

## Indo-French ties: a signal for world powers

All-weather ally: India and France will join hands to 'maintain the safety of international sea lanes'. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT arranged

Marking the 20th anniversary of their strategic partnership, India and France stepped up their engagement to a new level by quietly and swiftly concluding the reciprocal logistics support between their Armed Forces.

In contrast, India and U.S. took almost 15 years and still could only conclude a curtailed version of it. A senior military officer said the agreement with France "does not suffer from the political sensitivities the way our agreement with the U.S. does."

Beyond the strategic consequences of the agreements is the deep diplomatic messaging from the two sides to all three world powers: U.S., Russia and China. The new Joint Strategic Vision for the Indian Ocean sends the message that India is not limiting itself to the "Quadrilateral" arrangement with the U.S. and its allies Japan and Australia to develop interests in the "Indo-Pacific".

### A message for China

The "Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region" is similar to the agreement signed with the U.S. in January 2015, a message for China, as the two countries will work to "maintain the safety of international sea lanes for unimpeded commerce and communications in accordance with the international law"..

Given the vast areas of cooperation between India and France, underlined by Prime Minister Narendra Modi as stretching from the "earth to the sky", the relationship contains an alternative to both the U.S. and Russia when it comes to military hardware, aircraft, space cooperation and nuclear reactors.

Western diplomats will point out that the U.S. alliance with France and its Major Defence Partnership with India are far deeper, while Russian diplomats will point to their older military ties with India and logistical agreements that date back much further. Even so the slew of agreements signed and the vision statement indicate that the strategic partnership with France, India's first in 1998, remains a competitor for influence.

In particular, Mr. Macron's statement that France wants India as its "first strategic partner here (region), and we want to be India's first strategic partner in Europe, and even the western world," will be read closely.

Despite the bonhomie, one spoiler in the ties could come from China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which India has strongly opposed. But France is likely to play a "leading role" in it.

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