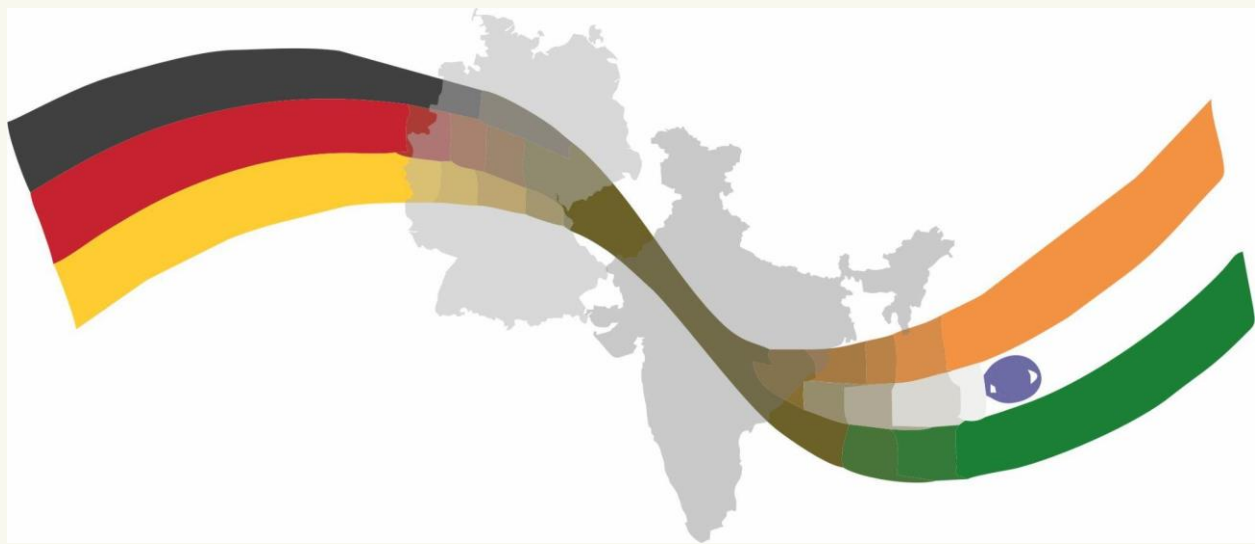


Rejuvenating Rivers: Deepening Indo-German Cooperation

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The year 2024 has been a busy year for India's diplomatic engagements. Amidst a host of significant developments, one that got relatively lesser attention is the renewed bilateral partnership between India and Germany that was cemented during the 7th India-Germany Intergovernmental Consultations (IGC) held in New Delhi in October. This has significant implications for India's climate and water security goals. The IGC led to a joint statement wherein both the nations announced a robust collaborative roadmap and reiterated the importance of Indo-German Green and Sustainable Development Partnership (GSDP) — where both water and climate feature as an important component. What does it mean for advancing India's water security paradigm and how does this locate in the broader context of the India-EU partnership?



Water and 'Diplomacy': The contours of India and the EU Partnerships

India and EU already share a formal partnership with a strategic vision to advance multilateral engagement on environmental protection, climate change and sustainable development. From 2000 onwards, both the EU and India deployed significant diplomatic and financial capital to advance these objectives especially on matters related to water management. The most notable being the India-EU Water Partnership (IEWP) in 2016 and India-EU Strategic Partnership: A Roadmap to 2025. The latter was endorsed during the 15th India-European Union Summit in 2020. Both of these engagements have water as a focus and priority area respectively. To further bolster the cooperation on water between the two regions, India-EU Strategic Partnership 2020 calls for establishing a Joint Working Group on Water and the EU-India Water Forum and commit to strengthening and continuing support for IEWP. It is interesting to note that IEWP is co-financed by the EU and the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) — [and is 'implemented and coordinated by GIZ India in conjunction with the BMZ funded Indo-German](#)

[Technical Cooperation project ‘Support to Ganga Rejuvenation’](#) highlighting the strategic role of Germany in the partnership.

The Bottleneck

One of the core premises on which such IEWP is founded (other being the technological aspects) is the EU's successful demonstration of building a regional network, institutions, and governance mechanism for the management of its river basins in the region. For instance, the EU's experience of implementing the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD) based on the principle of integrated river basin management (IRBM) is often considered, and rightly so, as an exemplary case of river basin management (RBM) and transboundary water cooperation. However, adoption of European practice of water management policies and frameworks are far from an easy path for India without taking cognizance of its own unique contexts.

The India-EU cooperation on water, although serves as a strategic entry point for knowledge exchange on a broad range of issues, this does not necessarily translate into India aligning its view on water governance priorities through the lens of the European Union. It must be recognised that the EU is not a monolithic block. The member states of the EU display a widely different political and social configuration and domestic political realities - all of which have an impact on the water management process and pathways. Thus, EU's engagement on transboundary water management from the distant view of international politics obscures the contribution of domestic politics in international water cooperation that transpired in the EU member states. Second, the India-EU cooperation has mainly been skewed towards technology transfer and infrastructure development and less on the legislative, policy, and institutional processes. This misses the context specificity, institutional history, and national political process of cooperation and consensus building championed by the EU member states that contributed to the regional water policies and legal framework. As has been argued by the former Executive Secretary of the International Commission for the Protection of the Rhine (ICPR), rules and principles that are negotiated at the international level have ‘general content’ and the riparian countries need to translate those into more specific rules for their precise implications (Goppel 1991). Domestic legislation and political maneuvering by the member nations thus becomes one of the enabling factors for various river basin management in Europe.

Rescaling from International to National: How Indo-German Cooperation can provide insights?

In recognition of the critical role of the national and subnational politics and policies of the EU member states and how they have been instrumental in shaping the management of Europe's river systems a potential India-Germany bilateral engagement — characterized by more sub-national engagements and knowledge exchange on building policy ecosystems and institutions serve as a good entry point in strengthening India's own water management practice.

The case in point is Germany — since the water management practices for both the nations have significantly been influenced by their federal structure marked by contestation among sub-national territorial units (Länders for Germany and Indian States) as well as the federal and the sub-national political

or administrative units are defining characteristics of water management. For instance, although, European RBM practices are widely acknowledged for their transformative impact on the regional and national water governance, Germany, due to its federal polity, experienced its own share of challenges in developing consensus to holistically manage its river basins – both in formulating the domestic water policies and subsequently during the implementation of the EU WFD. On a similar note, India, too, has been struggling to implement a River Basin Management framework for its own river basins—the River Boards Act of 1956 in India is in disuse and the River Basin Management Bill of 2018 is yet to see the light of the day.

States as ‘enabler’ of international cooperation

The recent India focus paper titled [Focus on India](#) adopted by the German cabinet further bolsters the rationale for Indo-German partnership on the intersection of water management and federalism with a potential to reinforce the existing IEWP in three interconnected ways. First, Germany is of the view that India is an ‘indispensable partner for Germany’ for cooperation related to environmental protection and climate action. Second, in terms of strategic goals, Germany acknowledges the critical importance of collaborating with India at the subnational scale as well as on matters related to legislative and parliamentary affairs. This is well expressed in Germany’s commitment to advance an alliance between German and Indian states as well as step up exchange programmes between parliamentarians of the two nations. There are already notable instances of this—Bavaria and the Indian State of Karnataka in 2007 and Baden-Württemberg with Maharashtra in 2015 entered into formal cooperation on a wide range of political, economical and environmental matters. Third, Indo-German bilateral relationships are meant to complement and strengthen the existing India-EU partnership, since Germany views its relationship with India as a continuation, and in consistency with the [‘European Union’s common policy on India’](#)

These recent developments signal a renewed impetus in Indo-German cooperation, with both countries looking to deepen their cooperation in various areas, water management being one such area. Building on these strategic partnerships between the subnational entities, the path to scale them to a national level will have its own challenges in India, given the vastly different contexts and hydroclimatic conditions even between Indian states. But the start looks promising and the display of intent by both parties is a testament to the deepening ties between the two countries. It will bode well for policymakers and researchers to follow this bilateral partnership closely, particularly in the arena of water and environmental management.

