

# ‘EFTA, India aim at building on existing work’

India and the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) member states (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland) last week held discussions to resume negotiations for a Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement that was abandoned in 2013 after five years of negotiations. Swiss State Secretary for Economic Affairs **HELENE BUDLIGER ARTIEDA** – who led the delegation to India – in an email interview with Asit Ranjan Mishra, says both sides need to acknowledge the change in geopolitical circumstances while restarting negotiations. Edited excerpts:

**India and EFTA recently discussed the resumption of trade talks. Have both sides formally agreed to start negotiations? What are the timelines?**

There is a shared will to bring these negotiations to a successful conclusion as soon as possible. Negotiations have been ongoing since 2008 and we are advanced in many areas. On the outstanding areas, experts will need to sit down and find solutions.

**Have both sides zeroed in on the chapters to be included in the deal?**

There is a shared understanding of the scope of the agreement. We aim at building on existing work and conclude a comprehensive agreement. It is important to note that all parties to this process approach the negotiation table with a strong conviction that any deal must be balanced and fair.

**India has proposed a chapter on gender equality. Do EFTA countries agree with it?**

EFTA received this proposal from India with an open and positive mind. A provision on inclusive trade is contained in our recently concluded agreement with Moldova and we are committed to including this in all our future free trade agreements

**Since 13 rounds of talks had already been concluded between both sides, will negotiators resume from where they left off or start afresh?**

A lot of work has already been done in these negotiations and we don't need to start at zero. Some of the already concluded chapters will need to be checked regarding their continued relevance. An area we will need to revisit is trade and sustainable development.

**What has changed since talks were put on hold in 2013 from the EFTA perspective that both sides need to keep in mind?**

I believe it is even more important to deepen and strengthen our economic partnership and diversify trade. I am confident that by concluding an ambitious and modern trade agreement, we can contribute to this and a more inclusive global trading system.

**It is believed EFTA will always precede a trade deal between India and the European Union (EU). Is that true?**

We are smaller than the EU and therefore, it is probably easier for us to find pragmatic and flexible solutions. From what we hear, the EU

negotiations stand quiet at the beginning.

**What will be the core focus areas in the trade talks from the EFTA side?**

The main outstanding issues concern market access for trade in services, intellectual property rights, and rules of origin.

**What are the opportunities India will be able to tap into through a trade deal with EFTA?**

A trade agreement would benefit both sides by way of enhancing trade, promoting technology and knowledge transfer, facilitating research and development and innovation, and encouraging business collaboration leading to more investments.

Improved market access for goods will boost India's export potential to EFTA markets. EFTA members are global leaders in innovation, technology, and quality and we are net exporters of smart foreign direct investment.

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**HELENE BUDLIGER ARTIEDA**  
Swiss State Secretary for Economic Affairs

