

FRANCE'S EARLY BET ON INDIA IS PAYING OFF

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

India and France are kindred souls on the global stage. They are both systemically important powers, with France being a Permanent Member of the UN Security Council. What they say and do matters. The relationship has attracted attention in all major capitals, from Washington to Berlin to Moscow to Beijing. This is not without justification.

The two countries complement each other in many areas. They do not carry historical baggage and do not have any major bilateral differences. Where such differences exist, the two sides have shown a remarkable ability to overcome them. Relations between them are time tested in every sense of the term.

The visit of French President Emmanuel Macron to India as the chief guest for the Republic Day exemplifies the natural bonds of friendship between the two countries. France occupies a unique position in India's strategic thinking. It is seen as a country that has stood by India through thick and thin — in 1998 when India went nuclear, its support to India on [Jammu](#) and Kashmir, its advocacy of India's claim to permanent membership of the UN Security Council, standing with India to counter Pakistan-sponsored terrorism or bolstering India's capabilities against China.

Its cooperation on security issues such as in defence production, nuclear and space sectors and intelligence sharing has been open-ended and has strengthened Indian hard power. France has not shied away from sharing the most advanced defence and civil technologies and building India's production and manufacturing base. It has promoted India's interests within the European Union without hesitation, becoming both the gateway for and a strong partner of India in Europe. It has offered its biggest strategic asset, its vast Indo-Pacific territory, and equities in organisations such as the Indian Ocean Commission, to India. Indian Air Force planes have been deployed to Reunion Island. France has also refrained from commenting on India's internal affairs.

This is a remarkable record of cooperation between two countries. India has reciprocated by treating France as a dependable source of high-end defence equipment and technology that has led to military purchases worth billions of dollars.

There are good reasons for this to happen.

France values its strategic autonomy like India. France's ability to look at India differently from the Anglo-Saxon world gives it immense advantage in dealing with India. For India too, the relationship with France exemplifies its policy of strategic autonomy without being labelled anti-Western. In doing so, both countries celebrate their commitment to multiculturalism and pluralism at the domestic and international level. They empathise with each other's challenges, such as at the moment of France's sense of betrayal over the cancellation of the contract for French nuclear submarines by Australia and the accompanying announcement of the AUKUS grouping, or India's experience with cross-border terrorism.

The two countries have developed a culture of supporting each other. France was the co-founder of one of Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#)'s flagship international initiatives, the International Solar Alliance. It was the first European country to accept the UPI payments system. Several mechanisms have been established to strengthen the India-France partnership in the Indo-Pacific region even though France is not a member of the Quad. Bilateral strategic maritime cooperation between the two predates the Quad.

Every summit meeting between the leaders results in new areas of cooperation. The forthcoming one is expected to be no different. Apart from exceptional protocol gestures, the visit is likely to result in new announcements in the area of military and technical cooperation, relating to engines, aircraft, submarines and space, digitalisation, cyber security and climate change.

President Macron's personal contribution to the India relationship cannot be overstated. This will be his third visit to India, and with it, France gets the unique honour of being the country that has been invited the highest number of times as chief guest for the Republic Day.

Furthermore, President Macron's role at this time of global tensions and uncertainty is even more important. He is the youngest leader to be sworn in as President of France since Napoleon, yet today, in his second and last term, at the age of 46, he is the senior-most leader in Europe. The world needs a bridge between the West and the East and between the North and the South. Prime Minister Modi and President Macron have a unique opportunity to harness their friendship to these ends.

France bet on India very early on. India fully reciprocated. Today, those bets are paying off.

The writer is member, National Security Advisory Board and former deputy National Security Advisor

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