

# EU's top team in India to bolster relations

AFP- The EU's top team arrived in India on an "unprecedented" visit Thursday, aiming to broaden commercial and diplomatic ties and hedge against souring relations with the United States.

EU chief Ursula von der Leyen and her college of commissioners are to hold talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu nationalist government in New Delhi during the two-day trip.

"In this era of multiplying conflicts and intense geostrategic competition, Europe wants to strengthen its partnership with India, one of its most trusted friends," Von der Leyen said in an interview printed in the Times of India on Thursday.

"There is a great, positive momentum in our relations. Together, we can drive forward trade, economic security, and resilient supply chains."

Von der Leyen is expected to meet with India's foreign minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar on Thursday, before meeting Modi on Friday, with a raft of topics from artificial intelligence to energy to be discussed.

"We aim to advance discussions on a free trade agreement, expand cooperation on digital technologies, particularly AI, and accelerate our work on clean technologies like electric vehicles and green hydrogen", she added.

Almost all of the EU's 26 commissioners are to join von der Leyen in what the EU chief is billing as the first visit of its kind to the South Asian giant – and the first outside Europe for the new college that took office in December.

Brussels has been working to broaden its horizons since US President Donald Trump won back the White House in November and undercut European allies by launching Ukraine talks with Russia's Vladimir Putin.

India has long pursued a policy of strategic autonomy in foreign affairs.

Historically close to Russia, its traditional supplier of military hardware, it has resisted Western pressure to distance itself from Moscow following its invasion of Ukraine.

The visit "will send the message that Europe is shoring up other partners, including India, as much as they focus on the task of resetting EU-India ties", The Hindu newspaper reported.

– 'Finish line' –

The EU is India's largest trading partner, accounting for 124 billion euros (\$130 billion) worth of trade in goods in 2023 – more than 12 percent of total Indian trade, according to the EU.

India's expanding market offers key opportunities for sectors ranging from defence to agriculture, automobiles and clean energy. Yet, protected by high tariffs, it currently accounts for only 2.2 percent of EU trade in goods.

Negotiations for a trade deal could get a boost from a White House bent on slapping tariffs on friends and foes alike.

"We are now preparing for a 10th round of negotiations in Brussels," von der Leyen said in the interview.

"There is more work to be done at a technical level, but I'm convinced we can cross the finish line if we both commit to it".

The EU team is also expected to pay their respects to revered

Indian independence hero Mahatma Gandhi at the Raj Ghat memorial.

The site, one of the most hallowed spaces in the capital New Delhi, is where the apostle of non-violence was cremated in January 1948 after he was shot by a Hindu nationalist ideologue.

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