

CEREMONY AND SUBSTANCE: ON THE MACRON VISIT, INDIA-FRANCE TIES

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Given the circumstances behind the invitation to the French President Emmanuel Macron, [his visit to India](#) last week was always going to be more about symbolism and ceremony than about substance. Mr. Macron, the sixth French President to grace the Republic Day celebrations, [stepped into the breach](#) when U.S. President Joseph Biden declined the invitation. In addition, India and France had in 2023 already sealed a number of agreements as they marked [25 years of their strategic partnership](#) — a year that saw Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Mr. Macron meet a number of times. Not only had the two countries already announced a fairly ambitious “Horizon 2047” relationship road map but they had also stated plans for joint production of military hardware, cutting-edge technology transfers and new purchase deals for French aircraft, engines and submarines. Diplomats had their work cut out for them with the two sides having to prepare for the Republic Day visit with little time to spare, and with so many agreements already announced. Many even speculated whether India had “missed an opportunity” to extend invitations to other partners including from the South Asian neighbourhood or Global South, rather than getting a much-invited France.

As a result, it is understandable that many of the agreements announced after the Modi-Macron meeting in Jaipur, and their time together watching the Republic Day Parade, were essentially built on the road map. These included the “Defence industrial” road map, meant to expand on plans for the two countries to co-design, co-develop and co-produce defence hardware in the air, on land and sea, as well as a space-defence partnership. In addition, the two sides signed MoU documents on agriculture, digital health and science and technology cooperation. An assembly-line manufacture of civilian helicopters (Airbus-Tata) was a first, but a private B2B deal. The two sides also issued a joint statement on regional and international developments. India has been unable to find such common ground with other partners including the U.S. and Russia on these issues but was able to take shared positions with France on the condemnation of terror attacks in Israel, the need for humanitarian assistance in Gaza and Ukraine, and concerns over the Red Sea attacks. While they did not demonstrate progress in other areas of cooperation, including big ticket defence hardware deals being negotiated, nuclear cooperation for the long-delayed power project in Jaitapur and for small modular reactors, it is clear that each is a work in progress, demonstrating the continuity in a partnership built on a mutual respect for strategic autonomy, which Mr. Macron said at the presidential banquet was also driven by their shared commitment to “tradition and innovation”.

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