

Singh, Gurjit

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Kontakt/Contact

ZBW – Leibniz-Informationszentrum Wirtschaft/Leibniz Information Centre for Economics
Düsternbrooker Weg 120
24105 Kiel (Germany)
E-Mail: [rights\[at\]zbw.eu](mailto:rights[at]zbw.eu)
<https://www.zbw.eu/>

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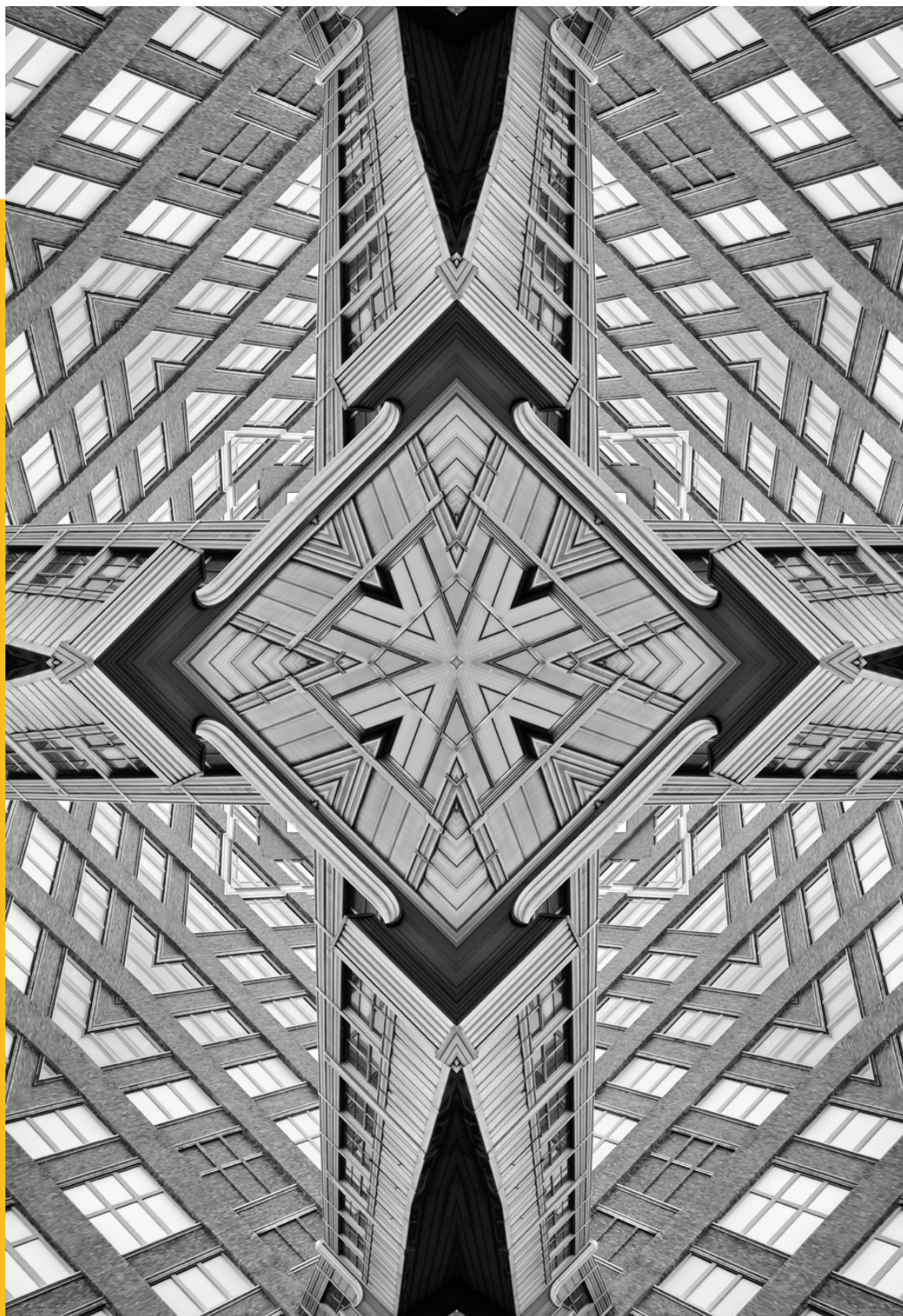
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The Role of Perceptions in India-Germany Relations

Gurjit Singh

Abstract

India and Germany, on their own, are important countries in their respective regions. Together, they have developed and diversified their partnership since the end of the Cold War. Yet, popular perceptions have historically failed to match what the governments are doing. This paper argues for better perception-building between the two countries, given its proven role in building international relations, especially for countries like Germany where civil society plays a big role. The paper traces the roots of perception-building between India and Germany, and offers recommendations for creating perceptions according to the requirements of a growing strategic partnership in a multipolar world.

The battle of perceptions is an important dynamic in the conduct of international relations, as perceptions are often regarded as key determinants of policy.¹ International relations are thus often structured on the basis of commonality of goals, a mutual assessment of the power of each player, and the status assigned by each actor to the other. These tend to foster a picture of the other actor which, if persistently emphasised, can generate lasting images among decision-makers, the public, analysts, and the private sector. Different segments within a State would react with nuanced differences to such persistent images and use them to generate reactions and take decisions relative to the State concerned.

Much of these perceptions emanate from the geostrategic location and affiliation of the States concerned. History and culture contribute to it and progress in economic and business areas has its own dynamic. A country's political and economic openness and the opportunities it affords, contribute meaningfully to the development of perceptions. Developments in demographic dividends, new technologies, and sporting prowess also give it added appeal if the perception is otherwise positive.

India and Germany offer a useful case study of the role of perceptions in international relations. In early May 2022, Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Berlin for the sixth Indo-German Inter-Governmental Consultations (IGC).² The visit was significant for its timing—coming as it was amidst the shock of the Ukraine crisis—³ and gave substantial results, too. After all, the bilateral relationship appeared to have plateaued towards the end of the term of German Chancellor Angela Merkel. A new coalition, led by the Social Democrats and including the Greens and the Free Democrats, was formed in Germany in December 2021. The IGC, first scheduled in 2021, was quietly postponed until the new government was in place. Meanwhile, the Ukraine crisis besieged Europe, and Germany in particular.

In the public's eyes, Modi's IGC visit was about adjusting to the Ukraine crisis and whether Germany would try to persuade India to follow its line. The two had business beyond Ukraine, however. The IGC was important strategically and economically. Germany was experiencing the economic fallout of the pandemic, and imposing sanctions on Russia would cause it further strain. As it seeks new markets for trade and investment, it looks to India, with its massive market size, as a relevant partner.

Yet, the congruence between the new German Chancellor, Olaf Scholz, and Modi, was often not matched by public perception. During the IGC, Western media's focus was the Ukraine crisis: how India responded to it, and its affinity to Russia which limited its democratic credentials. The German media did not differ. Meanwhile, the Indian media waited to see German reactions in the current context, especially at the level of government.

The important perception today is the close engagement between India and Germany.⁴ The regularity with which summits have been held in the Merkel years is a manifestation of this perception. The closer interaction saw deeper contacts, meetings, and exchanges as India and Germany re-engaged in the 21st century. Both countries showed effective use of the strategic space available to connect and diversify their relationship, and overcome certain misperceptions of the past.

“In international relations, perceptions are often regarded as key determinants of policy.”

Perceptions and Misperceptions in the History of India-Germany Relations

Pre-1947

New Delhi's perceptions of Berlin, and vice versa, were often conditioned by other priorities. The Germans were somewhat fascinated by Indology, conditioned by their interaction with the United Kingdom. The political and strategic appreciation was through London, as Germany saw India as a colony of their European rival. The economic interaction also had colonial roots as it was Britain which brought in Siemens (1922) to lay the telegraph lines and allowed Bayer (1896) and Bosch (1922) to join the industrial expansion in India.

Similarly, for India, Germany was the slightly chaotic polity which had often challenged the British in Europe and was thus unfriendly due to circumstances. The attraction of Netaji Subash Chandra Bose towards the Germans in the Second World War was short-lived. Jawaharlal Nehru and other Indian nationalist leaders were more apprehensive of fascism.

Thus, prior to India's Independence, both India and Germany were tied to the perceptions of the colonial era. In the post-war era, reconstruction initially consumed the attention of the two countries. Moreover, while the Federal Republic of Germany remained firmly in the Western camp, India was a leader of the non-aligned movement. It was the end of the Cold War that allowed both to engage each other more meaningfully.

Perhaps among the most significant reflections of how Indo-German engagement is perceived, is that German cultural institutes in India are called 'Max Mueller *Bhavans* (buildings)'—a tribute to Max Mueller who was a known Indologist. A professor of Literature at Oxford since 1868, he was a leading figure in Indian studies in the late 19th century. As the independence movement was consolidating itself, Indian nationalists viewed Max Mueller as an ally—although he had not visited India, he was a political liberal who was not a Briton and yet wrote in English.⁵ Names such as Christian Lassen,⁶ Franz Bopp,⁷ and Wilhelm von Humboldt⁸ were also associated with the study of ancient India. The universities of Bonn, Berlin, and Tübingen were leaders in Indology at the time.

Ludwig van Beethoven was another German cultural icon who was fascinated with India, in particular, the religious diversity that he had perceived of the civilisation. At the Beethoven Museum in Bonn is kept a diary full of notes on Indian mysticism, and a letter to a loved one where he spoke of visiting India.^a While he never did, he asked his publisher to take his works to India (and North America).⁹

a This author has visited the museum and seen the diary and the letters.

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Similarly, Alexander von Humboldt also had a view of India but never did manage to visit the country. That both Humboldt and Goethe had little interest in India was a loss for the building of a possible modern Indian perception among their group of Weimar Classicists.¹⁰ Meanwhile, Herman Hesse, who is famous for his book *Siddhartha*, was another purveyor of the perceived splendour and mysticism of India. His parents, who were missionaries, had spent time in India.

Before 1947, therefore, the perception of India among German intellectuals was clear: mystical, worth understanding, and a massive market.

The Inter-War Period

Around the time of the First World War, reunified Germany and Indian nationalism saw a modicum of commonality in their fundamental principles. Indian nationalists in Europe and the United States (US) sought more direct action against colonialism, unlike the more conservative leaders of the Indian national movement at home.

The resurgent Foreign Ministry under the new German Reich regarded an engagement with overseas Indian nationalists as a prudent way to irk their rival, i.e., the United Kingdom. The San Francisco-based Hindu Association of the Pacific Coast under Har Dayal formed a Berlin Committee¹¹ in cooperation with the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Under the 'Hindu German Conspiracy',¹² as the British had called it, efforts started in soliciting support from Germany for the Ghadar Party and related movements in the US. In 1915, a German-backed provisional Indian government was set up in Kabul. The movement eventually withered away but contacts between Indian nationalists and Germany had been opened by then.

These efforts were at variance with the large number of Indian troops and those from the Princely States who fought under the British against German troops at many battlefields. During this time, the widely-held perception among Indian elites was that the British Sovereign was to be served and the Germans were the enemy. The Germans made modest efforts to counter this narrative and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was primarily responsible for policy formulation towards India as well as the implementation of such policy. There was little interaction between the top German leadership and Indian nationalists in the First World War.

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That several Indian nationalist leaders were educated in the UK showed that there was a preference for the British view over the German one. The early failure of the Kabul provisional government fostered the view that the Germans were more inclined to tease the British than genuinely support Indian nationalism. Germany also lacked an Asia policy, further shoring up such perceptions.

Similarly, during the Second World War, Subhas Chandra Bose engaged the Germans as an early option. After he escaped to Kabul, he was assisted by German agencies to travel to Europe and meet the German leadership. At this time, history was repeating itself. Netaji (as Bose was known) was no fascist but saw in Germany a key ally against the British. For similar reasons, the German Reich saw an asset in Netaji.¹³ During this time, Netaji was assisted by A.C.N. Nambiar in Germany and they both married into German families, indicating a desire to stay in the country for a longer time.¹⁴

The main interlocutor for Netaji was Foreign Minister Joachim Ribbentrop. They decided to create a fifth column of troops to fight Britain by using surrendered Indian troops, an idea that later led Netaji to create the Indian National Army in Asia. By 1942, nearly 5,000 troops from among POWs in Germany and Italy were part of the Indian Legion which was trained by elite German troops, though their role was never clearly defined.¹⁵ Rudolf Hartog,¹⁶ who wrote a book called *The Springing Tiger* on Netaji and the Legion, was a young interpreter in Hindustani for the Legion. According to his account, the German military brass had no clear idea what to do with the Legion, which disbanded in disarray when Berlin fell.¹⁷ The Free India Centre and Free India Radio continued their broadcasts from Berlin. When Bose landed in Hamburg, India's national anthem was played at the Atlantic Hotel on 11 September 1942—the first time ever in a foreign country.¹⁸

An abiding perception is that Subash Chandra Bose met Adolf Hitler just once and that they had little mutual appreciation, if at all. Being obsessed with the Soviet challenge, Hitler left the Indian option to his Foreign Minister. Despite having family in Germany, Netaji took the option given to him to establish links with the Japanese in Asia and undertook the arduous submarine route with mid-sea changes to reach Japanese-controlled parts of Asia.¹⁹

During both World Wars, India was willing to engage with Germany; Germany responded but not in full measure. The German Foreign Ministry was the lead interlocutor but the aid and assistance were limited. There was no clear strategic role assigned to the Indian partners, as Germany's preoccupation was Europe.

The Cold War Period

Much of the Cold War era coincided with the years that Jawaharlal Nehru was Prime Minister and Konrad Adenauer was Chancellor of Germany. During 1947-1964, Nehru was both the Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs. Adenauer became Chancellor in 1949 and remained so till 1963. He was also the Foreign Minister till 1955. The two countries established diplomatic relations in 1951, among the earliest for the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), which needed the concurrence of the Allied powers to do so. Both sides chose their early Ambassadors with care. Subimal Dutt and A.C.N. Nambiar, an old German hand, came from India to Bonn and Ernst Wilhelm Meyer was resurrected from the academia to be the envoy to New Delhi.

Nehru visited Bonn for the first time in 1956 on a well-prepared visit, following the successful Bulganin-Khrushchev visit to India in 1955 when industrial support was garnered from the Soviet Union. He also did so in 1960. India sought similar support from the FRG. Support for the Rourkela steel plant, the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in Chennai, and the establishment of the Max Mueller Bhavans followed. Germany became an important industrial and academic partner as well as a part of the Aid India Consortium, allowing India to diversify from its UK-US-centred collaboration.

During the Cold War period, Germany was content to support India in exchange for India's acceptance of the Hallstein Doctrine²⁰ wherein New Delhi was to freeze its relationship with the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in order to facilitate German development assistance. India seemed to have accepted the Hallstein Doctrine for pragmatic reasons even though its relationship with the Soviet Union was at a high. Such a pragmatic approach was welcome and indeed perceived so. In a way, this burnished India's non-aligned nature in German eyes.

India and Germany had differing perceptions about each other and their respective foreign policies. Adenauer was suspicious of the Soviet Union and felt post-war Germany and France could fall prey to Soviet aggression. Nehru did not share these apprehensions and felt there were limits to Soviet power and ambition so long as Eastern Europe was left untouched. The 1956 Hungarian problem^b saw India and Germany view things differently. While Bonn felt that it reinforced their fears of the Soviet Union, New Delhi maintained that if East Europe was left alone and an attempt to wean it away from the Soviet Union was not made, no calamity would ensue. It was evident that Germany had a European view of the Soviet Union, while India had a wider view.

^b The Russian invasion of Hungary in 1956 was like a Ukraine 2022 moment.

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At the same time, the success of the Bandung Afro-Asian Conference in 1955, and later the Non-Aligned Movement summit in 1961 led Adenauer to seek Indian support for German reunification amongst developing countries. India saw that as a fulsome part of the Cold War dynamics and did not believe that the non-aligned movement had a role or needed to support the idea unless all sides were in agreement. The FRG did not appreciate non-alignment so much but did not hesitate to seek its support either, where necessary.²¹

The post Adenauer-Nehru period saw Indo-German relations go into hibernation. This was also the period when India was engaged in internal consolidation after Nehru and Shastri and the wars with China and Pakistan in 1962 and 1965. East Germany recognised Bangladesh early and India established diplomatic relations with it in 1972.

In the mid-1960s, Indian domestic economic woes, the drought, devaluation and the industrial slowdown diminished the interest of German industry whose perceptions were always short-term. The Indo-German Chamber of Commerce was opened in 1959 but it was never a leader of thought, but an aggregator of perceptions of German industry in India. The socialist policies of Indira Gandhi turned off the German medium-sized *Mittlestand*,^c leading to a trickle of economic engagement.²²

By 1971, India had signed the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and the FRG mistakenly perceived India as a lost cause. During the 1971 Bangladesh crisis, the German attitude was quite similar to that of other Western countries. This was clear when during the Indo-Pakistan conflict (1965),²³ they provided arms to Pakistan. In 1971 the Western nations tried to indulge Pakistan while supporting human rights in Bangladesh. This dichotomy was not well understood in India. Between the gap in German strategic thinking and morality and its perceptions that India was in the Soviet camp, the Indo-German relationship certainly did not look promising. There was a view that Nehru's refusal to criticise the construction of the Berlin Wall played a role in subsequent events after Adenauer.²⁴ Indira Gandhi also saw West Germany as being pro-Pakistan in 1965 and 1971.²⁵

When Chancellor Helmut Schmidt came to power in 1974, he quickly tried to follow the US lead on the opening to China. Schmidt saw the promise of China's growth and showed little interest in India. Moreover, he was well-connected to the US government and his strategic perspective was more out of Washington

c Commonly used to refer to a group of family-owned business enterprises.

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than Bonn. His long tenure from 1974 to 1982 contributed to the neglect of the relationship with India for nearly a decade. Schmidt created the impression in Germany during his tenure that for Berlin, 'Asia' essentially meant 'China'.

Another perception that dogged the Indo-German relationship was the poor export controls on nuclear materials which allowed Pakistan to obtain them from Europe including Germany. India, therefore, saw Germany as being lax in approach while taut in attitude. Germany was seen as 'even-handed' in its approach to Pakistan and India's problems with the latter on cross-border terrorism.

Changed Perceptions after German Reunification

After an initial reluctance, then Chancellor Helmut Kohl eventually listened to many of his ministers who had visited India in the latter part of the 1980s. He made a successful state visit in 1986 and Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi reciprocated in 1988. A new perception was building.

After an election marred by the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, India implemented economic reforms. In 1991, Narasimha Rao visited Bonn and launched the Festival of India. Rao and Kohl announced the establishment of an Indo-German Consultative Group, which had business, academic, and Track-II political members and was a timely effort to create a new paradigm of meaningful engagement in the post-Cold War era.

Thus, while the Cold War ended in Europe and Germany was reunited, for India it was a period of intense readjustment both economically and internationally. India opened up to Central Asia, Israel, and the West in economic terms. Former President of the European Parliament, Hans-Gert Pöttering, believed that while Germany became enmeshed in its own reunification and the eastward enlargement of the European Union, India was still perceived as maintaining close ties with the new Russia as well as economically more engaged with Western Europe. The Indian and German parliamentary democracies, he averred, were instrumental in fostering new perceptions regarding diversity into unity and enabled various plural parties and opinions to co-exist.²⁶

The German Parliament set up a German India Parliamentary Friendship group in 1971, which has a committed membership who frequently visit India and cities beyond New Delhi. They are an important factor in realigning perceptions of India in Germany.²⁷

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When Chancellor Angela Merkel took over the reins in Berlin in 2005, there was a new appreciation of India. This stemmed from a reordering of the perception that India was pro-Soviet. There was no more Soviet Union, and Germany, in many ways, was closer to Russia than India was. Moreover, Germany lacked an Asia policy which covered the region together,²⁸ but then led to a new perception of liberalising India as a land of economic opportunities. German courses were introduced into India more vigorously, more scholarships were awarded, and the numbers of Indian students went up from 4,000 in 2003 to 16,000 in 2018. More academic exchanges in non-Indology sectors emerged. The IITs were a real flavour and the IIT Indore's engagement with nine Technical Universities in Germany²⁹ set the pace for five additional IITs to link up. The number of Alexander von Humboldt Fellows from India rose sharply.³⁰ The Indo-German Environmental Partnership Programme (IGEP)³¹ and the Indo-German Education Partnership³² came into full flow.

These were guided by the bi-annual summit with several ministers participating that India and Germany introduced in 2011 in Merkel's time. This Inter-Governmental Consultations (IGC)³³ stood the relationship in good stead and now ministries vie to get new ideas into the IGC. The Indo-German Start Up exchange programme (GINSEP)³⁴ also emanated from an Embassy-led initiative to link Indian and German start-ups and upon its success, it was adopted at the IGC.

On the political side, bilateral relations between Angela Merkel and PM Manmohan Singh were highly evaluated and perceived, not only at the bilateral level but also through the G20. Merkel's respect for PM Singh saw close G20 consultations between India and Germany after the 2008 financial crisis.³⁵

Contemporary Paradigm

In 2014 when the National Democratic Alliance came to power in India with a clear majority, Germany saw a reaffirmation of its faith in parliamentary democracy in the country.³⁶ Modi sought an early meeting with Merkel in July 2014 by stopping over in Berlin instead of the usual halt at Frankfurt. The meeting did not happen, however,³⁷ but both sides remained determined to engage each other.

In 2015, as in 2017 and 2022, there were two summit meetings. The first one took place when Modi visited Hannover for the world's largest trade fair—the Hannover Messe—as a 'partner country' and launched the 'Make in India' campaign, which was widely appreciated in Germany.³⁸ The changed German approach towards India was evident in the second summit of the year when

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Merkel, accompanied by several ministers, visited India in October 2015 for the IGC. The focus was on the new anticipated dynamism in India.³⁹ New programmes like Make in India, Skill India, Digital India, and Smart Cities Mission were attractive to German institutions. The surge in Indian growth to 7.5 percent led to positive assessments for future growth. The burgeoning middle-class consumer base and a renewed interest among German companies and academia in non-Indology sectors was a positive momentum. Parliamentary exchanges became more frequent and German political foundations increased their interactions with Indian entities and tried to create new areas of collaboration and exchanges.

Merkel's October 2015 visit took place at a time when the German public was concerned about the ethics of German business in the wake of the scandal over Volkswagen diesel emissions.^d The surge of refugees into Germany had also somewhat dented Germany's image in parts of Europe and Berlin's leadership of Europe was apparently under a shadow.

Between 2013 and 2018, German FDI in India more than doubled and crossed US\$1 billion.⁴⁰ The early German commitment to Skill India, Digital India, the Smart Cities programme, as well as *Namami Gange* (National Mission for Clean Ganga) were welcomed by New Delhi, as was the German support of €1 billion to the country's solar energy programmes. In 2017 alone, Germany and India held two crucial meetings: in May, PM Modi visited Berlin for the IGC⁴¹ and in July, Hamburg for the G20 Summit.⁴² The various summits were supported by a number of ministerial interactions on various issues such as smart cities, defence, railways, science and technology, education and skills, and climate change. The two sides signed MOUs and Joint declarations of Intent (JDI) in many domains.

d The German giant automaker, Volkswagen, was found to have been cheating on its emissions measurements. See: <https://www.caranddriver.com/news/a15339250/everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-vw-diesel-emissions-scandal/>.

Key Builders of Healthy India-Germany Perceptions

Deutsch-Indische Gesellschaft (DIG)

The Indo-German Society or Deutsch-Indische Gesellschaft (DIG), established in 1953⁴³ and spread over 33 affiliates, has helped build positive perceptions of India in Germany. Most of the German youth involved with DIG are university researchers essentially looking at older India. Their views of India often clash with modern perceptions of the country and its people. The DIGs tend to drift on their own rather than bridge India and Germany to enhance understanding. New leadership of the DIG has been difficult to find. Efforts to engage with them, particularly for their annual events were unsuccessful as, like many German institutions, they remain apprehensive of deeper engagement with the Embassy and consulates.⁴⁴

The DIG fossilised itself, expansion remained limited since Indian-centric studies also diminished, reducing their German base. Most DIGs are still run by old veterans and newer members are from the Indian diaspora.

Indo-German Consultative Committee

Another group which performed well, at least for a time, was the Indo-German Consultative Committee established in 2005.⁴⁵ It had a track 1.5 approach, organising meetings between Indian and German counterparts from various fields, with the support of MEA and the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs.^e However, the mandate of the Consultative Group has not been renewed since 2015.⁴⁶ Just as Germany let the high-technology partnership group⁴⁷ lapse into dormancy, the consultative group also went silent. It would do well for building public perception of India in Germany if this group becomes functional, as India does not have the same kind of universal outreach to engage with different civil society groups.

In 2019 it was partly replaced by the Indo-German 1.5 Track Dialogue launched in the context of the intergovernmental consultations in Delhi that year. The exchange of think tanks and diplomatic officials was envisioned to become a pillar of bilateral relations. However, the dialogue lacked the diversity of the IGCC.

^e The journalist Theo Sommers was associated with the committee for many years. He once told this author that the IGCC was delighted when in 2013, the joint communique of the IGC recognised the work of the IGCC.

Key Builders of Healthy India-Germany Perceptions

German-India Round Tables (GIRT)

To harness the potential of business leaders in serving as ‘perception builders’ for India and Germany, efforts were made to enlarge the German-India Round Tables (GIRT) in 2016.⁴⁸ These were organised in 21 German regions and small towns and brought together members of the academia, local industry, and banks. These were modest efforts, but rivalled the DIG in their diversity and vigour. Many of them focused on the Mittlestand—the technology champions of Germany. Each roundtable had its own set of adherents, which allowed for the civil society approach. During 2016-17, efforts were made to encourage more GIRTs to emerge, which they did—and to engage frequently with others.

Not all of them are agreeable to government representation, and often prefer to do their programmes on their own. In 2021, for instance, three GIRTs in central Germany conducted a programme on looking at new business opportunities with India, where contrary views were expressed, questions answered, and perspectives gained.^f

Indian Council of Cultural Relations

India, through the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR), has supported nearly 30 Chairs in Indology and Indian studies in Germany. ICCR had five Rotating/Short-Term Chairs in various universities and a Long-Term Heinrich Zimmer Chair of Indian Philosophy and Intellectual History at the Ruprecht Karl’s University of Heidelberg. A Long-Term Chair of Corporate Responsibility and Governance at HHL Leipzig was established in 2011.

In the last few years, Germany’s internal systems reduced support while the current Indian model is a cost-sharing one due to which the number of Chairs in Germany⁴⁹ has drastically declined. This is a result of the altered priorities for funding of Chairs on both sides, and a lack of consensus among the professors to hold the Chairs. A model can be found in a Gundert chair in Malayalam studies sponsored by Kerala’s Thunchath Ezhuthachan Malayalam University at the Eberhard Karl’s University of Tübingen, established in 2015.⁵⁰

^f This author, as a former Ambassador to Germany, and now a commentator, was invited to the roundtable.

Indian Perceptions of Germany

India perceives Germany as a democratic and economic bulwark, its closest friend in Europe, and a leader of the continent. However, New Delhi feels that Germany is unable to deliver everything out of Brussels. Merkel's unequivocal support for India's Nuclear Suppliers Group waiver saw Germany speak to their recalcitrant friends with some effect. However, Berlin was unable to budge the Brussels bureaucracy to resume stalled negotiations of the India-EU Broad-based Trade and Investment Agreement (BTIA).

Germany is India's largest trading partner in Europe and a significant investor as well as recipient of FDI by Indian companies. India had therefore hoped that Germany would have been more persuasive with other EU member states rather than let the impasse continue. Merkel's last presidency of the EU in late 2020 used her diplomatic clout in trying for a China Summit with EU27 in Leipzig and a Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI). However, there was no similar effort by her to promote such with India. Instead, Portugal in May 2021 led an India+EU 27 Leaders' meeting, and the breakthrough in restarting negotiations on FTA and an investment treaty in the same year came from Brussels,⁵¹ and not Berlin. The perception is that the Merkel-SPD coalition was influenced by the German industry which saw better prospects in China.⁵²

It must nevertheless be noted that German Members of the European Parliament (MEP) have tended to adopt a softer stance towards issues like Jammu and Kashmir when they were raised in the European Parliament by mainly UK MEPs. The MEPs are also those who held up the hasty CAI with China. Yet India has no cohesive plan to deal with the European Parliament and influence German MEPs.

Seeking *Echt lnder* (the “true Indian”)

Despite direct India-Germany links over 70 years, the news coverage seen by both sides is largely US- or UK-centred.⁵³ A primary reason is that there is rarely any Indian journalist in Germany and only a few Germans in India are accredited as journalists. Some German news organisations cover India from Bangkok or Singapore, which are more convenient in terms of logistics. Perception-building through media, therefore, is a weak link.

Prevailing Mutual Perceptions

Of the coverage of India that emerges, the common themes continue to pander to stereotypes of the country and its people: a land of exotic practices such as Yoga and Ayurveda, and home to large destitute populations. They also give attention to issues of women's safety, and attacks on Christian churches.

According to a study by Goethe Institute in 2018,⁵⁴ the coverage about India that year “was dominated by stories about sexual violence, celebrities, animals and odd incidents.” The study analysed 400 articles published in *Spiegel Online*, *Deutsche Welle*, *Bild.de*, and *Express Online*.

More than media coverage, however, direct people-to-people contacts are proven to be important in improving outsiders' perceptions of a nation. These engagements include student exchanges and tourism. In 2020, Germany accounted for 725,600 tourists in India, making up the biggest share of tourists from the European Union (EU), along with France.⁵⁵ The Robert Bosch Stiftung (Foundation) ran a successful program to exchange media people between their home country, Germany, and India between 2015-2019.⁵⁶ ‘Media Ambassadors India–Germany’ aimed at attracting journalists with an interest in international understanding between the two countries.⁸

It is a challenge to obtain an overview⁵⁷ of the full achievements that mark India's rise to a global role, as well as Germany's role in Europe and beyond. Similarly, both societies, cultures and politics cannot be understood through Twitter posts or media headlines alone. A more composite and diverse reporting can help increase information, knowledge and mutual understanding.

The Role of Business

Among the most potent builders of perceptions are the business exchanges, trade and cross-investments. Germany has an image of being a reliable and steadfast supplier of high technology over recent years. It is periodically attracted by the Indian growth story and willing to be involved in the socioeconomic areas more fully. Its 2016 decision to set up the ‘Strategic Financing Initiative’,⁵⁸ a fund to match financing from East Asian countries such as Japan and Korea, was aimed at entering India in the infrastructure area and doing bigger projects. However, the decision did not muster adequate attention among Indian policymakers, reflecting a perception problem: India saw the decision as more of rhetoric rather than clearly spelt-out plans. The announcement of the fund failed to enthuse India for the High-Speed Railway (HSR) for which it was especially created.

^g During their three months' stay in their host country, Indian and German journalists gathered insights into journalistic theories and practices through skill enhancement courses and job-shadowing.

Prevailing Mutual Perceptions

Another area where Germany is seen well is its investments in India which are about €9 billion, with an employment generation of over 520,000. What is lesser known is that Indian companies have also taken to investment in Germany and invested close to €11 billion in Germany, generating over 23,000 jobs. According to a study by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) in 2018,⁵⁹ more Indian FDI is going into Germany than the other way around. Indian companies in Germany gain access to high-quality technology, build innovation capability, and leverage the country as a gateway to Europe.⁶⁰

For the German *Mittlestand*, a partnership with India focused more on selling to India and meeting companies at trade fairs. The *Mittlestand* became a focus of India's renewed effort to attract German investment. The 'Make in India *Mittlestand*' (MIIM) programme run by the Indian Embassy and several private sector partners was a perception changer.⁶¹ This programme went to smaller German towns and clusters, meeting small city banks, the Sparkasse's, the smaller local chambers, the clusters of industries and local influential newspapers that had rarely encountered an Indian.⁶² The pursuit of the *Mittlestand* enhanced perception benefits, too.

This provided India with a new perception charge to the post-Make in India image boost by creating a direct image makeover at the grassroots. The occasions also saw interaction with local universities, many of whom grasped the GIRT concept and held regular meetings where all kinds of questions were raised and perceptions cleared or at least shared.

Perceptions of Germany

Germany has a benign image in the Indian mind. Whether in the press or among civil society, the image is one of a friendly though slightly distant partner.^h Over the years, however, the image has slowly evolved—and now Indians see Germans beyond the stereotypical picture of being “serious” and “different” people.⁶³

The Germans are credited with being a partner of Indian development without the colonial baggage. Their focus on understanding India and contributing to its wider understanding in Europe over two centuries is acknowledged though the number of visitors from Germany, even among those who understood India, remained limited. Thus, an understanding but distant, friendly country remained the main perception of Germany in India.

^h In 2015, Lufthansa came out with an advertisement featuring a grandfather and his grandson on-board a flight. The elder tells the boy that the Germans are always serious and are “different”. That image would perhaps sum up the image of Germany and its people in the minds of Indians.

Prevailing Mutual Perceptions

Their early investments and establishment of a Chamber of Commerce has been an effective vehicle in promoting business understanding of India in Germany. In the Indian perception, Germans are seen as steadfast business partners with trust and quality as hallmarks. Their decisions are far-reaching but the new initiatives—despite now being well-established—do not seem to be high in Indian perceptions of Germany. These programmes include the New Passage to India, the Strategic Fund, the €1-billion support for solar energy development, and the support to Namami Gange.

The Green and Sustainable Development Partnership announced in early May 2022 is a crucial step forward as it brings an additional €10 billion to the table. Analysts saw this as a defining moment in Indo-German relations.⁶⁴ In many ways, Germany does a lot of work in India; however, it does not get enough credit for its support to Indian development. The German companies and offices for development cooperation are well-established in India as are the offices of influential German foundations that are linked to political parties. They have made forays into media, the academia, and think tanks. However, their impact remains limited. The improvement of the perception of Germany requires that all German institutions in India strive to reach beyond their familiar guest lists.

Journalist Ashok Malik has suggested that an initiative in education by German investment in a new-age Indian educational institution could bring areas beyond science and technology into play.⁶⁵ This could be as much of a game changer as the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in Chennai did in the 1950s.⁶⁶ This could enhance the growing perception of Germany as an education hub where the flow of Indian students has increased in the last few years. Among India's new IITs, the one in Mandi has German support. The IIT Indore has MOUs with several Technical Universities in Germany. The German government has also agreed to approve the setting up of institutions in the humanities.⁶⁷

Building Perceptions in the Shadow of the Ukraine Crisis

The media messaging around the defining moments of the Modi-Scholz summit in Berlin in May told a very different story—one that has two aspects. The first was that India was an unreliable partner for Germany and Europe, despite what the Chancellery was saying. Two weeks before the visit, *Bloomberg* broke the story that India was unlikely to be invited as a guest for the G7 summit in Bavaria in June because of differences over the Ukraine crisis. However, when Scholz spoke to the media after his meeting with Modi, the first thing he said was that Modi would be invited.

The second aspect was that while Germany itself is perturbed by the speed with which Russia is being rusticated from Europe and from multilateral organisations, it is attempting to make up with the United States to see itself as being in line. However, there is an understanding that if Germany and Europe are to develop strategic autonomy in a multipolar world, then partners like India are important—ones who are ready to speak their mind when required. India's and Germany's equations with Russia differ, but they share common ambitions for strategic autonomy. Germany thus stepped up to the plate, made special announcements of large allocations for a green partnership with India,⁶⁸ and showed that it was ready to cooperate with India. However, much of this was lost on the German media, which continuously harped on the divergences over Ukraine, mainly asking if India would condemn Russia.

Yet, the Modi-Scholz meeting of May 2022 was indeed a defining moment in Indo-German relations. Despite the Ukraine crisis, Germany strategically engaged with India, in the process overcoming hiccups within the ruling coalition, Parliament, and in public opinion. Ukraine dominates the German mind, but evidently did not dominate the Chancellery which is in the lead in engaging with India for implementing its Indo-Pacific policy.

Thus, the perception of the new government in Germany is that the Social Democratic Party (SPD) will stick to its stance of engaging India, which it carries forward from its coalitions with the Christian Democratic Union (CDU.) How the Greens will operate, especially as they control the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Economy and Climate, is another task. It is also where perceptions have a role. The Green ministers are not fully aware of India in its contemporary realities. Their agenda is more domestic and their understanding of democracy and values can lead to problems in understanding India. Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock's comments on her visit to Pakistan in June 2022, emphasised this problem.⁶⁹

Building Perceptions in the Shadow of the Ukraine Crisis

The imperative, therefore, is better perception management of India with Germany. The strategic push by the Chancellery needs to be matched by public opinion, which remains divided because of the cacophony regarding Ukraine and the Indian abstentions from United Nations (UN) resolutions condemning Russia. The German Chancellery understands what India stands for. Their task will become more difficult if the perceptions are not better managed. Influencing public opinion is important as some coalition partners respond more to public opinion than strategic analyses by academics.

Now that the COVID-19 pandemic appears to be slowing down, more in-person activity is possible and the lost time can perhaps be made up. Prime Minister Modi's visit to Germany once again for the G7 summit in June 2022 after the Quad Summit in May, emphasised the better congruence despite Ukraine.⁷⁰ India's presence at the highest levels of important Summits is well regarded and needs to be translated into better understanding.

“India's and Germany's equations with Russia differ, but they share common ambitions for strategic autonomy.”

This paper makes four recommendations. First, it needs to be recognised that the business community can be the most potent perception builder between Germany and India. Both governments must exert effort to encourage more German investments into India. This should now become easier since the FTA and Trade and Technology Council are to be established under the India-EU partnership and are no longer being debated. More business exchanges will help, along with delegations, support to the operation of the GIRTs, and the setting up of more effective India business forums in different parts of Germany. At the same time, Indian investors in Germany can be an important asset for this as well.


Second, India's growing green footprint, and its commitment to its Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDC) at Paris and Glasgow is now well-recognised. India is no longer an outlier on trade and climate issues. The projection of India's and Germany's green agenda needs to be heightened. India needs to project this particularly on the trade and climate issues in which it has often been seen as a hurdle.

Third, India should have a dedicated strategy for German media, print, audio-visual and social media. It is unlikely that media will turn around quickly, but elements within could have a better understanding. Such media outreach should go far beyond the "exotic India" image that has historically dominated the media. What is required is to push the trade, climate, and democracy agenda which often gets misread in German media and, consequently, in German popular opinion.

Fourth, a concerted effort needs to be made to reach out to the *landers* (States) of Germany to expand their perception of India. Berlin may be the capital of Germany but it is not its centre. So far, only a few States have relationships with Indian states. Far more needs to be done by exchanges of delegations. The landers are well-funded, with their own strengths in industry, banking, and cultural ties that will help take the bilateral relationship forward. The perception of India in Bavaria and Baden Wurttemberg, for instance, is somewhat better than in the rest of Germany because of their sister-state relationships with Maharashtra and Karnataka. India has three consulates in Germany and needs perceivable results out of these.

Conclusion

German civil society, academia, and think tanks need to approach India with an open mind. Indian media is often accused of being mere “government followers”. In the case of Germany, well-known think tanks, academia and media people have done no better by touting the popular German line that “Russia is evil” and India, by association, is demonised. The German Foundations all have programmes in India, but their ability to engage with contemporary India is sporadic and guided by their set preferences. It would do India well to engage with these organisations, understand their priorities, and give them a better interface to obtain a clearer understanding of India. This needs to be done out of direct government avenues, as they would likely welcome access to decision-makers who they are not able to meet.

The nuance in understanding India among these segments is missing. But there are enough elements in it who have enough interest in India to be engaged. It is where a perception bridge must be built. 

Gurjit Singh is a former Ambassador of India to Germany. He is Chair, CII Task Force on Trilateral Cooperation in Africa.

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20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area,
New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph : +91-11-35332000, Fax : +91-11-35332005
E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org
Website: www.orfonline.org