Kaushik 1985). After decades of relying on Soviet assistance to build its infrastructure and military prowess, there was a pronounced tilt towards the West to seek technological support. Over the years, however, the bilateral relations have remained steadfast in the face of geopolitical transformations and are firmly rooted in historical connections and a strategic convergence over the vision of a multipolar global order. At the same time, New Delhi has demonstrated discretion and a nuanced approach to balancing its equation with Moscow and the West.

On the Ukraine crisis, India has tried its best to accommodate Russia while upholding the primacy of dialogue and diplomacy. In 2024, the two sides registered a jump of 33 percent in trade from 2023 and are also holding talks on joint production of military equipment. There is also an investment treaty and signing of a free trade agreement with the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union on the cards (The Hindu 2024). At the Raisina Dialogue 2024, the European ministerial contingent (which comprised a majority of delegates from the CE region including Hungary, Czech Republic, Romania, Slovakia, Albania and Bosnia) urged India to reconsider trade relations with Russia, and to press the case for Ukraine's sovereignty (Haider 2024). However, India's long standing strategic relationship with Russia has been a major reason why India has avoided criticism of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. A major importer of Russian arms, New Delhi has also received Moscow's support on the Kashmir question. India's subtle handling of the situation speaks of its complex nature of relations with Russia which prevents it from an unequivocal condemnation of Russia's action. The official position reiterates respect for the UN Charter; however, India maintains a strategic ambivalence and therefore does not outrightly call out Russia. Indian strategic thinking is very much governed by the logic of being friends with Moscow to prevent it from getting close to China and Pakistan (Bornio & Poojary 2022).

However, Russia's political and economic isolation in the aftermath of the February 2022 armed invasion is making it tilt towards China and thus several challenges would complicate India-Russia ties (Ganguly 2022). For instance, Western sanctions have barred several Russian defence companies from international markets (Detsch & Gramer 2022). Delays in supplies have made India explore alternative sources. CECs offer a potential substitute for Russian spare parts, tanks, armoured vehicles and aircrafts (Warren & Ganguly 2022). Moreover, the growing proximity between Russia and China could play a spoilsport for India's calculations which is turning to forums like the Quad. India's import of Russian oil at a discounted price has upset Western officials and commentators who call out India for taking 'sweet deals' from an otherwise diplomatically isolated Russia (Ollapally 2022). While India has benefitted from this deal, sustaining a lucrative energy partnership between the two may not be easy because of the geographic hurdles and infrastructural constraints. Russia's 'energy blackmail' has led the CE states to diversify supply routes (Slakaityte & Surwillo 2024). The announcement of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) at the New Delhi G20 summit adds another opportunity to invest in India-CE relations. Partly funded by the EU's Global Gateway initiative, the ambitious project aims to rival China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While viability challenges remain for these logistic corridors to offer cost-effective and functional routes, it does signify efforts to further boost the current trend of transactional partnerships (Inamdar 2023). Thus, IMEC could also be a channel for India and CECs to come together in facilitating

sustainable infrastructure development and improving supply-chain resilience. It would also be helpful in mitigating potential risks stemming from economic dependencies on Russia and China (Dacey & Bianco 2023).

At the GLOBSEC Bratislava Forum held in June 2022, Jaishankar argued that 'Europe has to grow out of the mindset that its problems are the world's problems, but the world's problems aren't Europe's problems' (Chaudhary 2022). The Ukraine war is a test case for the global order and rising powers like India are setting the terms of global engagement. The crisis has further underscored India's desire for multialignment in a dynamic geopolitical constellation.

Engaging Central European countries: A new *raison d'être*

Chaudhuri (2021) argues that India's relations with Central Europe can be divided into three distinct phases: the Soviet era which was (and continues to be) the dominant lens to understand these ties, the post-Cold War period when there was a complete disconnect owing to new priorities and then the post Brexit phase, when India's rising economic clout enabled a revival of interest on both sides. The Russia-Ukraine War has further altered the context of this engagement as dynamics have changed with both India and CECs keen to reduce their traditional dependence on Russia and thus seek new partnerships.

Indian foreign direct investment diversified and picked up momentum after the mid-2000s as Indian multinationals began expanding their operations in knowledge and technology driven sectors such as pharmaceuticals, petrochemicals, steel production and automotive industries. The CE region also saw an upward swing in investments post liberalisation phase due to their geographical proximity acting as gateway to western European markets with advanced technological availabilities (Gerőcs 2018). Indian investors pursued a deliberate strategy to target smaller and peripheral economies before making entry into large and competitive markets (Ramamurti 2012). After the eastward enlargement of the EU in 2004, there was an expectation that India would benefit from the new markets. *The Polish Strategy towards Non-European Countries* (2004) did identify India as a 'priority' (Jain 2024). However, a lack of awareness about trade and business opportunities on both sides diminished prospects of cooperation. This was also attributed to low levels of research among trading and industry organisations, inadequate business networking and promotion events, few connectivity options via air routes and visa and consular arrangements (FICCI 2004: 5). The Indian business community thus missed out on the golden opportunity that the CECs accession to the EU brought forth and continued to deal with the member states on a bilateral basis rather than treating the EU as a common trade entity (Jain 2021).

Following the global economic meltdown of 2007–09 and to reduce its dependence on the EU-15, Hungary announced its Eastern Opening policy in 2012. This was meant to attract investments from Asian countries like China and India owing

to Hungary's conducive geographical location, which would facilitate logistics and transportation to the markets of the Asian and post-Soviet states (Völgyi & Lukács 2021). In the mid-2010s, Central Europe emerged as 'a strategically important place on the global economic map' and was the threshold of economic resurgence (FICCI 2015). The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) identified Switzerland, Poland, Austria and the Czech Republic as crucial markets for pharmaceuticals, automobiles, textiles, nanotechnology, etc. Hungary had already established a marked presence in the Indian IT and defence sector while several Indian BPO companies had set up their offices in Poland. TCS set up its first overseas Global Delivery Centre in Budapest in 2001. The Hungarian Government and TCS Hungary concluded a strategic cooperation agreement in 2013 (Völgyi & Lukács 2021). The CII report also noted that Slovakia's geographical location could be of great advantage for transportation and connectivity (CII & Deolite 2014). Despite these positive signs and high quality exports, Indian firms could not compete with China's aggressive pitching towards the CEE region.

In 2013, Prime Minister Viktor Orban visited New Delhi and Mumbai along with a 100-member delegation. During this visit several MoUs were signed on Traditional Systems of Medicine, Cooperation in the areas of Defensive Aspects of Microbiological and Radiological Detection and Protection and Cultural Exchange Programme (Embassy of India, Budapest 2024). In 2014, a steering committee was set up comprising officials from the Indian government, from Central European embassies in India and representatives from the Indian industry. The idea was to foster a better understanding of mutual business opportunities through a structured business dialogue. During his visit to the Czech Republic in 2018, the then Indian President Ram Nath Kovind urged the Czech defence companies to set up joint ventures with the Indian defence manufacturing sector. The two sides also signed MoUs between the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, India and the Czech Academy of Sciences related to visa waiver agreements for diplomatic passport holders and support for Indo-Czech projects in diverse areas of science and technology. A MoU was also signed between the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research and ELI Beamlines in the field of laser technology (The Economic Times 2018). Indian Foreign Minister Jaishankar's visit to Poland in 2019 wasn't followed by concrete initiatives to take forward the bilateral cooperation.

The CE countries with their large qualified workforce make an attractive destination for Indian companies to host key manufacturing activities that reflect a 'near-shoring approach' (Milelli 2016). A significant number among them are members of the WTO and EU Customs Union which makes it easy for a foreign company to carry out economic ventures in a rule-based framework (Goyal & Mukherjee 2012). Developed infrastructure and technological excellence and economic competencies were an added advantage for forging partnerships. In January 2020, the Czech government announced an expansion in quota for fast-

track visas for highly skilled professionals from India and also agreed to facilitate movement of Indian students and researchers through Project Student (Embassy of India, Prague 2024). Since their accession to the EU, most of the CECs have made rapid progress in upgrading from a developing to developed market status. But they are also facing demographic challenges in the form of aging populations and low fertility rates resulting in labour shortages. Facing an acute crunch in their domestic labour markets, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria have open doors to foreign workers in the farming, construction and service sectors (Harper 2024). India is a major source of skilled and semi-skilled migrant workers who are in great demand overseas. An enhanced public diplomacy and outreach is required to support policy initiatives that enhance student mobility programmes, mutual recognition of degrees and skills, and attracting talent in important sectors like healthcare, IT, science & technology, etc. There exists a sizeable opportunity for India and CE countries to expand the scope for cooperation in sectors like clean technologies, handling of radioactive waste, cyber-security, e-commerce and development of smart cities (ORF 2020). Indian companies like Infosys, TCS, WIPRO, Apollo Tyres, Sun Pharmaceuticals, HCL, Orion Electronics Ltd. and Tech Mahendra have made a prominent presence in the CEE region. Kugiel and Upadhyay (2014: 5) argue that 'there is a need for business groups from CEE to become stronger in the India-EU economic interactions through formal mechanisms and ad hoc initiatives'.

The increasing number of high-level visits from India to the CE region indicates a well-chalked out strategy to re-engage with a once neglected area which has now become geo-strategically important in New Delhi's strategic calculus (Sachdeva 2018). This stands in contrast to the earlier 'perfunctory rather than consistent' approach (Singh 2018). However, what has been notably evident in India's dealings with the CECs is the lack of a dedicated and integrative outreach unlike what the New Delhi has devised in the case of the Nordic region. At present, India lacks a coherent Indian strategy towards Central Europe and that creates space for China to expand its footprint in the region (Jedrzejowska & Wróbel 2021). China deserves credit for creating an institutionalised template for regional cooperation. The launch of '17 + 1' in 2011 is a case in point in efforts to build a synergised outlook towards a region in the context of the BRI. This grouping of all the 16 CEECs was missing in the EU and NATO enlargement (Smith & Kavalski, 2010). Despite their distinct historical experience and approach towards post-communist development, the first time these countries were brought together to develop a shared regional understanding was under the 17 + 1 (Kavalski 2020).

The Visegrad-4 (V4) has emerged as an active foreign policy to engage with issues beyond Europe. They have also extended it to the 'V4+' format where regular summits have been organised with Japan (since 2013), South Korea (since 2015) and Israel (since 2017) (Kugiel 2024: 338). Along with the bilateral mechanisms,

India and CECs should institutionalise exchange through the V4 format to bolster regional cooperation. The regular India-V4 summits would help in steering the global agenda. Poland is heading the V4 from July 2024 for a year and will also hold the EU Presidency in 2025. This could be an opportune moment for India to elevate not only the bilateral relations but also to push for stronger engagement with the CE region on various issues including cooperation on multilateral initiatives like the International Solar Alliance and Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI) (Kugiel 2024).

In 2022, China's Y-20 transport planes delivered a sophisticated anti-aircraft system to Serbia, which was flown in under semi-secret conditions. In May 2024, Serbia (an EU Candidate country) became the first country in Europe to sign an agreement with China to build a 'shared future'. Chinese firms are building highways and rail and road networks across the Balkan nation and also run Serbia's biggest copper mine and steel factories. In 2014, Hungary and Serbia entered into an agreement with China to modernise the railway link between Budapest and Belgrade, to connect with the Chinese-controlled port of Piraeus in Greece. While China has stepped up its engagement with the CE region, there remains some scepticism about the delivery of its promises. The CE countries showed visible signs of drifting away from China through project cancellations, critical statements and improving ties with Taiwan and joining the US Clean Network, an initiative to address threats to data privacy, security and human rights posed by authoritarian countries (The Print 2022).

As Russia inches closer to China, both India and CECs are trying to eschew path dependence and seek greater commonality of interests. Sustainable connectivity offers one such arena where India could provide a normative leadership in collaboration with the EU (Jaishankar 2018). Moreover, to counter China's expanding footprint, India needs to step up its engagement with the V4 platform as these countries rank high on the Human Development Index and have demonstrated impressive growth trajectories in recent years (Chaudhary 2019). While it will be tough for India to match China's economic might, it could still offer the CECs a potential alternative as a safer and reliable economic partner. There are favourable indications of this, such as Poland opening a branch of its investment agency in Mumbai, and a new direct flight between Warsaw and New Delhi (Lidarev 2020). In January 2024, Czechia became the first country in Central Europe to sign a strategic partnership with India. The mounting Western pressure against Russia and China would put India in a better spot for the CE region. The V4 countries are equally keen to woo India as they see it as an attractive destination and therefore willing to provide technological support to facilitate India's infrastructural development, infrastructure for sanitation and agro-processing (Kugiel 2024: 335).

After a long hiatus, the visit of Prime Minister Modi to Poland and Ukraine in August 2024 came at a crucial juncture as India balances its geopolitical interests

in the region. An Indian PM visited Poland after 45 years and Modi also became the first Indian PM to visit Ukraine. This was seen by many as bold diplomatic posturing by a leader from the Global South to raise concerns about the impact of conflict on poor nations (Bisaria 2024). Moreover, this also underscores India's commitment to deepen its strategic engagement with Europe as a whole and also focus on different sub-regions to cater to its economic interests as well (Pant 2024). While the prospect of New Delhi being a peace mediator may sound unrealistic, India's recent warzone diplomacy does contribute to an active effort towards peaceful resolution of the conflict.

In the context of the current geopolitical situation, the CECs have the opportunity to exercise greater influence in the EU and shape its foreign policy agenda. With increasing investments in defence, the region is strengthening its military prowess as Poland intends to commit four percent of its GDP annually to defence (The Economic Times 2023). Herein, a robust relationship with India would be mutually beneficial to make use of emerging economic opportunities and partner in steering the global agenda. Additionally, India and the CECs can explore the Indo-Pacific as a potential area for collaboration as both India and the EU have emerging interests in the region with respect to upholding a rule-based order and also a plethora of security and economic opportunities. India is pursuing across-the-spectrum bilateral engagements with states that have significant stakes in Indo-Pacific stability, and is also working with trilateral, mini-lateral and multilateral forums (Panda 2022).

Conclusion

As traditional resources deplete, future crises will lead to a fierce competition among states to secure supply chains. There will be an avid interest in exploration of critical minerals and rare earth metals and also access to cutting-edge technology to stay superior. Multipolarity and rebalancing military power is likely to cause greater uncertainty about state behaviour and diplomatic disputes and standoffs can escalate to dangerous levels causing further instability. Countries therefore need to develop resilience against newer challenges and risks posed by environmental degradation, economic shocks, pandemics and artificial intelligence. These are likely to create new fault lines and geopolitical tensions.

The Russia-Ukraine War has been a wake-up call for states to craft a delicate balance between economic interests and geopolitical considerations, which emphasise the importance of diplomatic efforts for conflict resolution. Also, states are prioritising economic statecraft to secure their core geopolitical interests. It is in this context that after a long hiatus, India has begun beckoning the CE region, realising the untapped potential that these countries hold. The CECs have witnessed a remarkable economic transformation and have a lot to offer to a fast growing economy like India. New Delhi's close historical relations with the

CECs are of added advantage to regain the lost momentum and push for greater cooperation and convergence in strategic outlook. The CECs can benefit from the intellectual calibre and skill-sets of the Indian workforce and India could target the region to tap niche technologies in different sectors like infrastructure, health and education. India and the CECs need to identify complementarities rather than exacting competitive leverages (ORF 2020). New Delhi's clear articulation of the 'India First' narrative illustrates that in its commitment to a rules-based order, it refuses to tag along the anti-West propaganda and is also not hesitant to make new friends to navigate the fast-changing geopolitical landscape.



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