

## An Indo-French maritime partnership

French President Emmanuel Macron is coming to India, and preparations are afoot to make his visit a memorable one. On top of the agenda for discussions, reportedly, is maritime security. In a series of preparatory visits, French officials have underlined the need for a deeper nautical partnership with India. During a visit to New Delhi in October 2017, defence minister Florence Parly stressed “strategic cooperation in defence”, particularly maritime cooperation in South and South-East Asia. Earlier this year, foreign minister Jean-Yves Le Drian came calling, highlighting the need for stronger security measures in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

Official accounts suggest Indo-French naval cooperation is aimed at securing the critical sea lanes. The desire to pool operational resources in littoral Asia is driven ostensibly by the need to effectively combat security threats—piracy, trans-national crime and terrorism—as also to build security capacities in the Indian Ocean. For New Delhi, however, the more substantive pay-off of a nautical pact with France is a potential expansion of the Indian Navy’s operational footprint across the Indo-Pacific region. France, Indian analysts point out, is the only European power with a strong military presence in both the Indian Ocean (Réunion and Mayotte) and the Pacific (French Polynesia and New Caledonia). Its utility as a catalyst for India’s cross-theatre maritime outreach is immense.

Macron’s visit is expected to result in the signing of a reciprocal agreement granting French naval vessels access to Indian ports for repair and resupply, and Indian vessels the right to routinely use France’s Indian Ocean military bases. Besides the French base in the Réunion Islands, Paris is likely to allow Indian warships to utilize its military facilities in Abu Dhabi and Djibouti, where the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) already operates a logistical base.

For many in the Indian establishment, France’s long-standing political support for New Delhi makes it an ideal partner in the regional commons. Paris, Indian commentators say, has always stood by New Delhi, even in moments of crises. Not only has France routinely assisted India with vital defence equipment, it also played a key role in pulling New Delhi out of its international isolation in the aftermath of the 1998 nuclear tests.

France, of course, won’t be the first to sign a logistical pact with India. Washington concluded a Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (Lemoa) with New Delhi in August 2016, and Singapore last year allowed Indian naval ships extended access to its port facilities. Muscat too recently entered into a pact with India, granting Indian warships access to the strategically important base of Duqm on Oman’s southern coast. French facilities are likely to add to India’s network of nautical outposts in the IOR, including in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and Seychelles, where New Delhi plans to build and operate a military base. Notwithstanding a White Shipping Agreement with France, India’s naval planners know they have been slow to capitalize on France’s Indian Ocean facilities, particularly in the area of maritime domain awareness.

France’s proficiency with military manufacturing and defence trade buttresses the logic of a strategic partnership. Not only are French companies, such as Thales Group, Airbus Defence and Space, Dassault Aviation, and Naval Group extremely competitive, the country’s defence industry has a reliable record of production and supply. French firms also have particular expertise in navigating India’s choppy defence market, demonstrated by Paris’ success in securing contracts for the Rafale aircraft and Scorpene submarines (Project-75).

Crucially for New Delhi, a nautical pact with France sends a strong message to India’s geopolitical antagonists in maritime Asia. India will be hoping for a closer engagement in the Western Indian Ocean, where France has one of the most forward-deployed armed forces in the world. India’s

naval leadership would be keen to expand the scope and complexity of the Indo-French bilateral naval exercise VARUNA, while also exploring opportunities for French warships to participate in trilateral drills with Quad-partners (Japan, Australia and the US).

Paris' robust posture in the Pacific represents a similar strategic opportunity for New Delhi. France in 2016 offered to coordinate the navies of fellow European Union nations in conducting joint freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, a space where French warships have been deployed regularly since 2015. A partnership with the French navy in littoral South-East Asia would allow the Indian Navy to influence the security-dynamic of the Pacific, even extending operations to the Southern Pacific Islands.

The only reason New Delhi will be a wee bit cautious is because the bilateral relationship has hitherto relied heavily on defence trade. Much of the optics surrounding Paris' Indian Ocean outreach appears intended at securing new contracts for French defence firms. Indian policymakers would then need to carefully evaluate the real strategic benefits of closer naval ties with Paris. If all France needs is a deal to supply more fighter jets and submarines, a partnership in the nautical commons may not be worth the effort.

Ultimately, however, the true test of Indo-French maritime ties will lie in each side's ability to meet the other's expectations. While both parties would want to optimize gains by combating threats jointly, none is likely to be ready for a concession that amounts to a strategic compromise.

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