

OLD NEW FRIENDS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Europe, European Union (EU) and India

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For nearly four decades, successive French presidents — Francois Mitterand in the 1980s, Jacques Chirac from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s and Nicolas Sarkozy after that — made repeated efforts to elevate the engagement with India to a higher level. If Paris was an eager suitor, Delhi was distracted. Preoccupied with other major powers — US, Russia and China — and burdened by its inherited Anglo-Saxon bias, Delhi could hardly appreciate the pivotal value of France, and more broadly that of Europe, in transforming India's international position.

The one-sided love affair has begun to change as Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) paid greater strategic attention to France and Europe in the first term. While many pending issues relating to Europe were sorted out during 2014-19, it was the boosting of ties with France that stood out as an important feature of Modi's foreign policy in the first term. The PM's summit with French President Emmanuel Macron this week and participation in the G-7 outreach next week mark the injection of some real content into the bilateral strategic partnership that was unveiled more than two decades ago in 1998.

The Modi-Macron bromance could not have come at a more critical time for the two countries. The relative harmony between the major powers witnessed after the Cold War is now becoming a distant memory. The growing tensions between the US on the one hand and China and Russia on the other are roiling the international waters. Meanwhile, thanks to Donald Trump, the cracks in the political West are widening.

As they come to terms with the breakdown of the post-War order, India and France recognise the urgency of constructing coalitions that can provide a measure of stability in an increasingly unstable world. France, which had sought strategic autonomy within the framework of its alliance with the US, and India, which has valued independent foreign policy, are natural partners in building the new coalitions for an uncertain era.

The rapid rise of China — and the expanding gap in the national power indices in favour of Beijing — have altered the balance of power in India's neighbourhood. During the Cold War, India had turned to the Soviet Union to ensure a stable regional balance.

In the last few years, Russia has been drawing steadily closer to China. This movement is not

defined by any problem between Moscow and Delhi, but Russia's larger global calculus. That Russia has a broader and deeper economic and political relationship with China means the new entente between Moscow and Beijing can only make it harder for Delhi to rely on the former to balance the latter.

After the turbulent 1990s when Delhi and Washington argued over non-proliferation and Kashmir, the two sides settled into a period of stable and expanding partnership under the presidencies of George Bush and [Barack Obama](#) lasting from 2001-2017. The arrival of Donald Trump in the White House in early 2017, amidst an unexpected turn in American domestic politics, has begun to produce complications for India on a range of issues — from bilateral trade to regional and global affairs.

Trump was, by no means, trying to target India in particular. Delhi has been affected by sweeping changes in the foreign, economic and national security policies unleashed by Trump. He has turned hostile to the WTO and walked away from many multilateral arrangements. He has spewed venom on long-standing US allies for being a burden on the American exchequer. As he withdraws from some of the conflict zones, Trump insists that America's allies and friends do more for their own security. His recent call on India to join the fight against Islamic State in Afghanistan is part of that belief system.

Whether these new emphases will survive the Trump presidency or not, they have unnerved most of America's partners in Europe and Asia. For many nations, including India and France, coping with the muscular assertiveness of China, the resurgence of Russia and the retrenchment of America become the central challenge of their foreign and security policies.

As they look for options in a world where the old political certitudes look shaky, India and France see that strengthening bilateral cooperation and building coalitions with like-minded countries is critical for the protection of their long term interests. The new imperatives driving India and France have manifested themselves in a five-fold agenda for Modi and Macron.

First, enhancing bilateral cooperation in strategic sectors. France has always been an important partner in the development of advanced technologies. This is set to advance further with the consolidation of civil nuclear cooperation and enhancing space cooperation. The summit this week saw the placing of artificial intelligence and the unfolding digital revolution at the top of the bilateral agenda. Second, the new commitment to go beyond the buyer-seller relationship in the field of weapons procurement. When India comes up with clear policies for making arms in India, the synergies between India's large defence market and the French strengths in armament production would come into full play.

Third, political cooperation between India and France is relatively new; it began with French support for India in limiting international sanctions on Delhi after its 1998 nuclear tests. Today, France has emerged as India's most reliable partner on issues relating to terrorism and Kashmir.

Fourth, the relationship between India and France has gone beyond the bilateral to focus on the regional. Modi and Macron this week have agreed to intensify maritime and naval cooperation in the Indian Ocean and more broadly the Indo-Pacific. There is a sweeping and ambitious ocean agenda awaiting the two countries — from maritime governance to oceanographic research and from interoperability between their armed forces to capacity building in the littoral.

Finally, it is the prospect of global agenda-setting that is beginning to make the India-France strategic partnership very exciting. After their joint efforts to limit climate change and develop the Solar Alliance, India and France have turned to more ambitious ideas. The road map on cybersecurity and digital technology issued by Modi and Macron this week provides the

framework for long-term cooperation on a set of issues, whose weight is growing by the day.

France also opens the pathway for deeper engagement with Europe on global issues. Since independence, India has experimented with different institutions — including the NAM and BRICS — to shape global norms. The new partnerships with France, Germany and other like-minded countries like Japan would hopefully turn out to be far more consequential for India's influence on the global stage.

(The writer is director, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore and contributing editor on international affairs for [The Indian Express](#))

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