

THE FRENCH CONNECTION: INDIA-FRANCE PARTNERSHIP FOR THE INDO-PACIFIC ZEITGEIST

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India's bilateral relationship with France has been a robust one, and a test case for maintaining a distinct trajectory of its own allowing enough elbow room to both countries to practice their respective strategic autonomies. This issue brief after delving into the multi-dimensional convergences of the India-France strategic relationship contends that the partnership between New Delhi and Paris is one of equals based on complementariness of interest and congruence of intent. The complex geopolitics and geo-economics of the Indo-Pacific would require navigating areas of competition, cooperation, and confrontation. Therefore, the issue brief argues that New Delhi and Paris are well positioned through their worldviews to lend a sense of pragmatism in the Indo-Pacific, beyond the binary expectations of "either you are with us, or against us". India and France through their terms of engagements sans entanglements could provide a primer for the webs of new partnerships and alignments in the Indo-Pacific.

As far as India's major power relations are concerned, the one with the United States, Russia or China occupies the limelight. However, the convergences that India has built with France, and the strategic potential of this relationship in the Indo-Pacific era is underrated. The shifts in power transition and power diffusion across the Indo-Pacific are making countries reorient their national security strategies and foreign policy outlooks. The quest for multipolarity in the Indo-Pacific faces the primary challenge of China's unabashed power projection and drive for unipolarity. In counteracting such

designs and helping build a "free, open, inclusive and rules-based" Indo-Pacific, New Delhi has entered into a closer strategic embrace with many powers in the West, particularly the United States and other partners like Japan and Australia through the Quadrilateral Dialogue (Quad). India's new strategic convergence with the G7 grouping, as well with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is being explored.

While India's stronger partnership with France falls under this larger ambit, the bilateral

partnership has a long history and both countries have invested in this relationship to maintain a distinct and independent trajectory. India seeks to engage with a multitude of actors in the Indo-Pacific while simultaneously seeking to set the terms of engagement to preserve the practice of its strategic autonomy. In this context, this issue brief attempts to assess the contours of the India-France partnership amidst the uncertainties inherent in the ongoing geopolitical, geo-economic and technological transformation and unpack the primary areas of convergences in the relationship. At the end, it will attempt to articulate the way ahead in this underexplored yet consequential partnership for the future of the Indo-Pacific.

A Strategic Entente on the Rise

When a relationship is bereft of any historical baggage and has no fundamental divergence, diplomacy can bet for bigger returns. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to France as a guest of honor at the Bastille Day Parade set the perfect atmospherics to take forward the substance in the relationship. France is a known proponent of strategic autonomy even as a member of NATO and through the Cold War to the current era of Indo-Pacific, India and France have exuded a pragmatic relationship, bereft of undue expectations.¹ The latest joint communique released during Prime Minister Modi's visit contended that the India-France relationship is one "that has been resilient in the darkest storms and bold and ambitious in riding the high tides of opportunities." "It is founded on shared values, belief in sovereignty and strategic autonomy, an unwavering commitment to international law and the UN Charter, an abiding faith in multilateralism and a common quest for a stable multipolar world," said the communique.² The blossoming India-France partnership acquires more significance at a time when the Ukraine war has upended the European security order and raised binary perceptions of partnerships and foreign policy choices. India and France see each other as strategic partners of equal in the Indo-Pacific region, helping avoid the unwarranted question of

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'whether India needs France more, or France needs India more'.

Both geography and history of the two countries being resident maritime powers of the Indian Ocean provides extra ballast to their growing mutuality of interest in the Indo-Pacific region. The new India-France Indo-Pacific roadmap clearly advocates an alignment between "Prime Minister Modi's vision of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and President Macron's vision of security and cooperation outlined in the Indo Pacific Strategy of France." "Our cooperation is comprehensive and covers defence, security, economic, connectivity, infrastructure, sustainability and human centric development," the roadmap contended.³ The roadmap clearly sets more focus on the tangible outcomes and scales up the understanding achieved between these two Indian Ocean powers through the 'Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region' signed in 2018.⁴ As responsible stakeholders of the Indo-Pacific region, how to ensure access to global commons and strive for partnerships that bring prosperity and sustainability remain a primary task for both sides. The impetus has been on developing a holistic and all-comprehensive partnership, building and cementing habits of cooperation not only through bilateral mechanisms but also through consonance

with other like-minded countries. As the roadmap highlights:

“Our cooperation extends from seabed to space. We will continue to deepen our exchanges, cooperate on situational and domain awareness, intensify maritime cooperation across the region such as the one we conduct in the South West Indian Ocean Region in liaison with partner countries in the region. We will also increase militaries’ naval visits and develop defence industrial capabilities in India and jointly support the needs of other countries. We will continue to develop our comprehensive cooperation including the French overseas territories of La Reunion, New Caledonia and French Polynesia and in coordination with other countries in the region and beyond.”⁵

New Delhi and Paris will explore new avenues of trilateral cooperation with partnering countries like Australia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and through “regional forums such as Indian Ocean Rim Association, Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, the Indian Ocean Commission, Djibouti Code of Conduct, the ADMM+ and ARF.”⁶ India and France also seek to increase cooperation and coordination in maritime security through a

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number of institutional mechanisms meant to enhance maritime domain awareness (MDA) in the region.⁷

Over the years through hard and good times, France has been a major and consistent supplier to India’s military hardware, particularly in military aviation, the latest of which is the sale of Rafale aircraft and the understanding for joint development of a combat aircraft engine. Today as India envisions self-reliance in defense industrial and technological base, while aiming to scale up co-development and co-production of defense technologies, a partnership with France becomes even more imperative. India’s aspiration to become a defense exporter also aligns with the understanding entered with France to not only cooperate in co-development and co-production of advanced defense technologies but also to do so for the benefit of third countries.⁸ Moreover, the Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) has entered into a Shareholders’ Agreement with France’s Safran Helicopter Engine for the benefit of the Indian Multi Role Helicopter (IMRH). More ambitious submarine projects are ready to be explored following the success of the first Scorpene submarine construction program (P75 – Kalvari). An MoU was also signed between Garden Reach Shipbuilders and Engineers Ltd. (GRSE) and Naval Group France for the development of surface ships. India is setting up a Technical Office of the DRDO at its Embassy in Paris and both sides are working towards adopting a Roadmap on Defence Industrial Cooperation.⁹

Cooperation and collaboration in outer space is also emerging as a critical area of the bilateral partnership with global consequences. The Centre National d’Etudes Spatiales (CNES) and Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) will cooperate on the TRISHNA mission to acquire imagery of the Earth’s surface in thermal infrared by a satellite, which is to be launched in 2024. They will also cooperate on activities within the Space Climate Observatory (SCO) relating to extra-planetary exploration and monitoring of maritime and air

pollution on earth. To facilitate deeper cooperation, ISRO will be setting up a special office in the Indian embassy in Paris to facilitate coordination and outreach activities.¹⁰

Mitigating climate change impact and collaboration towards greener development will remain a significant area of the strategic partnership between India and France. Considering the climate crisis, France and India have adopted an international treaty to ban plastic pollution via a supply-side solution. In partnership with the European Union and KfW of Germany, the French Development Agency has promised €101 million (INR 923 crore or USD 111 million) for the second phase of India's flagship sustainable cities program "CITIIS 2.0". In 2022, France and India had adopted a roadmap for decarbonized hydrogen. This has matured into McPhy and L&T signing a partnership agreement for the manufacturing of electrolyzers in India. Lastly, India and France will continue to protect the marine environment and terrestrial biodiversity via the Indo-Pacific Parks Partnership, International Solar Alliance, and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI).¹¹ India and France are also developing a model of Triangular Development Cooperation, to set up "the Indo-Pacific Triangular Cooperation (IPTDC) Fund aimed at supporting climate and SDG focused

innovations and start-ups from third countries of the Indo-Pacific, with the goal of facilitating the scaling up of green technologies being developed in the region."¹² Mobilizing people-to-people connectivity is also bound to add a new perspective to the relationship, easing student mobility, intellectual exchange, ideational growth and skilled workforce migration.

Over the years, India and France have also started to cooperate on emerging technologies—especially artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML). In June 2020, India and France became a part of the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence (GPAI) as one of the 15 founding members. GPAI represents a global and collaborative effort aimed at overseeing the ethical advancement and application of AI.¹³ Digital technology emerged as a prominent focal point of discussions during the recent visit of the Indian Prime Minister. India and France shared many views on critical areas such as cyber security, AI, quantum computing (QC), semiconductors, and high-performance computing (HPC).¹⁴

The India, U.S., and France trilateral has also emerged as an important platform on issues concerning AI and ML. India's capabilities and assets as well as its approach to the evolving geopolitical dynamics surrounding the sector have provided the essential momentum for the cautious U.S. bureaucracy as well as the cooperative French institutions. India's evolving technology diplomacy has been showcased through the formalization of an agreement between the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) and the French Ministry of Economy. This agreement is rooted in the Indo-French roadmap on Cyber Security and Digital Technology that was endorsed in 2019. Most notably, France and the U.S. have both agreed to help India reduce its digital divide. As cyber security emerges as an important focal point of geopolitics, such relations will mature into sound security-based strategies to enable countries to safeguard their presence in the digital domain.¹⁵

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A Partnership of Equals

Today, India and France cooperate on many key issues related to the Indo-Pacific, the fight against climate change and maintaining their strategic autonomies in a multipolar world order. Prime Minister Modi's visit also commemorated the 25th year of the India-France strategic partnership that was signed in the year 1998, when India was at the receiving end of harsh sanctions from many western countries after its nuclear tests. France has always supported India's candidacy to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and supported India on issues related to Kashmir.¹⁶ Similarly, India is a key partner for France in maintaining its global presence and relevance. In 2015, India and France jointly launched the International Solar Alliance (ISA) for harnessing solar energy in solar-rich countries located between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn.¹⁷ In 2021, India exported goods worth USD 6.4 billion to France. These were all high value goods like refined petroleum (USD 776M) and packaged medicaments (USD 321M). France exports highly technical goods to India such as industry machinery, nuclear reactors, boilers worth USD 916.89 million and electrical, electronic equipment worth USD 532.78 million. At present, France has 1.5 million French citizens and 8,000 soldiers stationed in the Indo-Pacific region.¹⁸ For France, India is a key partner in deepening its security interests in the region along with other similarly inclined nations like Japan and Australia. They jointly organize many naval, army, and air defense exercises such as Varuna, Shakti, and Garuda to enhance cooperation between security forces. Such high-level military-to-military exercises are extremely significant in terms of increasing interoperability between the forces of these two Indian Ocean maritime powers.¹⁹

India and France are both conscious of their strategic autonomy. China has emerged as the third largest trading partner of France after the U.S. and E.U. French firms feel caught between the West and the East due to France's NATO membership. Similarly, India has also received a

“As India and the EU resume negotiations for signing a Free Trade Agreement (FTA), its positive engagement with a large economy like France will provide more heft and momentum to the process.”

lot of criticism for purchasing Russian oil and not condemning Russia's military actions in Ukraine. As it emboldens relations with the U.S. and France, it has maintained its relations with Russia. The India-France partnership is growing at a time of stronger multipolarity. However, it is noteworthy that such power transition and power diffusion is also transpiring at a time when calls for reformed multilateralism encounter challenges at the doors of established powers and entrenched 20th century institutional structures.

France is also relevant for India's future Africa strategy. France holds considerable influence in all the Francophone countries in Africa. These include countries like Rwanda, Niger, Burkina-Faso, Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast), Senegal, Cameroon, Madagascar, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Algeria. It also holds considerable influence over the Central African CFA Franc (XAF), which requires member-states of the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) to maintain at least 50 percent of foreign assets with the French Treasury.²⁰ Recently, the Wagner Group has started to influence the politics of the region considerably. From destabilizing governments to performing security operations for them, its growth has been linked to anti-neocolonial sentiments against the French in these countries.²¹ Hence, if India wants to deepen its presence in African states, it must cooperate with France to ensure the stability of the region.

India's bilateral engagement with France is also going to be important for its future in Europe. As India and the EU resume negotiations for signing a Free Trade Agreement (FTA), its positive engagement with a large economy like France will provide more heft and momentum to the process.²² There are a lot of sensitive issues such as Investor Protection Agreements which need to be affirmed by individual countries, even if the larger FTA is to be ratified by the European Parliament.²³

Conclusion

The India-France partnership places people, planet, and partnerships at the heart of its vision. Despite being a member of the NATO, France has a history of exercising its independent agency vis-à-vis the United States. India's penchant for practicing strategic autonomy throughout its independent existence as a nation state is well-known. Therefore, New Delhi and Paris are well-positioned through their worldviews to lend a sense of pragmatism in the Indo-Pacific, beyond the binary expectations of "either you are with us, or against us". The complex geopolitics and geo-economics of the Indo-Pacific would require navigating areas of competition, cooperation, and confrontation. India and France through their terms of engagements sans entanglements could provide a primer for the webs of new partnerships and alignments in the Indo-Pacific. Strategic partners since 1998, India and France have maintained a rather robust and stable relationship. The India-France strategic partnership does not conjure the same kind of limelight accorded to New Delhi's dynamics with the United States or Russia. However, this underrated status gives the right kind of room for traction to the political leadership and the diplomatic core on both ends, to work on the deliverables bereft of the baggage of undue expectations. Moreover, India's

relationship with France cannot be delinked from the former's engagement with the European Union. As India continues to work towards generating new associations and partnership frameworks with the EU as an institution and with members of the EU in order to enhance its own interoperability and influence in the Indo-Pacific region, the strong bonhomie between India and France strikes the right chord.

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Endnotes

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