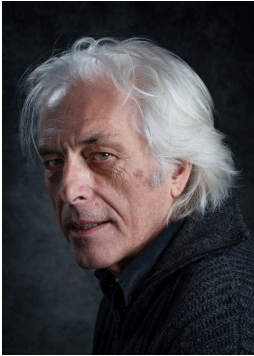


EFTA

In the land of the Maharajahs, this Lilliput is Goliath

by Christian Campiche,* Lausanne



Christian Campiche. (Photo
www.infomeduse.ch)

We can bet that the media, public service excepted, will not make this their headlines. This would be unfair because the announced agreement with India finally constitutes good news for the Swiss economy. It took no less than 16 years of tenacious negotiations for the painstaking work carried

out by Swiss officials of the European Free Trade Association, EFTA, to bear fruit. "An important milestone for our country's trade policy," comments the Federal Department of Economic Affairs.

The stronghold of *Guy Parmelin* does not throw out jokes for the gallery. His satisfaction is sincere. Above all, it has the merit of realism at a time when Switzerland is questioning its relations with its large European neighbor. These resemble a game of bobwhite or "I've got you, you've got me, by the goatee" since a famous "Black Sunday" in 1992.

The rejection of the European Economic Area by German-speaking Switzerland dashed the dreams of a rapprochement with Brussels. Constantly rebooted, EU bilateral agreements are stalling. The next round will be played before Easter. «The last battle of Ignazio Cassis», says the *Blick*. This Swiss daily portrays a facade of

optimism, yet nothing is certain that the Minister of Foreign Affairs will prevail. We can count on the conservative SVP party and the trade unions, united in a holy alliance for this purpose, to thwart his ambitious plans.

The joint parchment signed by the EFTA and Indian ministers should, however, put his anxieties into perspective, as well as those of eager liberals on the left and right. This lobby is unrestrained when it comes to the EU bilateral negotiations, an issue it would like to see completed at all costs. Certain grumblers will no doubt object that EFTA is a second-best solution, the shadow of an organization which, after having brought together the finest nations of the old continent, is now reduced to four members - Switzerland, Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein.

They would be wrong to do so. With three times as many inhabitants as the European Union, India is the world's most populated country. Although a large proportion of its population lives in conditions below the poverty line, India nonetheless boasts the temperament of a locomotive. With GDP growth of 7%, it is a serious contender for the position of third world economic power behind the USA and China.

«Switzerland and the other EFTA states are the first European partners to conclude a free trade agreement with India». This little sentence in the press release speaks volumes about the success achieved by the Swiss negotiators. A result that greases the wheels of Swiss machine builders, hard hit in recent months by the German recession. In fact, the lowering or even removal of customs duties has boosted the value of «Swisstech» in the face of Chinese and Western competition.

In the land of the Maharajahs, Lilliput managed to beat Goliath to the punch.

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