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? India–Belgium Relations Enter a New Strategic Phase Through Defence, Technology, Trade, Clean Energy and Maritime Cooperation

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Recent Developments:

- **Belgian Prime Minister Bart De Wever** visited India from 2–4 **September 2026** at the invitation of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, marking his first visit to India since assuming office in February 2025 and the first visit by a Belgian Prime Minister to India in nearly two decades.
- India and Belgium agreed to broaden bilateral cooperation across **defence, counter-terrorism, trade, investment, semiconductors, critical minerals, renewable energy, maritime security, research and talent mobility**.
- The two countries agreed to **double bilateral trade over the next five years** and launched an **India–Belgium Investment Fast-Track Mechanism** to facilitate investment and resolve business-related bottlenecks.
- The visit produced a **Letter of Intent on Defence Cooperation**, covering military exchanges, training, research, exercises, maritime security and defence-industrial cooperation.
- India and Belgium also agreed to deepen cooperation in **semiconductors**, including greater engagement between Belgium's **imec** research ecosystem and India's semiconductor ecosystem.

Background of India–Belgium Relations:

Political and Diplomatic Relations:

- Belgium was among the early European countries to establish diplomatic relations with independent India in **September 1947**, and the relationship is based on shared commitment to the **rule of law, pluralism and democratic values**.
- The bilateral relationship has traditionally been driven by **trade and investment**, but recent developments indicate a transition towards a broader strategic partnership covering security, technology, energy and connectivity.
- Belgium is particularly important for India because of its location at the heart of the **European Union**, making bilateral engagement relevant to India's wider European strategy.

Institutional Mechanisms:

- The **India–Belgium–Luxembourg Economic Union Joint Commission**, established in 1997, provides an institutional framework for economic cooperation.
- India and Belgium have also developed cooperation through ministerial dialogues, business forums and sector-specific mechanisms covering investment, technology, energy and security.
- An **India–Belgium Business Forum** is being strengthened as a regular platform for promoting commercial partnerships and investment.

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Economic Relations:

Trade and Investment:

- **Trade and investment remain the traditional foundation** of India–Belgium relations, particularly because of strong commercial linkages in diamonds, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, machinery and other industrial sectors.
- Belgium's **Antwerp** is a major international diamond-trading centre, while **Mumbai and Surat** are important nodes in India's diamond-processing and trading ecosystem.
- The European Commission identifies **pearls and precious stones, machinery, optical and medical instruments** among important Belgian exports to India, highlighting the scope for diversification beyond diamonds.
- India and Belgium have now set an objective of **doubling bilateral trade within five years**, indicating an effort to move from traditional commerce towards technology-intensive and strategic sectors.

Diversification of Economic Engagement:

- Emerging areas include **pharmaceuticals, life sciences, advanced manufacturing, defence, aerospace, digital technologies, fintech, renewable energy, critical minerals and semiconductors**.
- The **Investment Fast-Track Mechanism** can reduce administrative barriers and improve predictability for Belgian investors in India.
- India and Belgium also intend to strengthen cooperation between Belgium's **Federal Holding and Investment Company** and India's **National Investment and Infrastructure Fund**, creating opportunities for long-term investment partnerships.

Defence and Security Cooperation:

Defence Cooperation Framework:

- Defence has emerged as a **new strategic pillar** of bilateral relations, moving the partnership beyond its traditional economic focus.
- The **Letter of Intent on Defence Cooperation** provides a framework for regular exchanges, staff talks, education and training, research, exercises and defence-industrial partnerships.
- Cooperation is expected to promote **technology transfer, co-development, co-production and industrial partnerships**, supporting India's objective of greater defence self-reliance.
- Belgium has also decided to appoint a **Defence Attaché in New Delhi**, while India plans to appoint a resident Defence Attaché in Brussels.

Defence Industrial Cooperation:

- Belgian and Indian companies are exploring collaboration in **drones, rockets, ammunition, mine-countermeasure systems, tanks, radar, electro-optical systems and counter-drone technologies**.
- Cooperation between **Exail Belgium and Larsen & Toubro** in autonomous systems for mine-countermeasure vessels is significant for India's maritime security capabilities.
- Other industrial opportunities include **70-mm rocket systems, counter-drone systems, electro-optical equipment for armoured platforms, air-defence software and marine technologies**.
- Such cooperation can strengthen India's **domestic defence manufacturing ecosystem**, while providing Belgian companies access to India's industrial capacity and large defence market.

Counter-Terrorism and Intelligence Cooperation:

Security Cooperation:

- India and Belgium agreed to strengthen **intelligence and information sharing** between security agencies to combat terrorism, organised crime and other transnational threats.
- The two countries are exploring a **Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism**, with potential cooperation against terrorist financing, terrorist networks and safe havens.
- An agreement involving India's **Central Bureau of Investigation** and **Belgium's Federal Police** is intended to improve cooperation against **transnational organised crime and cybercrime**.
- Cooperation in tracing fugitives, capacity building and exchange of investigative best practices can strengthen India's response to **cross-border criminal networks**.

Semiconductors and Emerging Technologies:

Semiconductor Cooperation:

- **Semiconductors** have become a major area of India–Belgium cooperation because both countries possess complementary capabilities.
- Belgium hosts **imec**, a globally significant semiconductor research and innovation ecosystem, while India offers a large market, engineering talent and expanding semiconductor manufacturing capabilities.
- The two countries plan to connect **imec with India's semiconductor ecosystem** to support advanced research, innovation and resilient technology supply chains.
- Cooperation in **artificial intelligence, start-ups, digital skills and emerging technologies** can further integrate the two innovation ecosystems.

Strategic Significance:

- Semiconductor cooperation can reduce excessive dependence on concentrated global supply chains and support **technology sovereignty and supply-chain resilience**.
- For India, Belgian technological expertise can complement domestic initiatives under the **India Semiconductor Mission** and broader efforts to develop a complete semiconductor ecosystem.

Renewable Energy and Critical Minerals:

Clean Energy Cooperation:

- India and Belgium have renewed and expanded cooperation on **renewable energy**, including green hydrogen, solar energy, energy storage, offshore wind, bioenergy, small hydropower and pumped storage.
- **Green hydrogen** cooperation is particularly relevant because India seeks to develop domestic clean-energy production while Belgium can provide technological and industrial linkages with European markets.
- Cooperation in clean technologies can support India's **energy transition, decarbonisation and energy security** objectives.

Critical Minerals:

- Both countries agreed to enhance cooperation in **critical mineral processing and recycling**, which is important for batteries, electronics, renewable-energy technologies and advanced manufacturing.
- Such cooperation can contribute to **diversification of supply chains** and reduce vulnerabilities arising from excessive dependence on limited geographical sources.

Maritime and Port Cooperation:

Maritime Security:

- India and Belgium identified **maritime and port cooperation** as an important emerging area of bilateral engagement.

- Potential areas include **port development, logistics, connectivity, dredging, offshore wind infrastructure and maritime training**.
- Belgium's maritime and dredging expertise can complement India's efforts to modernise ports and strengthen the broader **Blue Economy**.

Strategic Importance:

- Cooperation in **mine countermeasures, autonomous maritime systems, underwater robotics and advanced sensors** can strengthen maritime domain awareness and protection of critical infrastructure.
- Secure sea lanes are essential for international trade, energy flows and global supply chains, making maritime cooperation relevant to both **Indian Ocean security and wider Indo-Pacific stability**.

India–EU Dimension:

European Strategic Context:

- Belgium's importance extends beyond bilateral relations because it is a member of the **European Union and hosts major EU institutions**.
- Stronger India–Belgium relations can therefore support India's broader engagement with the EU on **trade, technology, investment, defence, climate action and connectivity**.
- The EU and India concluded negotiations for a **Free Trade Agreement on 27 January 2026**, creating a broader framework for expanding economic engagement.
- The EU–India agreement is particularly relevant to Belgium because Belgian exports to India include significant volumes of **precious stones, machinery and industrial products**, while services such as financial and maritime activities also offer opportunities.

People-to-People and Knowledge Cooperation:

Education, Research and Mobility:

- India and Belgium are seeking stronger cooperation in **higher education, scientific research, astronomy, astrophysics, space technologies and skill development**.
- Belgium's universities and research institutions can contribute to India's knowledge economy through joint research, academic partnerships and technology development.
- The two sides are also working towards greater **mobility of students, researchers, professionals and business travellers**, including enhanced visa processing and direct air connectivity.
- Cooperation in healthcare, including opportunities for qualified Indian nurses, can strengthen **human-capital linkages** between the two countries.

Global and Regional Issues:

Shared Approach to International Challenges:

- India and Belgium discussed the conflicts in **Ukraine and West Asia** and emphasised **dialogue, diplomacy and respect for the UN Charter and international law**.
- Both countries highlighted the importance of maintaining **safe and unimpeded maritime shipping**, reflecting their shared interest in secure international trade routes.
- Belgium has expressed support for India's efforts against **terrorism and cross-border terrorism**, strengthening the security dimension of the relationship.

Significance for India:

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Strategic and Economic Benefits:

- The emerging partnership can provide India with access to **specialised European technologies, advanced research capabilities and industrial expertise**.
- Defence-industrial cooperation can support **Make in India, Atmanirbhar Bharat and defence export ambitions** through co-production and technology partnerships.
- Semiconductor and critical-mineral cooperation can strengthen **strategic autonomy and supply-chain resilience**.
- Renewable-energy cooperation can accelerate India's **green transition** and strengthen cooperation with European clean-technology ecosystems.
- Stronger maritime cooperation can improve India's capabilities in **port infrastructure, underwater systems and maritime security**.
- Belgium can also serve as an important gateway for deeper Indian engagement with the **European Union**.

Challenges and Way Forward:

Key Challenges:

- India must ensure that defence cooperation results in **meaningful technology absorption and domestic manufacturing**, rather than remaining limited to equipment procurement.
- Bilateral trade diversification requires reducing excessive dependence on traditional **diamond and precious-stone commerce**.
- Differences in **regulatory standards, intellectual property, market access and sustainability requirements** may affect the expansion of economic ties.
- Semiconductor cooperation requires sustained investment in **research, skilled manpower, infrastructure and high-end manufacturing capabilities**.

Way Forward:

- India and Belgium should institutionalise **defence-industrial working groups** and prioritise joint development and production.
- The countries should strengthen **critical-mineral supply chains, semiconductor research and clean-energy value chains**.
- The Investment Fast-Track Mechanism should be used to promote long-term investment in **manufacturing, technology and infrastructure**.
- Greater cooperation with the EU should be leveraged to integrate bilateral initiatives with India's broader **European and Indo-Pacific strategies**.

Conclusion:

- The India–Belgium partnership is increasingly becoming a **technology-enabled strategic and economic partnership**, in which defence cooperation, semiconductor technology, critical minerals, clean energy and maritime security complement the traditional foundations of trade and investment.