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# Towards an India-EU Educational Connectivity in the Indo-Pacific for Strategic Engagement

*Priya Vijaykumar Poojary and Shubhankar Paul*

**Abstract:** India and the EU constitute two of the world's largest economies and exhibit potentials of becoming global knowledge hubs. Asia's emergence in the international order is not just signified by its economic might but also by its educational prowess. The current uncertainties caused by the war in Ukraine and the Middle East as well as the pandemic have direct and indirect repercussions in the field of higher education especially on the cross-border mobility of scholars, academicians, researchers apart from more intangible components like ideas and knowledge. Europe has traditionally been an educational soft power through its higher education, research, and scholarships attracting scholars, researchers and students from all across the world. Similarly, India's soft power potentials in the field of education have not been sufficiently used yet. Thus, in this paper we argue that India-EU cooperation must move beyond the traditional 'hard' areas of cooperation to include higher education cooperation and connectivity to strengthen people-to-people ties. We extend this line of India-EU cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region which is besieged with geopolitical and geoeconomic challenges. Actualising a stronger and deeper people-to-people connect may further strengthen the untapped strategic partnership between the two.

## **Bulleted Summary**

- India and the EU have made renewed efforts at amping up their strategic partnership in the last couple of years, nevertheless the focus has been always on traditional 'hard' areas of cooperation. There exists an immense untapped potential in the so-called 'soft' areas of cooperation – higher education cooperation and connectivity between India and the EU could be a prime area of policy to work on.
- We assert that higher education offers certain possibilities that India-EU cooperation in other sectors may not offer. Given the existing irritants to the free trade agreement between India and the EU, which remain unsolved, cooperation in higher education might emerge as a natural priority for the two.
- Building the momentum that India and the EU currently enjoy in the field of higher education and also the potentials of extending the cooperation to the Indo-Pacific region, we outline a practical approach to enhancing region-building initiatives in higher education
- India and EU could look at collaborating with ASEAN and other countries in the region to develop sustainable and long-lasting collaborations in the field of higher education and to provide a sustainable counter to China's incursions in the domain by fostering academic exchanges between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and by creating pan-regional consortia of universities between Europe and South Asia, mobilizing greater funding for researchers, and establishing university alliances, and utilizing the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) as a potential alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative to create opportunities for better cross-regional higher education cooperation.

### **Quotes (3 to be finalized)**

- Countering China's academic presence in the Indo-Pacific region is a visible threat to both India and the EU and therefore collaborative efforts in the form of regional efforts in higher education might be an effective way to tackle this challenge.
- Given the existing irritants to the free trade agreement between India and the EU, which remain unsolved, cooperation in higher education might emerge as a natural priority for the two.
- India and EU both can benefit not only from each other's partnership but also create a [viable alternative to China](#)'s increasing higher education activities in the region as well as the globe.
- Several Western countries have begun attracting students from India in a bid to de-risk their reliance on Chinese students in the higher education ecosystem

### **Introduction**

India and Europe's role in the Indo-Pacific has become a matter of strategic importance in the Indo-Pacific with both actors stated to play a [central and stabilising role](#) in the region. Their activities in the region comprise several layers of diverse policy areas – beginning from [maritime security](#), [ocean governance](#) to [trade](#), [technology](#) and [sustainability](#). This multi-layered and multi-faceted cooperation is also better understood with levels of cooperation that is operational between India on the one hand, and member states on the other hand. Both actors are committed to fostering a 'rules-based' order in the Indo-Pacific while also [rebalancing](#) their strategic dependence on US, China and most importantly Russia. India-EU's increasing awareness of the China and Russia challenge have pushed them to realign their strategic priorities [promoting security, growth and greater connectivity](#) in the Indo-Pacific.

Numerous scholars have envisaged architectures for India-EU cooperation in the Indo-Pacific with maritime security, ocean governance, critical technologies and [connectivity](#) as forefronts of cooperation. These 'hard' policy areas have predominantly overlooked the instrumental roles that 'soft' policy areas can play. People-to-people exchanges have been traditionally undermined in the discourse of the Indo-Pacific region in general and India-EU cooperation in specific. This is despite EU's clear iteration in its [Indo-Pacific strategy 2021](#) emphasizing the importance of higher education, research and innovation in the region. Similarly, India has slowly realised the [potentials of placing education](#) at the foreign policy agenda. In [2020](#), the Indian government unveiled its [ambitions](#) to make India a leading education hub in the world pointing at the increasing prominence of education as a national and international priority.

Further, China's ambitious [Belt and Road Initiative](#) has been increasingly aimed at developing its higher education and research system by cooperating with the academic partners along the New Silk Road. China's growing dominance in the field of development cooperation has also spread to the domain of education with an increasing [number of partnerships fostered among Higher Education Institutions \(HEIs\)](#) and countries that are either member of BRI or are in the Indo-Pacific region – like ASEAN and other East Asian countries. Thus, China's efforts at creating a resilient infrastructure in the academic field along the BRI – including with HEIs has clearly yielded

numerous benefits – currently making China the [fourth](#) most popular destination for foreign students.

Further, the setting up of the [Asia University Alliance](#) (2017) and [University Alliance of the New Silk Road](#) (2015) depicts Chinese activism in fostering higher education collaborations along the NSR by building what it calls an '[Academic Silk Road](#)'. Thus, a plausible India-EU cooperation in education partnership in the Indo-Pacific is necessary to comprehensively challenge Chinese rising soft power footprint in the region. In this article, we argue that India-EU relations can move beyond the traditional areas of cooperation such as trade, security and defence to include educational connectivity. Thus, India and EU both can benefit not only from each other's partnership but also create a [viable alternative to China](#)'s increasing higher education activities in the region as well as the globe. We also provide policy recommendations to policymakers from India and the EU charting the way forward.

### **Charting Europe and India's Educational Interest in the Indo-Pacific**

In recent times, the role of higher education particularly [academic exchanges](#) in building international partnerships have been frequently characterized by the term 'soft power'. More often, soft power is referred to the strength of ideas and culture. And higher education is an ideal tool for harnessing soft power. Europe's [Erasmus](#) programme is the torchbearer of its educational soft power and a nucleus around which a collective European identity has been fostered over the years. Additionally, the large international student population from India creates more opportunities for Europe to be interested in increasing its educational connectivity with India.

Further, the EU's [Global Gateway efforts](#) at increasing digital connectivity and partnering with countries in Africa and ASEAN can be also extended to South Asia and its higher education systems where the digital infrastructure is being developed. With ASEAN, EU concluded its [Support to Higher Education in the ASEAN Region \(SHARE\) project](#) in 2022 after seven years – which positively impacted ASEAN higher education mobility as well as increased people-to-people connectivity. From Europe's side, the Erasmus+ programme has benefitted researchers, higher institutions of education and students. Finally, EU's Global Gateway Project could better realize its goals by partnering with ASEAN – the Connectivity Master Plan 2025 of ASEAN and the [EU-ASEAN Youth Summit](#) are effective areas of cooperation where the project can realize bigger outcomes.

India too has slowly realised the potentials of placing [education at the foreign policy agenda](#). One of the ambitions recently unveiled by the Indian government is to make India a leading education hub in the world pointing at the increasing prominence of education as a national priority. Historically, India has served as the higher education destination for students from the South Asian region. This has enabled India to maintain and strengthen its political ties as well as spread its [culture](#) in the region. India needs to enhance educational connectivity if it wishes to establish a foothold in the Indo-Pacific region. And in this, the EU can indeed be an effective partner for India in strengthening and expanding regionalisation of higher education in the Indo-Pacific region.

India's global role in the last few years has been championing the cause of the global South in effectively every forum of its membership. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic saw greater engagements between India and the rest of the global South in the form of [vaccine cooperation](#) and humanitarian aid. In the G20 Presidency of India, the efforts to include [African Union](#) as a new member to the group and also consistently voicing the [concerns of the global South](#)

underlined India's aspiration of seeing itself as the aspiring leader of the global South. Apart from this, India's government under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi aspires to be the 'Vishwa guru' of the new world order – a teacher to the world. Used as a rhetoric in foreign policy aspirations until now, realizing the role of the 'Vishwa Guru' could possibly start a new phase for India to ['teach' the world its values](#) and its worldview – and in this respect, what better than educational cooperation with EU and the world, one may argue.

However, given certain challenges and limitations, India's thirst to become a ['Vishwa Guru'](#) would require a stronger collaboration with EU in the higher education, science and technology and research and innovation sectors. While the [India-EU Trade and Technology Council](#) is a creative arrangement designed to share best practices of technology and accelerate the trade agreement talks between the two parties, more opportunities wait to be tapped into, especially in the field of educational cooperation and student mobilities.

The urgency of a stronger educational connectivity is also realised owing to [growing Chinese educational incursions in the region](#). While China has been a popular source of international students in Western countries, several countries in the West, including EU member states like Germany – have begun attracting students from India in a bid to de-risk their reliance on Chinese students in the higher education ecosystem. Very recently, Indian students became the top source of [foreign students in Germany](#) as well as [USA](#), thus replacing China from the traditional first position it held as the country of origin of the largest number of foreign students in most countries in the West. Additionally, scepticism in Western countries regarding China and its education outreach efforts have generated a momentum of de-risking from Chinese students and increase collaborations with HEIs and countries elsewhere – India could use this as an opportunity to carve for itself a better position in international higher education, starting from EU and the [UK](#).

### **China on Education Cooperation – Global and in the Indo-Pacific**

China's ambitious [Belt and Road Initiative](#) is a broad project covering political, economic and cultural objectives as it develops its higher education and research system by cooperating with the academic partners along the New Silk Road. The setting up of the [Asia University Alliance](#) (2017) and [University Alliance of the New Silk Road](#) (2015) depicts the Chinese activism in fostering higher education collaborations along the NSR by building what it calls an 'Academic Silk Road'. Chinese universities like Tsinghua University and Peking University have already made it to [the 20 best universities](#) in overall rankings worldwide and they are in partnerships with leading universities from the West, ASEAN, Central Asia and South Asia.

Earlier this year, China partnered with the ASEAN countries for a [massive digital education alliance](#) which involves 60 international institutions. [China's Education Cooperation Week with ASEAN](#) has been a recurring event since 2008 and it involves institutions from prominent countries like Malaysia and Singapore. Recently, ten [HEIs in the Philippines](#) have partnered with Chinese institutions in a bid to boost collaboration and partnership. China has also partnered with countries like Cambodia – the Cambodia-China Association has announced [250 higher education scholarships for Cambodian students](#) to study in China this year. China's scholarships to students in Indonesia have also resulted in immense popularity of China among [Indonesian students](#) – more than 15000 Indonesian students went to China last year compared to the 9000 Indonesian students who went to the United States.

Similarly, China's efforts to offer an alternative to the anglicised education systems in the form of [Confucius Schools](#), Mandarin training centres and opportunities for African students to study in

universities have been [received positively by African countries](#). One of these efforts includes the [20+20 Cooperation Plan](#) which includes 20 universities from China and 20 universities from Africa spread across 17 African countries, facilitating cross-border student mobility, research collaborations and knowledge transfers. China's outreach efforts in Africa also provide employment opportunities to students either before or after their education in China. The [China Zimbabwe Friendship Scheme](#) is an example of how China has fostered friendly ties with African countries to generate mobility not only for education but also [employment opportunities](#).

### **Towards India-EU Educational connectivity in the Indo-Pacific**

After a decade of stalemate, India-EU relations are finally witnessing what resembles a [positive momentum](#) in the last two years. The interest and commitment to enhance and deepen the relations stem from a variety of reasons – an evolving complex geopolitical setting characterized by multipolarity, a rising Indo-Pacific region, and global disruptions caused by the Russia-Ukraine war and the latest iteration – Israel-Hamas war. Both sides have been taking proactive efforts in different policy areas to prioritize each other in their foreign policy agendas. There has been a growing recognition that India and Europe must actualize greater strategic engagement against the context of their enormous untapped potential. It was only recently – June 2022- that India-EU resumed negotiations on the decade long pending [Free Trade Agreement \(FTA\)](#). Additionally, India-EU jointly set up a [Trade and Technology Council \(TTC\)](#) last year, making India only second to the United States to have a TTC with EU. As much as these areas have to be accorded salience and remain the bedrock for stronger India-EU cooperation, education cannot be neglected as a last item of agenda for cooperation. India-EU relations have suffered from misperceptions for decades and therefore stronger people-to-people connect is salient for an enhanced partnership in the future.

Over the last 20 years, the Bologna Process has transformed from being a [pan-European project](#) to become a significant higher education region exerting its influence beyond Europe. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) may be easier to mobilise within the member states of the EU given the realisation that higher education sector has a much greater role to play in the processes of internationalisation and globalisation to advance towards a knowledge-based economy. Europe is emerging as a knowledge leader through its efforts such as the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and European Research Area (ERA) and therefore cooperation with Asian actors can enhance the competitiveness of the EHEA. It is also key to increasing the awareness of Europe in Asia thus bringing the two regions culturally and politically closer. It may also serve as a vehicle to reposition Europe as a [global higher education hub](#).

We assert that higher education offers certain possibilities that India-EU cooperation in other sectors may not offer. Given the existing irritants to the free trade agreement between India and the EU, which remain unsolved, cooperation in higher education might emerge as a natural priority for the two. Building the momentum that India and the EU currently enjoy in the field of higher education and also the potentials of extending the cooperation to the Indo-Pacific region, we outline a practical approach to enhancing region-building initiatives in higher education.

India can enhance its [position](#) in the Indo-Pacific mainly among the South Asian countries through higher education. It can do so by attracting greater international students from the surrounding regions. This can help facilitate cross-border sharing of ideas, knowledge and greater interaction

between scholars and students in the region. The data from gathered from the [All India Survey of Higher Education \(AISHE\) 2018-19](#) indicate that nearly half (49%) of the International students studying in India were from the neighbouring countries. This is despite the existing challenges in higher education, India has emerged as a regional higher education hub due to the comparative advantage that it enjoys over other neighbouring countries. However, this trend seems to be slowly changing with China emerging as an [alternate education hub](#) in the region as it ventures on an Academic Silk Road.

China's rise as a [higher education hub](#) because of increased spending on education has also diverted mobility flows from neighbouring countries to China. Education has been a soft power tool employed by India (maybe underemployed) to establish itself as a regional power in South Asia. China is quickly becoming the largest [sender](#) of students with 662,100 Chinese students studying abroad, while simultaneously becoming a [higher education destination](#) welcoming about 500,000 students in 2018. The emergence of China and the ascent of Asia (in general) are reconstructing the geopolitical map. All these reasons point at the growing common ground furthering practical cooperation on educational connectivity between EU and India and in the Indo-Pacific region. Countering China's academic presence in the Indo-Pacific region is a visible threat to both the EU and India and therefore collaborative efforts in the form of regional efforts in higher education might be an effective way to tackle this challenge.

## Conclusion

The paper concludes with the following policy recommendations to Indian and European policymakers presenting possible ways of enhancing educational connectivity in the region.

- Regional higher education efforts through regional organisations: The EU and India can work more closely with regional organisations like ASEAN and the SAARC. This might indeed be an opportune time to revive SAARC. The development of regional multi-country centre such as the South Asian University set up by SAARC countries in 2015 and the Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development deemed as a UNESCO Category 1 Institute in the Asia-Pacific region is an example of regional efforts in South Asia. Such regional multi-country centres can be replicated in more regions through EU and India's collaborative efforts. Similar such efforts can be carried out with ASEAN in the South-East Asian region. The EU has been supporting the ASEAN regional integration forum and education has emerged as a top priority in EU-ASEAN dialogues. Therefore, the EU-India-ASEAN can collectively work towards increasing their strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific by mobilising the HEIs in the region.
- Inclusion of more countries in the Horizon Europe program as associate countries. Presently, only New Zealand signed an association agreement with the EU reckoning its entry into the EU's Horizon Europe program. Horizon Europe is an ambitious program aimed at developing the global competitiveness of European Research and Innovation (R&I) in key strategic areas. The EU must welcome more like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific to become associate countries in the Horizon Europe program. Talks with Japan are currently ongoing.
- Mobilise funding for researchers, especially for joint research projects with partners who share similar values in the Indo-Pacific region. Increased research collaboration among universities in the region can help address common region-specific challenges.

- Establish consortia of leading universities from the region facilitating the mobility of scholars, academicians, and researchers from Europe, South Asia and South-East Asia. The consortia can also support specific joint study programs at Masters and Doctoral levels offered by consortia. Consortia building exercises can be led jointly by the EU, India and ASEAN.
- Start an EU-Indo-Pacific link program (modelled along the Asia Link), bringing HEIs in Europe, India and other Indo-Pacific countries together by providing funds for joint projects in capacity building.
- Setting up of a Europe-Asia University Alliance for promoting and supporting activities like Vice-Chancellors'/Rectors' Conference, technical assistance programs, round table conference, and other such follow up activities that will help in sharing best practices/knowledge across the regions.
- Establish regionally oriented cross-border regional centres focussing on priority issues such as sustainable development goals and other common areas. Creating such regional research centres can help in furthering regional educational and simultaneously political ties.
- Educational connectivity through digital platform can also foster greater India-EU ties. As India plans to emerge as a regional education hub, it can do so by delivering education digitally. The EU can partner in India's efforts such as National Knowledge Network and simultaneously expand it to the countries in the Indo-Pacific region.
- The [India-Middle East-Europe Corridor](#) can also serve as the foundation for a larger higher education area in future. Its future at the moment is uncertain in light of the developments in Israel and Palestine, however it can be a forum to develop policies to foster exchanges of students and researchers among the universities and countries in the IMEC.