

SADF Podcast S4E6 Edited Transcript

SADF Podcast

The Future of South Asia–EU Relations: Trade, Migration and Human Rights in a Multipolar World

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This transcript has been lightly edited for clarity, grammar and readability while preserving the substance, arguments and character of the original conversation. Views expressed by the speakers are their own.

Tapas Kanti Baul

Welcome to the SADF Podcast, a forum where we unpack democracy, governance, trade, migration and human rights across South Asia and its global intersections.

I am your host, Tapas Kanti Baul, from the South Asia Democratic Forum.

Today, I am honoured to be joined by **Dr Indira Bhotia**, Lecturer in Law at Glasgow Caledonian University. Dr Bhotia teaches business law, international trade and WTO law, and investment law. Her research bridges international human rights, minority protection and comparative judicial systems across India, the European Court of Human Rights and the Inter-American Court.

Our context today is particularly timely.

On 27 January 2026, India and the European Union announced the conclusion of negotiations for a landmark Free Trade Agreement, described by EU leaders as the “mother of all deals”, with sweeping tariff reductions on both sides and broader cooperation frameworks on security and mobility.

Within days, Washington also signalled a reset with New Delhi. The United States said it would reduce tariffs on Indian goods to 18 per cent and rescind an additional 25 per cent punitive duty, while President Trump linked the move to changes in India’s energy purchases.

Against this fast-moving backdrop, our theme today is **the future of South Asia–EU relations: trade, migration and human rights in a multipolar world**.

Dr Bhotia, welcome.

Dr Indira Bhotia

Thank you.

Tapas Kanti Baul

Let me begin with the major geopolitical question.

How do the India–European Union Free Trade Agreement and the United States tariff reset together reshape India’s bargaining power with major partners?

And what immediate consequences might smaller South Asian states face?

I appreciate that it is still too early to assess the full implications of the US tariff reset, but perhaps you could also say something about that broader context.

Dr Indira Bhotia

I think, in a way, we should almost thank the United States for creating the current situation.

The tariff policies pursued by President Trump towards countries around the world helped create a political and economic environment in which this EU–India agreement received extraordinary attention.

The Free Trade Agreement did not suddenly appear.

It is the result of nearly **20 years of negotiations**.

That is an exceptionally long period for a trade agreement, and this is now one of the most significant trade deals in the world.

As you mentioned, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen described it as the “**mother of all deals**.”

For India, it is the largest trade agreement it has concluded so far.

But we also have to be careful.

The agreement is not yet fully in force.

It still has to go through legal review and ratification procedures on both sides.

Within the EU, the text normally undergoes legal vetting.

Any changes may then need to be agreed again with India.

After that, the process moves to the **European Council** and then to the **European Parliament**, which must ratify the agreement.

And the European Parliament can still block a trade agreement, as we have seen with the difficulties surrounding the EU–Mercosur agreement.

So politically and legally, the process is not yet complete.

Dr Indira Bhotia

There are also important geopolitical sensitivities.

One of the longstanding concerns for both the European Union and the United States is India’s relationship with **Russia**.

That relationship is not simply economic.

It is also historical and strategic.

Russia has traditionally supported India's position on Kashmir in the United Nations Security Council.

That diplomatic support remains important to India, particularly because India itself does not have a permanent seat on the Security Council.

So India continues to perform a delicate balancing act.

It is deepening ties with the EU, but it also maintains strategic relationships elsewhere.

That does not necessarily prevent closer EU–India cooperation, but it makes the broader geopolitical picture more complex.

Dr Indira Bhotia

If the FTA proceeds successfully, however, it marks a new phase in EU–India relations.

And it is not simply about trade.

It also involves security cooperation, mobility and people-to-people relations.

We are talking about two enormous economic actors.

India is one of the world's largest economies, while the European Union is one of the world's largest economic blocs.

Together, they represent a market of roughly **two billion people** and a very significant share of global trade.

For the EU, the agreement opens access to an enormous and fast-growing market.

That is why the media have described the agreement not only as the “mother of all deals”, but as a **“tale of two giants.”**

Symbolically, it sends an important message: cooperation remains possible at a moment of growing protectionism, fragmented supply chains, geopolitical tension and tariff conflict.

For the EU, it is also part of a wider strategy of diversifying trade relationships and reducing excessive dependence on both China and the United States.

Tapas Kanti Baul

Let us move from the geopolitical symbolism to what this means in practice.

Dr Indira Bhotia

There are three areas that stand out immediately:

manufacturing, mobility and non-tariff barriers.

First, tariff reductions and market access.

Indian products will become more competitive in the European market.

That includes products such as seafood, precious stones, jewellery and various services.

There is also an important mobility dimension, facilitating greater movement of Indian workers and students into the EU.

But the agreement works both ways.

European products will also become significantly cheaper in India.

For example, tariffs on certain cars are expected to fall dramatically, though there will be quotas and safeguards.

This creates some concern that India could become more of a market for high-value European imports rather than developing as a manufacturing hub.

Other tariff reductions are also substantial.

Medical and chemical products face major reductions.

Wine tariffs are expected to fall significantly.

Tariffs on products such as chocolate and pasta will also decline sharply.

Beer tariffs will also be reduced.

These examples may sound very specific, but they help people understand that consumers will experience the agreement directly.

There will be more choice and lower tariff burdens on a range of goods.

Dr Indira Bhotia

There is also a major business dimension.

For Indian companies, preferential access to a large, rules-based European market provides greater predictability.

That can support long-term investment decisions, export strategies, capacity expansion and partnerships.

Both European and Indian firms are also trying to diversify supply chains and reduce concentration risk.

For India, this could support a move towards higher-value manufacturing and more technologically intensive sectors.

India has an important demographic advantage.

It has a large number of skilled professionals in technology, engineering, research, healthcare and business services.

So this is not simply an agreement about traditional goods.

It also covers services, investment, digital trade, sustainability, mobility and technological cooperation.

Dr Indira Bhotia

But not everything is open.

There are sensitive sectors and exclusions on both sides.

India wanted greater access for some steel products, but the EU resisted.

India has also excluded or protected areas such as rice, beef and dairy.

That reflects the domestic political importance of Indian agriculture.

At the same time, it also suits the EU, which is itself dealing with farmer protests and strong resistance to agricultural competition.

So one could describe India's trade philosophy here as **selective openness combined with strategic safeguards**.

Dr Indira Bhotia

There are also major regulatory obstacles.

On the EU side, there is the complexity of the European regulatory system.

The EU has extremely sophisticated and demanding rules concerning chemicals, food safety, data protection, carbon accounting, sustainability reporting, labour processes and product liability.

For Indian exporters, the main challenge may therefore not be tariffs at all.

It may be **compliance**.

Indian producers will have to deal with conformity assessments, certification timelines, traceability requirements and documentation standards.

The EU also has strict sanitary and phytosanitary rules, as well as the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism.

This means Indian businesses will need to adapt.

And that raises an important distributional question.

Will small Indian producers be able to afford these changes?

Compliance may require investment in sustainability, branding, traceability and cold-chain infrastructure.

Large Indian companies may be able to absorb those costs relatively easily.

Small producers may not.

So we need to ask who will actually benefit.

Tapas Kanti Baul

That is a crucial point because the question is not only whether the agreement grows trade, but who within India is able to participate in that growth.

Dr Indira Bhotia

Exactly.

And the complexity also exists on the Indian side.

India is a continental-scale market with multiple layers of regulation.

European companies have to navigate central ministries, state governments, port authorities, customs zones and sectoral regulators.

When we move into investment, questions such as land acquisition, environmental clearance, taxation and subnational regulation become extremely important.

India therefore also needs stronger standards infrastructure—testing laboratories, accreditation bodies and certification agencies.

Dr Indira Bhotia

There is another dimension which received less media attention: **security and strategic cooperation**.

Alongside trade negotiations, the EU and India have been developing cooperation around a Security of Information Agreement.

If this advances, it could allow the exchange of classified information.

That is significant because this kind of cooperation is normally associated with very close security partners or NATO allies.

It suggests a deeper level of strategic trust.

In practice, it could support cooperation in defence, advanced technologies, maritime security and cyber defence.

There is also a wider concern around state-sponsored cyber activity, particularly activity attributed to China and Pakistan.

Dr Indira Bhotia

Artificial intelligence is another important area.

There has already been cooperation between the European AI Office and India's AI Mission.

Part of this focuses on large language models and on attempts to develop ethical frameworks for artificial intelligence.

That is particularly interesting because the EU strongly emphasises human rights and democratic values in its approach to AI governance.

So the relationship is expanding well beyond traditional trade.

Tapas Kanti Baul

Thank you for laying out those different dimensions.

India currently has a very large and rapidly expanding middle class, which means European firms see an enormous consumer market.

At the same time, Indian investors gain access to the European market.

But the distributional question remains.

Who benefits?

There is often a significant divide between high-income investors and smaller producers.

And both India and Europe also have to protect farmers, who remain socially and politically important.

Let me now turn to **human rights**.

Whenever the European Union enters a major economic agreement, questions of human rights inevitably arise.

What might this FTA mean for India's human-rights situation, particularly in relation to minorities?

Dr Indira Bhotia

At the moment, surprisingly little has been said publicly about the direct impact of the FTA on human rights.

But it is important to understand that human rights can sometimes operate selectively in international economic policy.

Sometimes they are foregrounded.

Sometimes they are not.

A useful comparison is **Sri Lanka**.

Sri Lanka has a strong economic relationship with the European Union through the Generalised Scheme of Preferences.

A very large proportion of Sri Lankan exports to the EU benefit from that framework, making it extremely important to the country's economic recovery.

But access is conditional.

Because the EU possesses significant economic leverage, it has used trade preferences to apply pressure on human-rights issues.

That has included concerns about reforming Sri Lanka's **Prevention of Terrorism Act**, which has been widely criticised for abusive application.

The EU has also raised questions about the decriminalisation of LGBTQIA+ relationships and broader governance and rights issues.

So in Sri Lanka's case, we can clearly see trade policy being connected to human-rights conditionality.

Dr Indira Bhotia

The question is whether similar dynamics could emerge in the India relationship.

One issue many people will naturally think about is **Kashmir**.

I do not want to go deeply into the dispute itself, but European and other Western governments have repeatedly expressed concern about developments in Kashmir.

So one can reasonably ask what discussions may have taken place between India and the EU on that subject.

There may be diplomatic understandings that are not yet public.

It will be interesting to see whether more information emerges over time.

Dr Indira Bhotia

There is also an important connection between **trade, migration and human rights**.

Migration has become one of the most politically sensitive issues in Europe.

The EU is facing major challenges at its external borders.

There have also been serious allegations of human-rights violations involving border management and institutions supported by the European Union.

At the same time, the rise of populism and anti-immigration politics has made migration a central political concern across Europe.

That has increasingly shaped the EU's external relations.

The European Union has therefore used trade and economic incentives to encourage cooperation on migration management.

There is even a logic sometimes described as "**more for more, less for less.**"

Countries that cooperate more effectively with the EU on migration management may receive or retain greater economic benefits.

Countries that do not cooperate may risk losing advantages.

Dr Indira Bhotia

That matters particularly for countries such as **Bangladesh and Pakistan**.

Both are important countries of origin for migration to Europe, and remittances from citizens working abroad are crucial to their economies.

But forced returns of migrants can also be politically sensitive domestically.

So migration cooperation becomes part of a wider negotiation.

The EU has tried to create a more positive side to that relationship through **Talent Partnerships**.

These programmes seek to create legal, regulated migration pathways for skilled workers in sectors where Europe faces shortages, such as healthcare and information technology.

The idea is to match European labour-market needs with skilled workers from partner countries while encouraging safer, regulated migration.

But there are legitimate criticisms that these programmes remain quite selective or boutique in scale.

Tapas Kanti Baul

Let me bring us to the regional implications.

If the India–EU FTA proceeds, it is bound to affect other South Asian countries.

Immediately after the deal was announced, there was concern in Bangladesh about whether preferential Indian access to the European market might affect Bangladeshi exports.

Pakistan and Nepal also have obvious interests.

How do you see those effects?

Dr Indira Bhotia

India already has significant influence on its neighbours, not only economically but legally.

Indian jurisprudence has long influenced neighbouring legal systems, including Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan.

One example is the development of public-interest litigation.

So one aspect of the FTA that may eventually matter is **dispute settlement**.

Trade agreements inevitably produce legal disputes.

Indian courts have historically been innovative and relatively fluid in developing jurisprudence.

Decisions arising from trade disputes may therefore influence legal thinking across the region as well.

Dr Indira Bhotia

There is also an interesting wider circulation of jurisprudence.

We often think about regional human-rights systems—the European, Inter-American and African systems—as operating largely within their own regions.

But that is not really true.

Indian courts, for example, have referred to decisions from the European Court of Human Rights.

So there is already transregional legal influence.

A deeper EU–India relationship may strengthen those exchanges.

Dr Indira Bhotia

But if we look more concretely at trade, **Pakistan** has reason for concern.

India and Pakistan compete in some of the same export sectors, particularly textiles and leather.

Pakistan already benefits from preferential access to the EU through the Generalised Scheme of Preferences.

But if India receives significantly improved access under the FTA, Pakistan may lose part of its competitive advantage.

From Pakistan’s perspective, this is not merely geopolitics.

It is about market share, jobs, exports and investment.

Dr Indira Bhotia

Bangladesh faces a similar challenge.

It is one of the smaller South Asian economies compared with India, but it is extremely significant in labour-intensive manufacturing, particularly garments.

The effects of the India–EU FTA on Bangladesh will therefore be indirect but potentially important.

European importers may increasingly compare Indian and Bangladeshi suppliers across price, regulatory compliance, labour standards and supply-chain security.

Bangladesh has long benefited from low-cost labour.

But that also makes labour rights extremely important.

European trade policy increasingly takes questions such as workplace safety, freedom of association and labour rights into account.

The Rana Plaza disaster was a turning point in this regard.

Since then, European buyers and institutions have paid far greater attention to sourcing conditions.

So the competitive landscape is already changing.

We can see that in ordinary European retail markets.

Where shops once relied very heavily on Bangladeshi garments, there is now greater diversification into products from India, Vietnam and elsewhere.

Tapas Kanti Baul

And that raises the question of whether India will eventually face the same pressure on labour standards and human-rights compliance as other major suppliers.

Dr Indira Bhotia

Exactly.

Dr Indira Bhotia

There is also **China**.

From Beijing's perspective, this agreement is likely to be viewed as part of a broader Western strategy to reduce dependence on China and strengthen India as an alternative economic and strategic partner.

And I do not think that interpretation is entirely wrong.

From China's perspective, the agreement is therefore not just about trade.

It is about long-term strategic alignment.

Tapas Kanti Baul

So the effects radiate well beyond India and Europe.

They affect Pakistan's export competitiveness, Bangladesh's garment sector, regional legal developments, migration policy and China's understanding of Europe's strategic intentions.

Dr Indira Bhotia

Yes, absolutely.

Tapas Kanti Baul

That brings us to the end of today's programme.

Dr Bhotia, thank you for guiding us through a moment in which a historic India–EU Free Trade Agreement and a rapid reset in India–US economic relations are together reshaping the map of trade, energy, migration and rights in an increasingly multipolar world.

For our listeners in Europe, South Asia and beyond, I hope today’s discussion helps clarify the signals behind tariffs, energy sourcing, supply-chain shifts, mobility and the human-rights consequences that accompany them.

The central message is perhaps that this is not merely a trade deal.

It is part of a much larger transformation in the relationship between **Europe, India and South Asia**—one that links markets to security, technology, migration, law and democratic values.

Dr Bhotia, thank you very much for joining us.

Dr Indira Bhotia

Thank you.

Tapas Kanti Baul

And to our listeners, thank you for joining the SADF Podcast.

For more analysis on South Asia and its relationship with Europe, follow the South Asia Democratic Forum and visit our website for further episodes and analysis.

I am Tapas Kanti Baul.

Thank you for listening, and see you next time.