

Trust Architecture: What the EU–India Model Reveals About the Transatlantic Relationship

From a Presumed Relationship to a Structured Relational Architecture

For decision-makers and 1783 strategic community - non-paper

Scope

This note draws significantly on the analytical framework developed by the European Union Institute for Security Studies in “*Living with friction, Three anchors of the EU–India partnership*” (Anaïs Marin, January 2026), which formalises the concept of structured coexistence despite friction in the EU–India relationship.

The EU-India model is not presented as directly replicable. It serves as a conceptual prototype, enabling the identification of explicit relational mechanisms and, by contrast, revealing the structural shortcomings of the relationship between the European Union and the United States, a relationship that has long been presumed and is now facing the obsolescence of its implicit framework.

The objective of this non-paper is not to propose a new transatlantic architecture. It seeks to clarify why the inherited one is no longer able to absorb ongoing transformations, and why the absence of explicit frameworks has become a strategic risk in itself.

I. Two Contrasting Relational Mechanisms

1. EU–India: a relationship designed ex ante

The European Union–India relationship was explicitly conceived as an object requiring its own conceptual framework:

- divergence assumed as a starting condition, not an anomaly;
- modular and functional cooperation (critical technologies, cybersecurity, maritime security, supply chains);
- operational dissociation of broader geopolitical disagreements;
- trust built through explicit objects and mechanisms, not political presuppositions.

This model rests on a structuring assumption: friction is not an accident to be eliminated, but a condition to be organised.

The relationship was designed from the outset as non-fusionary, allowing for anticipated and controlled management of disagreement.

2. EU–United States: a presumed relationship

By contrast, the transatlantic relationship was never constituted as an autonomous strategic object. It was built on implicit presuppositions:

- community of values,
- durable convergence of interests,
- stability of the U.S. strategic framework.

It was never formalised as a distinct relational mechanism. It rested on an accepted asymmetry of power, stabilised by the Cold War context. This relationship was not poorly designed. It was perfectly designed for a world that no longer exists. As long as the implicit hierarchy remained stable, there was no need to formalise it. The current crisis is therefore neither moral nor axiological. It is a crisis of formalisation, revealed by the unilateral evolution of U.S. doctrines (NSS, NDS), the weaponisation of economic and technological interdependencies, and the progressive transformation of the alliance into a conditional relationship.

II. Synthetic diagnostic , a crisis of formalisation

The tensions currently affecting the EU–US relationship are often interpreted through political, ideological or even emotional lenses: divergence of priorities, erosion of trust, or weakening of shared values. Such readings are misleading.

The transatlantic relationship is not facing a crisis of values. It is facing a crisis of formalisation.

For decades, the relationship functioned without explicit architecture because its underlying conditions were stable. Strategic convergence, power asymmetry and security guarantees formed an implicit equilibrium that did not require articulation. Integration substituted for design. Trust was presumed because it was never tested structurally.

This implicit order no longer holds.

What has changed is not the existence of shared values, but the context in which those values operate. Strategic priorities have shifted. Power asymmetries are no longer neutralised by shared threat perception. Interdependence — once stabilising — has become a potential instrument of leverage. Security commitments, while still present, are increasingly conditional and contextualised.

In this new environment, a relationship built on presumption becomes fragile. Not because one party defects, but because the framework was never designed to absorb divergence. The absence of explicit relational mechanisms now produces three cumulative effects.

First, ambiguity replaces predictability. When roles, boundaries and expectations are implicit, each adjustment by one party is interpreted by the other as unilateralism or disengagement, rather than as structural adaptation.

Second, integration turns into vulnerability. Without articulated limits, systemic interdependence exposes the weaker side to asymmetric shocks - legal, economic, technological or strategic - that cannot be collectively managed because they were never formally negotiated.

Third, disagreement becomes politically costly. In the absence of recognised spaces to structure divergence, any friction risks being interpreted as disloyalty or misalignment, even when it reflects legitimate differences of interest or constraint.

This is the core of the diagnostic. The EU-US relationship has reached a point where implicitness no longer protects stability. It amplifies friction. What once reduced transaction costs now increases political risk. What once signalled trust now obscures responsibility.

The crisis, therefore, is not one of alignment versus opposition. It is one of architecture versus presumption.

Until this diagnostic is acknowledged, any attempt to “fix” the relationship, through dialogue, reassurance or renewed declarations, will address symptoms rather than structure. The issue is not the absence of goodwill, but the absence of a formalised framework capable of making disagreement governable.

III. From systemic relationship to constrained modularity

Historically, the transatlantic relationship was structured as an integrated system: collective defence (NATO), intelligence sharing, technological and financial interdependencies. Recent U.S. doctrinal transformations have progressively converted this systemic architecture into de facto modularity, not chosen by the European Union but imposed through unilateral reconfiguration of the framework:

- increased conditionality of collective security;
- extraterritorial legal reach and export controls;
- national prioritisation and transactional logic.

Modularity is therefore not a deliberate European strategy. It is a constrained degradation of the systemic framework, revealing the absence of formal mechanisms capable of managing this transition without creating vulnerability.

IV. Trust interstices: an analytical principle, not a turnkey solution

The conceptual transposition of the EU–India model does not assume the immediate existence of operational trust interstices. Trust interstices should be understood as:

- intermediate spaces for proof through action;
- limited frameworks allowing the testing of interoperability, sectoral cooperation, and explicit management of divergences;
- diagnostic instruments revealing the capacity, or incapacity, to structure a negotiated modular relationship.

They simultaneously test the willingness of the United States to accept a negotiated relationship and the capacity of the European Union to act as a credible counterpart. Trust interstices are neither a method nor a guarantee. Their current scarcity is the core finding: it reveals deficits in capabilities, leverage and institutional articulation.

Trust interstices are not the solution. They are the reality test of the relationship.

V. Beyond the transatlantic case: partnerships in a fragmented world

Beyond the transatlantic relationship, the EU-India comparison reveals a broader structural lesson about partnerships in a fragmented world. Relationships built on presumption remain stable only as long as the conditions that sustain them do not change. When convergence is assumed rather than articulated, durability depends on external stability, not on the strength of the relationship itself.

The EU-India partnership was constructed without assuming convergence. Divergence was treated as a permanent condition, not a temporary deviation. This forced explicit choices early on: where cooperation was possible, where it was not, and how disagreement would be contained. Stability did not result from alignment, but from articulation.

Seen from this perspective, the EU-India model is not a regional curiosity. It illustrates a more general shift in how partnerships must be designed when power asymmetries fluctuate, interdependence becomes weaponisable, and continuity can no longer be taken for granted.

This insight extends beyond the transatlantic case. It speaks to the European Union's position as a partner in the world. In a context where fragmentation is structural rather than transitional, the credibility of partnerships increasingly depends on the capacity to formalise relationships *ex ante*, rather than relying on inherited convergence or presumed alignment.

What the EU-India case ultimately reveals is not a model to imitate, but a condition for durability in a world where disagreement is no longer an exception, but a permanent feature of international relations.

VI. Structural limits of transposition

The EU-India model operates in a fundamentally different context from the transatlantic relationship. The EU and India approached their partnership as relative equals designing a new architecture from a position of acknowledged divergence. Starting asymmetries were known, accepted and operationalised within a modular framework that neither party had inherited.

By contrast, the EU-US relationship is marked by:

- deep and sedimented interdependencies (defence industrial integration, intelligence sharing, financial systems, technological ecosystems);
- seventy-five years of institutional path dependency, embedding expectations, legal frameworks and operational habits;
- an inherited asymmetry of power, never formally contested during the Cold War and now being reasserted unilaterally rather than renegotiated.

These structural differences do not render the EU-India framework irrelevant. They clarify that its transposition cannot be mechanical. The challenge is not to replicate a model, but to extract the principles that allow a relationship built on presumption to transition toward one built on articulation - while recognising that such a transition will be constrained, contested and structurally complex.

VII. Conclusion

The European Union does not need to invent a new transatlantic relationship.

It must clarify and re-architect a relationship long presumed, now rendered inadequate by structural change. #LongView 🏗️

The EU-India model is not a normative benchmark. It is an analytical prototype revealing what the EU-US relationship currently lacks to absorb friction without sliding into dependency or rupture. #Reset 🔄

Trust interstices are neither wishful thinking nor promises. They are indicators of whether an articulated relationship can exist in a fragmented world. #TrustArchitecture 🏗️

Source

Anaïs Marin, *Living with friction - Three anchors of the EU-India partnership*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, January 2026

This non-paper does not propose a political solution. It establishes the strategic diagnosis without which no durable decision can be taken.