

# EXPLORING THE BLUE IN THE INDIA-FRANCE PARTNERSHIP

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The formal acceptance programme of the first Rafale fighter jet at the Dassault Aviation plant, in Merignac, France, in 2019 | Photo Credit: AP

The celebration by India and France of 25 years of their strategic partnership (January 26) presents an important opportunity for both to introspect on their relations. Signed in 1998, the time-tested strategic partnership has continued to gain momentum over shared values and aspirations of peace, stability and, most importantly, their desire for strategic autonomy. There are no real substantive disagreements between the two nations. France has emerged as a key trading partner of India with annual trade of \$12.42 billion in 2021-22. It is the 11th largest foreign investor in India with a cumulative investment of \$10.31 billion from April 2000 to June 2022, which represents 1.70% of the total foreign direct investment inflows into India.

More importantly, it has emerged as a key defence partner for India, becoming the second largest defence supplier in 2017- 2021. France has emerged as a major strategic partner for India with crucial defence deals and increased military to military engagement. A key example of this is the inducting of the French Scorpene conventional submarines, being built in India under technology transfer agreement of 2005, and the Indian Air Force having received 36 Rafale fighter jets. The Tata group has also tied up with Airbus to manufacture C-295 tactical transport aircraft in Vadodara, Gujarat. This line is expected to be expanded into other civilian and military aircraft manufacturing in a joint venture with France. These relations are further fortified with the robust network of military dialogues and regularly held joint exercises — Varuna (navy), Garuda (air force), and Shakti (army). The importance of the defence partnership was further underscored in the recent statement by the French Ambassador to India, Emmanuel Lenain — that France is a willing partner for India as it builds its national industrial base for the defence industry and for critical strategic defence projects. As the complexities in the international geopolitical order have emerged, both countries have worked towards a deepening and broadening of their cooperation. France was among the first countries with which India signed a civil nuclear deal. Paris also played a critical role in limiting India's isolation in the non-proliferation order after the 1998 nuclear tests. In a sign of expanding cooperation, France supports India's bid for permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council as well as its entry into the Nuclear Suppliers Group. An area of importance for both is climate change, where India has supported France in the Paris Agreement expressing its strong commitment towards mitigating climate change impact. New Delhi and Paris, as part of their joint efforts on

climate change, launched the International Solar Alliance in 2015.

The bilateral naval exercise 'Varuna' | Photo Credit: ANI

The deepening of the strategic partnership is also visible in their maritime cooperation. India and France are resident powers of the Indian Ocean and in the Indo-Pacific. The importance of the Indian Ocean Region was visible during the visit of French President Emmanuel Macron's visit to New Delhi in 2018 when the leadership of both countries welcomed the "Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region" which presented a blueprint for a strengthening of ties. In operational terms, Franco-Indian joint patrolling in the Indian Ocean signals New Delhi's intent to engage with like-minded partners in expanding its footprint in the Indian Ocean.

An exchange of agreements on reciprocal logistics support between the armed forces | Photo Credit: PTI

Maritime security has further gained momentum as both countries have articulated their common vision for a free, fair and open Indo-Pacific. As both countries share a comprehensive strategy for the Indo-Pacific (it seeks to provide comprehensive solutions for maritime security, regional cooperation, climate change adaptation), India and France in September 2022 agreed to set up an Indo-Pacific Trilateral Development Cooperation Fund that will support sustainable innovative solutions for countries in the region. The two partners have formed a trilateral grouping with the United Arab Emirates to ensure maritime domain awareness and security from the east coast of Africa to the far Pacific.

While there are divergences over the Ukraine crisis, there is a broad understanding of each other's position and both countries are working together to coordinate on playing a constructive role in the crisis. It also needs to be noted that Mr. Macron and Prime Minister Narendra Modi are among the few world leaders who have maintained open communication channels with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Both countries share concerns over the rise of China and its aggressive behaviour, regionally and globally, and have committed to working together to ensure that there is no imbalance in the Indo-Pacific.

India's partnership with France is built on common values and goals. Both have underlined the 'importance of maintaining strategic autonomy with a shared understanding of global risks in many domains. There is a high-level India-France political dialogue that is ongoing in defence, maritime, counterterrorism and the Indo-Pacific. They are now forging ahead with cooperation in issues such as digitisation, cyber, green energy, a blue economy, ocean sciences, and space'.

India and France understand each other's interests and dependencies, be it in relation to China or Russia. In the marking of a long strategic partnership, a common interest in enhancing strategic autonomy and improving resilience, there is much ground ahead for further collaboration.

Harsh V. Pant is Vice-President for Studies at the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), New Delhi, and Professor at King's College London. Ankita Dutta is a Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation

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