

# India and Europe After Ukraine

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## Summary

*This working paper explores the paradoxical transition of Ukraine from an intractable difference between India and Europe during 2022 into a catalyst for reframing the bilateral relationship and elevating it to a higher level. It reviews India's problematic European inheritance from the past, the divergence of the Cold War era, the tentative outreach to Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the new geopolitical factors that have persuaded India and Europe to rethink their relationship after the Ukraine War that we might call the fifth phase in modern India's engagement with Europe.*

## Introduction

If Russia's invasion of eastern Ukraine in February 2022 shook the European and global security order to its core, the Western backlash against the muted Indian response to it delivered a shock to India's foreign and security policy strategy. Delhi's carefully crafted policy of holding on to the Russian relationship inherited from the Soviet days while expanding strategic cooperation with the United States (US) and its allies in Europe came under stress as Russia's conflict with the West intensified by the end of the first decade in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The Ukraine shock, many had assumed in Europe and beyond, would be a short and sharp one. Delhi was no exception on this count. If Moscow were successful in its plans to bring Kyiv under Russia's heel with a quick and decisive 'special operation', as many in the world expected its impact on India's grand strategy might have been limited. However, Ukraine, under the leadership of President Volodymyr Zelensky, offered surprising resistance and pushed back Russian forces in some sectors. This, in turn, has compelled all major actors in the world and the combatants themselves to rework their strategies.

Russia now turned to a brutal war of attrition pounding away Ukraine's cities and their water and power infrastructure causing immense losses to Ukraine and at great cost to itself in terms of men and equipment as well as its economy. Ukraine, buoyed by its initial successes, mobilised the world to support its brave war against Russian occupation. The US and its European allies now began to supply arms to Ukraine and construct a global campaign to isolate Russia and impose political costs on it. Delhi found itself caught between intense and growing Western hostility towards Russia and India's traditional policy of sustaining a reasonable relationship with Moscow.

India's refusal to condemn the Russian aggression against Ukraine, its seriatim abstention on the United Nations (UN) resolutions denouncing Moscow's violation of Kyiv's sovereignty and territorial integrity, Delhi's massive purchase of discounted oil from Moscow and its interaction with President Vladimir Putin at the leadership level angered the West further.

India's defiant defence of its Russia policy, especially by its articulate foreign minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar appeared to make matters worse.<sup>1</sup> Yet, three years after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, India's ties with Europe appear poised for unprecedented expansion.

## European Engagement Before Ukraine

Modern India's intensive engagement with Europe began in the colonial era, as the rising powers of the old continent turned east in search of markets, resources and empires. All the major European powers, barring Spain, showed up in India which became a crucial stepping stone for a wider presence in Asia. The British, Dutch, French and Portuguese shaped the contest for India and Asia from between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Britain consolidated its dominance over India by defeating its European rivals. However, it had to constantly fend off the European rivals from growing their influence in India.

The so-called 'Great Game' in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was about countering the European rivals in and around the Subcontinent. The Indian resources were fully mobilised not only for the Great Game in the region but also to secure the British position in Europe. India contributed nearly one million troops in the First World War and more than two million troops in the Second World War. The Indian army was also the sword arm of the British in securing peace and stability across the vast spaces of what we now call the Indo-Pacific. If India was the crown jewel of the British Empire, undermining British authority was a major objective of its European rivals. France, Germany and Russia made forays of different kinds to mobilise the anti-British sentiment in Europe.

It was Soviet Russia, the weakest of the European powers that eventually gained a strong foothold in India that persists to this day. This is thanks to the Soviet support for decolonisation and the attractiveness of its socialist ideology in the radicalising elite in the inter-war period. In independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru and his colleagues emulated the Soviet model of economic development; and his much-proclaimed non-alignment inevitably ended tilting to the Soviet side, given the Anglo-American support for Pakistan on the Kashmir question and Nehru's trenchant critique of Western policies in Asia.

To be sure, Delhi maintained reasonable relationships with Britain, France and Germany. It was also among the first countries to establish a relationship with the European Economic Community (EEC) that later became the European Union (EU). India's inward economic orientation meant there was little dynamism to India's commercial engagement with the European majors or the EEC. Although India bought occasional weapons systems from Britain, France and Germany, there was no strategic content to defence cooperation with these countries.

India's economic reforms of the 1990s at the end of the Cold War, saw Delhi turn to the US and Europe for the acceleration of its economic development in a new liberalised

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<sup>1</sup> "S Jaishankar Defends India's Neutral Stance over Russia-Ukraine Crisis", *Economic Times*, 25 November 2022, <https://m.economictimes.com/news/india/s-jaishankar-defends-indias-neutral-stance-over-russia-ukraine-crisis/articleshow/95773595.cms>.

framework. Trade volumes began to rise with major powers as well as the EU. In the post-Soviet world that shook India's geopolitical framework to the core, Delhi sought to improve political, military and security engagement with Europe. But movement tended to be slow and tentative. That began to change in the Narendra Modi years. One of the significant shifts in India's foreign policy under Modi has been the conscious elevation of Europe, including the United Kingdom, to a higher strategic priority. As framed by Jaishankar, India's great power strategy is about "engaging America, managing China, reassuring Russia, cultivating Europe and drawing in Japan."<sup>2</sup> This was probably the first time that Delhi elevated Europe to such a high level in its geopolitical calculus. This worked well for India in the revitalisation of a long-neglected relationship. India's lack of strategic interest in Europe.

When the Modi government took charge in May 2014, its European relations were in a deadlock due to the collapse of free trade talks, the absence of annual summits and a major dispute with Italy – a critical European power – over the arrest of its marines following a shooting incident involving Indian nationals off the coast of Kerala in early 2012.<sup>3</sup> During its first term, the Modi government decisively resolved the issue. The transformation of Delhi's bilateral relations with Rome has been emblematic of the more expansive and purposeful Indian engagement with Europe. This was reflected in the intensity of high-level engagement between India and Europe. During his first decade as prime minister (2014-24), Modi travelled 27 times to Europe and received 37 European heads of state and government. Since he became foreign minister in 2019, Jaishankar travelled to Europe 29 times and received 36 of his European counterparts in Delhi. There has been no slowdown in this engagement since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Focusing on resolving long-standing irritants with vital bilateral partners and sustained high-level engagement saw unprecedented forward movement in India's relations with Europe in various areas, including the economic and security domains.

The acceleration of bilateral ties is visible in three broad domains – geopolitical, economic and technological. On the geopolitical front, India discarded its historic hesitations about working with "Colonial European Powers" to shape regional security. As it seeks to cope with the structural changes in the Asian balance of power driven by China's rise, Delhi is now ready to engage with the European powers in a different post-colonial perspective on regional security. In opposition to China's slogan of 'Asia for Asians', Delhi has, on various occasions, emphasised its vision of a more inclusive regional order that includes roles for former the colonial powers as well as the US.<sup>4</sup>

This is also reflected in the transformation of India's bilateral relations with the old European powers – Germany, Italy, France and Britain – under Modi. As one of the fastest-growing major economies in the world, a valuable partner in defence and technological domains, and a source of talented immigration, India emerged as an important partner for

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<sup>2</sup> S Jaishankar, *India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> "Explained: What Is the Italian Marines Case?", *The Indian Express*, 10 April 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-what-is-the-italian-marines-case-7266450/>.

<sup>4</sup> "Remarks by External Affairs Minister, Dr S Jaishankar at the launch of Asia Society Policy Institute", New Delhi, Ministry of External Affairs, 29 August 2022, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/35662/>.

Europe.<sup>5</sup> All key bilateral relations of old Europe have advanced considerably since Russia's Ukraine invasion.

India has matched the renewed cultivation of old Europe with a new determination to improve ties with 'collective Europe'. On the economic front, India and the EU resumed trade talks in 2022 after Brussels had suspended them in 2013. India signed a trade and investment agreement with the European Free Trade Association in March 2024 that showcases the possibilities for reimagining the economic ties between India and Europe.<sup>6</sup> An India-EU FTA will be the most significant development in relations. However, there remain wide gaps in the positions and preferences of each side – partly explained by contrasting socio-developmental conditions in both societies. India would prefer a more 'shallow' and sequential approach centering on services, goods and mobility for Indian professionals and investments. On the other hand, Europe has adopted a much more ambitious 'deep' approach based on aligning policies on investments, competition and intellectual property rights. Eventually, both sides must balance these two opposing approaches for mutual benefit.

The Modi years have also seen India's discovery of the value of smaller nations of Europe as well as the 'regional Europe'. As it began to pay greater attention to Europe, it recognised the salience of the smaller nations of Europe all of whom have much to offer India, including technology and political support. Delhi also recognised the capacity of these nations to block or facilitate progress with collective Europe in Brussels. Besides the smaller nations, Delhi also recognised the political and policy diversity across Europe and that the continent has its own sub-regions that have a distinct role of their own. The Modi years have seen India step up its diplomacy with Nordic, Baltic and the Euro-Mediterranean regions. Recognising the new salience of the Central European states, Delhi has reached out to Poland and Hungary in the region.

### **After Ukraine: Crisis and Opportunity**

The intensification of India's relations with Europe, despite the real differences over the Russian invasion of Ukraine, is an interesting paradox. Several factors explain this.

One is the growing salience of India – economic, political and diplomatic. India's continuing rapid economic growth at a time of great global uncertainty has meant Europe could not simply turn its back on India despite the anger on Delhi's approach to the Ukraine crisis. The situation is not dissimilar to the one that Europe faces about China. Beijing's Moscow partnership without limits – announced just before the Ukraine invasion – and China's enabling of Russian aggression have caused great challenges to Europe. Yet, Europe is in no position to make the Ukraine question a make-or-break one with China. Although India's salience is far less for Europe, it has substantive and growing international weight.

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<sup>5</sup> "Signing of Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany on a Comprehensive Migration and Mobility Partnership", Ministry of External Affairs, 5 December 2022.

<sup>6</sup> "India-EFTA Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement", <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseframePage.aspx?PRID=2013169>.

India is the fifth largest economy and is expected to become the third largest by the turn of 2030.<sup>7</sup> Growing economic ties with India remain a high priority for Europe at a time when there is considerable pressure from the US on its ties with China and its Russian ties have broken down. India is also a member of several leading international forums, including the G20 and a regular invitee to the G7 summits. It is also a leading light of the Global South. That many nations from the Global South have refused to condemn the Russian invasion has registered in Europe, including Ukraine. Europe has seen India's role as critical in winning over the Global South to its point of view.

Second, as the war in Ukraine persisted, Europe's focus on moralpolitik to convince India and the Global South yielded place to the recognition of the need for a practical engagement with the concerns of the Global South. Europe's outrage over the Russian violation of Ukraine's sovereignty began to look shaky as the US and Europe acquiesced in Israel's actions in Gaza and Lebanon after the horrible terror attacks on 7 October 2023.

Third, the military stalemate on the ground in Ukraine towards the end of the third year of the war convinced the need to find diplomatic solutions. If Russian victory over Ukraine was taken for granted in the immediate aftermath of the invasion, Kyiv's initial military gains convinced many Europeans that the Russian invasion was easily reversed. A definitive defeat of Russia – by compelling it to withdraw from all occupied territories – looks increasingly unlikely. Russia's advantages over Ukraine in a war of attrition had increasingly come to the fore. This was further compounded by the fact of growing divisions within Europe on how to deal with the Russian invasion. Amid the growing recognition of the need for an early end to the war, India's consistent advocacy of dialogue and diplomacy since the invasion appeared to have a credible ring to it. From being viewed as a problem in Ukraine, Delhi has looked at least a small part of the solution.

Fourth, even more consequential has been the US government's approach to India on the Ukraine question. Although the Joe Biden administration was unhappy with the Indian position, it was unwilling to condemn India's position on Ukraine. It was willing to recognise the inertia of India's ties with Moscow and was unwilling to disrupt the emerging strategic partnership with Delhi that was so critical to the US' strategy of balancing China in Asia.

Finally, India on its part was taking steps to slowly reduce its exposure to the Russian weapons systems as well as adapt to the political reality that Moscow was getting tied ever more deeply to Beijing, which presented the most challenges to Indian security.

Together, these five factors provided a context for developing new terms of mutually beneficial engagement while reducing the differences in Ukraine.

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<sup>7</sup> George Mathew, "India's GDP Set to Double to \$7 Trillion, Third Largest in the World by FY30-31: S&P", *The Indian Express*, 19 September 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/business/economy/indias-gdp-set-to-double-to-7-trillion-third-largest-in-the-world-by-fy30-31-sp-9577737/>.

## **New Terms of Engagement**

As India and Europe confronted the unpleasant consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the two sides began to reassess the relationship.<sup>8</sup> On its part, Delhi recognised that deeper cooperation with Europe is critical in achieving Modi's objective of turning India into a developed state by 2047. From the European perspective, a rising India could contribute to sustaining European prosperity, and continuing growth and dynamism of Europe. To get there, though, India and Europe need to define new terms of engagement that are in tune with new realities and emerging possibilities.

The search for new terms of engagement could begin with the recognition that the war in Ukraine offers an opportunity for a comprehensive overhaul of the relationship. Although the conflict in Ukraine has sharpened the disagreements between India and Europe, it has also compelled the two sides to reassess and better understand each other. Five themes stand out.

### **American Centrality**

Today, Delhi has a solid partnership with Washington, an essential change from the Cold War and provides a more favourable environment for engagement between India and Europe. Although both have concerns about potential swings in US domestic politics, both recognise the US' centrality in shaping the balance of power in Europe and Asia. Both Europe and India recognise that maintaining America's involvement is crucial for their security, especially now amid the deepening partnership without limits between Russia and China. Yet, both recognise the value of strategic autonomy and understand that they cannot indefinitely depend on the goodwill of US taxpayers or the internationalist commitments of the foreign policy elite.

As they develop their own capabilities, India and Europe must respond to the imperative of creating deeper ties between themselves. A strategic partnership between Europe and India would rest on three pillars: ongoing bilateral and security cooperation with the US, greater individual contributions to regional stability and prosperity, and enhanced bilateral cooperation between Europe and India.

### **India and European Security**

Europe finds it quite baffling that India is reluctant to condemn Russia's brazen violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and Putin's claim that Ukraine has no right to exist as a nation. Delhi's unwillingness is rooted in several factors: the historical memory of Soviet support for Indian Asian liberation from European colonialism, Moscow's role in blocking proposed resolutions in Kashmir under the UN umbrella, its past policy of balancing China in Asia and its emergence as a reliable supplier of advanced weapons. While the past hangs over India's

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<sup>8</sup> Gabriel Gavin and Barbara Moens, "Row over Russian Energy Sanctions Gatecrashes EU-India Summit", *Politico*, 16 May 2023, <http://www.politico.eu/article/eu-india-summit-russia-oil-sanctions-subrahmanyam-jaishankar/>.



relationship with Russia, India recognises that its future is with the West and is gradually navigating a 'managed decline' in its relationship with Russia.<sup>9</sup>

While Europe needs to understand the unique context of Delhi's ties with Moscow, India must be sensitive to the history of Russian imperial expansion in Europe and the enduring fears it generates among the smaller countries on its Western periphery. Similarly, Delhi needs to appreciate the unique dynamic that governs post-war Russo-German ties and the multiple lines of European thinking on the future of the Russian question. Developing a greater appreciation of the history and current dynamic of European geopolitics cannot be an abstract question for Indian grand strategy. It is about reclaiming India's history of contributing to European security. Indian troops played a crucial role in the First and Second World Wars. As India rises, it cannot continue to view European security solely through the Russian lens; it needs to develop greater engagement with European security institutions. Moscow, after all, does not view Asia through an Indian lens.

### **Europe and Asian Security**

While India may have a blind spot when it comes to the Russia problem, Europe shares a similar reluctance to confront Chinese encroachment in Asia and its surrounding waters. As in the Indian case, there are reasonable explanations for Europe's inability to respond to the China challenge. Four decades of intense economic cooperation have made China a significant market for the European industry. Disentangling this relationship is not going to be easy. China has invested heavily in diplomatic efforts to engage Europe over the past several decades, more so than any other Asian country, resulting in significant political goodwill for Beijing. Despite the power of the Chinese market and the political links built over time, Europe has begun to rethink its China policy. With encouragement from the US, Europe is also considering raising its security profile in Asia and the Indo-Pacific.

Sceptics point to the importance of Ukraine and question Europe's ability to make a big military difference to the Asian balance of power. However, Europe's normative power, diplomatic weight and military-industrial capability will make an important contribution to blunting China's expansionism in Asia. India would welcome a greater European role in Asia, considering the magnitude of the challenge posed by Beijing's alternative vision of a global order.

### **Eurasia and its Waters**

Europe's engagement with Asian geopolitics and India's with European security provide a much needed response over the longer term to the growing Sino-Russian continental axis. For too long European and Asian theatres were seen as separate. That stands in contrast to the dynamic economic and military interaction between Europe and Asia during the colonial era. To be sure, the colonial framework lends a bad taste to that history. Today, Europe and Asia can work together in a new compact based on mutual respect and reciprocal benefit.

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<sup>9</sup> Chietigj Bajpae, "Managing a Managed Decline: The Future of Indian-Russian Relations", *War on the Rocks*, 27 February 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/02/managing-a-managed-decline-the-future-of-indian-russian-relations/>.

We are seeing the growing impact of Asia on European geopolitics. Besides the growing influence of China, South Korea has become an interesting source of arms supply to Poland and Ukraine. North Korea and Iran too have become important players in the war for Ukraine. The so-called AP-4 – Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea – have become regular invitees to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization summits since 2022.

Meanwhile, Europe can play a big role in boosting the national capabilities of the Asian countries and facilitating their ability to stand up to China's bullying and defend their sovereignty. This is of particular interest to India that is staring down China in the great Himalayas and seeking to reduce its historic dependence on Russian weapons for its defence. France and other European states have long sold arms to India. Today, there is an opportunity for a major European contribution to the modernisation of India's defence industrial base.<sup>10</sup> India too could contribute to the European effort to accelerate the production of much-needed war material that is in short supply. The Trade and Technology Council, announced in June 2021, could become the principal vehicle for boosting high-technology cooperation between India and Europe.<sup>11</sup> India's large engineering talent pool could play an important part in the revitalisation of the technology sector in Europe which is lagging behind the US. Given the toxicity of the immigration crisis, India and Europe need definitive frameworks for promoting legal skilled migration while cracking down on illegal movement.

Today, the Western Indian Ocean, including Africa and the Middle East, is ripe for greater regional security cooperation between India and Europe. The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, initiative announced at the G20 summit in Delhi in September 2023, opens the door to new connectivity initiatives between India and Europe via the Middle East. Small steps are also being taken for cooperation between India and the European states in developing joint projects in Africa. All these developments point to the changing imagination of spatial and strategic connectivity between India, Europe and the regions between them.

### **Like-Minded Coalitions**

Multilateralism has been the anthem of the European Union that overcame the bitter history of contested sovereignties in the old continent. Among all the major global actors, the EU has been the most active champion of multilateralism that has acquired great depth and breadth in the post-Cold War decades. Yet, it is becoming increasingly clear that the multilateral order – economic, political and security – that emerged in the aftermath of the Cold War is under stress. Domestic developments in the US and China and their economic contestation has put the future of the World Trade Organization under a dark cloud. The territorial expansionism of Russia and China in defiance of the first principles of the UN

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<sup>10</sup> "Germany Fully Backs Submarine Negotiations with India, Wants to Offer Military Cooperation Alternatives to New Delhi: German Envoy", *Economic Times*, 9 April 2024, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/germany-fully-backs-submarine-negotiations-with-india-wants-to-offer-military-cooperation-alternatives-to-new-delhi-german-envoy/articleshow/109161107.cms?from=mdr>.

<sup>11</sup> "India – EU Joint Statement 1st Meeting of the Trade and Technology Council", Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. 16 May 2023, [www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/germany-commits-10-billion-euros-for-green-projects-in-india-by-2030-122050201117\\_1.html](http://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/germany-commits-10-billion-euros-for-green-projects-in-india-by-2030-122050201117_1.html).



Charter – respect for territorial sovereignty – has made the UN Security Council (UNSC) marginal to the management of the global security order. Like Europe, India too has been a major votary of multilateralism since independence. However, the nation-building imperatives of India and the post-modern multilateralism of Europe have often come into a clash. Yet, there have also been instances of cooperation, for example, between India and Germany, in the campaign for the expansion of the UNSC.<sup>12</sup> That campaign, however, was unsuccessful and it is unlikely that there will be an agreement among the major powers for such a major transformation.

India and Europe, however, could better spend their energies in building like-minded coalitions to address global challenges. Although these institutions can't replace true multilateralism, they can serve as valuable tools until we can find ways to end great power rivalry and restore the centrality of multilateral institutions.<sup>13</sup> The US has increasingly turned to these coalitions and minilateral institutions. India, traditionally reluctant to join such institutions is now participating in many of them led by the US. Besides the Quad that focuses on the Indo-Pacific order, India is now part of the Mineral Security Partnership,<sup>14</sup> the Artemis Accords<sup>15</sup> and the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence.<sup>16</sup> Europe is part of all three. India is also a regular invitee to the annual summits of the Group of Seven. Although the gap on global issues is large between India and the rest of the G7, integrating India into the apex structure will help the US and Europe lend ballast legitimacy to this presumed global directorate of the West. For Delhi, gaining an immediate say in the management of the global order through these like-minded coalitions is more important than waiting for the day when India becomes a permanent member of the UNSC. The next few years will see how these factors might play out in rearranging India's relations with Europe.

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<sup>12</sup> "Joint Statement: 6th India-Germany Inter-Governmental Consultations", Ministry of External Affairs, 2 May 2022, [https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/35251/Joint\\_Statement\\_6th\\_IndiaGermany\\_InterGovernmental\\_Consultations](https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/35251/Joint_Statement_6th_IndiaGermany_InterGovernmental_Consultations).

<sup>13</sup> Asit Ranjan Mishra. "Germany Commits 10 Billion Euros for Green Projects in India by 2030", *Business Standard*, 2 May 2022, [www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/germany-commits-10-billion-euros-for-green-projects-in-india-by-2030-122050201117\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/germany-commits-10-billion-euros-for-green-projects-in-india-by-2030-122050201117_1.html); and A "Joint Declaration of Intent on Forest Landscape Restoration between India and Germany Signed Virtually", <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseframePage.aspx?PRID=1822121>.

<sup>14</sup> The Minerals Security Partnership is a "collaboration of 14 countries and the EU to catalyse public and private investment in responsible critical minerals supply chains globally." See "Minerals Security Partnership", U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/minerals-security-partnership/>.

<sup>15</sup> The Artemis Accords are "principles for cooperation in the civil exploration and use of the moon, Mars, comets and asteroids for peaceful purposes." See "Artemis Accords", U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/artemis-accords/>.

<sup>16</sup> The Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence is "an international initiative established to guide the responsible development and use of artificial intelligence (AI) in a manner that respects human rights and the shared democratic values of its members." See "Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence", OECD, <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/programmes/global-partnership-on-artificial-intelligence.html>.