

The French connections

With French President Emmanuel Macron's recent visit to India, the India-France Strategic Partnership launched in 1998 seems finally to have come of age. In these two decades, both sides have gradually enhanced cooperation in diverse fields covering civil nuclear, defence, space, counter-terrorism, education, research and development in science and technology, culture, urban development, climate change, trade and economics and people-to-people contacts. The slew of bilateral agreements and memoranda of understanding signed, the detailed 'joint statement' and accompanying 'vision statements' on cooperation in space and the Indian Ocean Region, the boat ride in Varanasi, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's warmly reciprocated diplohugs indicate that the relationship has received a momentum that gives it critical mass and greater coherence.

As a country that has prided itself on its 'exceptionalism', France has always been sympathetic to similar Indian claims based on its ancient civilisation. This is why both countries were quick to voice support for global multi-polarity once the Cold War ended. French discomfort with the U.S.'s unipolar moment in the 1990s was evident when it described it as a 'hyperpower'.

Defence cooperation with France began in the 1950s when India acquired the Ouragan aircraft and continued with the Mystères, Jaguar (Anglo-French), Mirage 2000, Alizè planes and the Alouette helicopter. Joint naval exercises, later christened Varuna, date back to 1983.

Cooperation in the space sector has continued since the 1960s when France helped India set up the Sriharikota launch site, followed by liquid engine development and hosting of payloads. Today, it is a relationship of near equals and the 'vision statement' refers to world class joint missions for space situational awareness, high resolution earth observation missions with applications in meteorology, oceanography and cartography. Inter-planetary exploration and space transportation systems are cutting edge science and technology areas that have also been identified.

Yet the Cold War imposed limitations on the partnership. After the Cold War, France decided that its preferred partner in the Indian Ocean Region would be India. In January 1998, President Jacques Chirac declared that India's exclusion from the global nuclear order was an anomaly that needed to be rectified. After the nuclear tests in May 1998 when India declared itself a nuclear weapon state, France was the first major power to open dialogue and displayed a far greater understanding of India's security compulsions compared to other countries. It was the first P-5 country to support India's claim for a permanent seat in an expanded and reformed UN Security Council.

With the establishment of a Strategic Dialogue, cooperation in defence, civil nuclear, space, intelligence sharing and counter-terrorism has grown. An agreement for building six Scorpène submarines in India with French help was signed in 2005. Similarly, technology sharing and acquisitions of short range missiles and radar equipment were concluded. Joint exercises between the air forces and the armies were instituted in 2003 and 2011, respectively. The government-to-government agreement for 36 Rafale aircraft, salvaged out of the prolonged negotiations for the original 126 which were at an impasse, was as much driven by technical requirements as by political considerations. The ambitious offset target of 50% (nearly 25,000 crore), properly implemented, can help in building up India's budding aerospace industry.

In the nuclear field, an agreement was signed about a decade ago for building six EPR nuclear power reactors with a total capacity of 9.6 GW for which negotiations have been ongoing between the Nuclear Power Corporation of India (NPCIL) and Areva, and now EdF. Terror strikes in France in recent years by home-grown terrorists have enlarged the scope of counter-terrorism cooperation to include cyber security and discussions on radicalisation.

Even though these areas provided a robust basis for engagement, it remained primarily at a government-to-government level. In recent years, it was clear that for a wider partnership, strengthening business-to-business and people-to-people relationships was essential. Climate change and renewable energy resources, particularly solar, soon emerged as a new plank, reflected in the multilateral initiative of the International Solar Alliance. Another area identified was urban planning and management of services like housing, transport, water, sanitation, etc using the public private partnership model which the French have employed successfully. Mr. Macron's visit has enabled progress to be registered across a variety of sectors including the strategic partnership areas.

There has been a growing convergence of interests in maritime cooperation. Like India, France has expressed concern about China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean Region. French overseas territories in the Indian and the Pacific Oceans provide it with the second largest exclusive economic zone globally. It has long maintained bases in Reunion Islands and Djibouti and established one in Abu Dhabi in 2009. This regional dimension is reflected in the Vision Statement on cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region.

The signing of MoUs regarding the provision of reciprocal logistics support to each other's armed forces, exchange and reciprocal protection of classified information and developing shared space studies and assets for maritime awareness provide the basis on which to strengthen joint naval exercises. With the U.S., naval cooperation has been easier with the Pacific Command which covers China and the region up to the Bay of Bengal but more difficult with the Central Command which covers western Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea because of Central Command's privileged relationship with Pakistan. Therefore strengthening cooperation with France, particularly in the western Indian Ocean Region makes eminent strategic sense even as India develops its presence in Oman (Duqm) and Seychelles (Assumption Island).

The agreement on the industrial way forward between NPCIL and EdF affirms that work at Jaitapur will commence before the end of 2018. Equally significant are the two agreements signed between EdF and other French entities and L&T and Reliance, respectively, reflecting the engagement of Indian industry.

Trade has grown in recent years but at \$10 billion is half of the trade with Germany. The signing of nearly \$16 billion worth of agreements at the business summit indicates that private sectors in both countries are beginning to take notice. There are nearly 1,000 French companies present in India including 39 of the CAC 40 while over a hundred Indian businesses have established a presence in France. In the past, Indian companies saw the U.K. as the entry point for Europe; now with Brexit approaching, Mr. Macron has cleverly pitched that India should look at France as its entry point for Europe and Francophonie! The flagship programme of Smart Cities in which France is focussing on Chandigarh, Nagpur and Puducherry is taking shape as more than half the business agreements signed related to electric mobility, water supply, waste management and smart grids.

Potentially, the most significant was the focus on youth and student exchanges. Currently about 2,500 Indians go to France annually to pursue higher education, compared to more than 250,000 from China. A target has been set to raise it to 10,000 by 2020. The agreement on mutual recognition of academic degrees and the follow-on Knowledge Summit, where 14 MoUs between educational and scientific institutions were signed, is a welcome move.

Tourism is another area that has received attention. A target of a million Indian tourists and 335,000 French tourists has been set for 2020. Given that France receives over 80 million tourists a year and India around nine million, these targets may seem modest but reflect that while there are only about 20 flights a week between India and France, there are four times as many to

Germany and 10 times as many to the U.K.

The Strategic Partnership has already created a solid foundation; other aspects have now received the much needed focus and with proper implementation, it can add to the growing strategic convergence that draws India and France together.

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