

## An Enlarged Partnership

Mr Claude Arpi®

To grasp the intricacies of Indo-French relations in the field of

defence and security, it is necessary to first have a look at the historical background; it may help to grasp the deepening of the relations over the last decades and provide clearer perspectives for the future of the partnership.

### Historical Background: The Colonial Factor

A factor which weighed heavily in the Indo-French relations is the hangover of the colonial era. The British left the subcontinent in August 1947, while the French remained present in five tiny Establishments. For several reasons,<sup>1</sup> Paris could not follow the British example at that time, and over the years it became increasingly difficult to come out of the entrenched positions and find an honourable exit for France by returning to India the suzerainty over the French Establishments in India. Only the wisdom and the determination of the French Premier Pierre Mendès-France saved both nations from a longer and even more unpleasant conflict in 1954.

It is also important to note the parallel between the fate of the French Establishments in India and the situation in other French colonies, particularly in Indochina and North Africa. The *de facto* (1954) transfer of the French Establishments was linked with the fate of the Geneva Conference on Indochina and the *de jure* (1962) transfer was ratified by the Parliament soon after the Evian Agreement on Algeria. These elements, external to the bilateral relations between India and France played an important historical role.

### First Phase of the Defence Relations: 1947-1962

Historians usually consider the period between 1947 and 1962 as the first phase of the Indo-French relations. Year 1962 was for France the year it departed from the subcontinent constitutionally and also sorted out the Algerian conflict; for India, it marked the end of the dream of a *Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai* relationship.

Though the relations between France and India were not too cordial, as early as January 1947, the French Government asked for a ten-year extension of the 1945 agreement permitting military air ferries to fly across India.<sup>2</sup> Nehru, the Interim Prime Minister noted: "Public opinion in India is very much against the use of force by the French Government against the people of Indochina and anything which we do to facilitate the use of this force is bound to be resented and vigorously criticised."

However, on 16 Jul 1947 an Agreement on Air Services between India and France was signed, allowing French planes to fly to Indochina. The French armament sales during this first phase were relatively large despite the political tensions.

Though the Indian Air Force did not directly take part in the conflict with China, 49 *Ouragan* (toofanis) fighter planes (produced by Dassault Aviation), 110 *Mystère* and 12 *Alizée* (of Bréguet Aviation) were in service in 1962. Further, 150 AMX 13 light tanks were sold to India after an agreement signed in 1957. The total arms sales from France between 1950 and 1962 amounted to US\$ 794 million according to SIPRI database,<sup>3</sup> which made it the second most important supplier after UK (US\$ 4,612 millions), before USSR (US\$ 612 millions) and the US (US\$ 248 millions)

On 22 Sep 1962, General de Gaulle received Nehru in Paris. After congratulating the General for the settlement of the Algerian crisis, Nehru expressed his satisfaction for the ratification of the Treaty of Cession of the French Establishments in India.

De Gaulle replied that he was happy to see that India had dealt successfully with some of the issues on which the West had doubts at the time of Independence. At the end of the meeting, Nehru pointed out the danger coming from China "which spent most of its resources for preparing the bomb. ...It is for them a question of prestige" explained a worried Indian Prime Minister who, however, did not request the French President for armaments. Four weeks after this encounter in Paris, the Chinese attacked India.

## **Phase 2: 1963-1971**

On 31 Jan 1964, de Gaulle declared: "China, a great people, the most populous of the planet, a race patient, industrious, hard-

working ...a State more ancient than history, steadfast and proud of its ageless continuity; that is China of the ages.” Though the Americans were deeply unhappy, the French President decided to recognise the People’s Republic of China. France had found a new friend.

This ‘independent’ attitude of the French Government was in many ways similar to the one advocated by Nehru, minus of course, the *Force de frappe*.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, for the two nations, this did not translate into a significant improvement in the Indo-French relations.

France remained a friend, not an ally. Arms supplies from France reached nevertheless US\$ 323 million between 1963 and 1971, while the tally of the Soviet Union touched US\$ 7,100 million (US\$ 76 million for the US). Paris’s approach was businesslike and restricted to arms sales. During the period between 1962 and 1971, the French sales mainly pertained to *Alizé* aircraft, AS-30 air-to-surface missiles, *Entac* and SS-11/AS-11 anti-tank missiles. The ‘commercial’ attitude of the French Government was not always appreciated by its Western allies, but it enhanced France’s image in Delhi, who probably considered France as the most reliable Western partner.

### **Phase 3: 1971-1991**

During this period, France continued to remain just a ‘friend’; this translated into moderate arms sales during the next twenty years. From 1971 till its collapse in 1989, the Soviet Union supplied US\$ 33,622 million worth of armament to India, while France was only the third exporter with US\$ 2,113 million (after the United Kingdom US\$ 7,001 million).<sup>5</sup> One thousand short range air-to-air missiles *R-550 Magic-1* and 40 PA-6 diesel engines for offshore patrol vessels were ordered in 1979 as well as thousands of *Milan* anti-tank missiles in 1981.

Although the purchase of 150 Mirages 2000 was announced in December 1981 to counter the American F 16 ordered by Pakistan, the final agreement was for 40 planes only. A preferential credit rate of 9.25 per cent had been offered to India.<sup>6</sup> Since India needed the fighter aircraft quickly, the first part of an initial batch of 26 single-seaters and 4 two-seaters was shipped in 1985.<sup>7</sup>

The second part of this initial batch consisted of 10 more single-seaters with the M53-P2 engine, with these aircraft designated Mirage 2000H. A second batch of six Mirage 2000H single-seaters and three Mirage 2000TH two-seaters was shipped in 1987-1988. In 1986, 9 more planes were ordered.<sup>8</sup>

By the end of 1982,<sup>9</sup> India had received its first *Milans*, the reputed Franco-German anti-tank guided missile. Bharat Dynamics Limited started manufacturing them in January 1985 under French license.<sup>10</sup> Before President Mitterrand's visit in February 1989, France concluded a contract for the feasibility study of the construction of an aircraft-carrier in the dockyards of Cochin for the Indian Navy; this project never fructified.

### **1991-1998 - India Becomes a Power to Reckon With**

Year 1991 witnessed a new birth for India. After more than 40 years of planned economy patterned on the Soviet model, Narasimha Rao, the Prime Minister had the courage to open up the economy; the results can be seen today. It was as if the genius of the Indian race, bottled up during all those decades, suddenly sprang forth again. On the international stage, this period corresponded to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the chaos in Afghanistan which eventually led to the advent of the Taliban regime.

Despite the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the world turning unipolar, the Russian Republic remained India's main armament supplier during the period 1992-2006 with 13,751 USD. France was fifth (US\$ 797 million) after the Netherlands (US\$ 1,004 million), UK (US\$ 801 million) and Germany (US\$ 898 million). With the economic liberalisation in India, all efforts were focussed to make the local economy vibrant; the percentage of defence expenditure came down from a maximum of four per cent in the 1980's to less than three per cent in the nineties (2.6 per cent in 1996 and 2004).

### **The Strategic Partnership**

The most interesting aspect of the 1990s was the tremendous boost in bilateral relations given by the visits of President Chirac to India in January 1998 and Prime Minister Vajpayee's trip to Paris later in the year.

The striking feature was the setting up of a framework for a strategic partnership. Before reaching Delhi, the French President had declared that he was keen on an 'ambitious partnership'. Using de Gaulle-like language, Jacques Chirac saluted India, "a nation which has affirmed its personality on the world stage". He said that he had come to show that "France wanted to accompany India in its potent march [towards the future]."

Inaugurating a Seminar in Vigyan Bhavan, the French President elaborated on the nuclear deal. While reminding that "certain conditions are to be met", he suggested to: "reflect together with those of our partners involved, on the ways to reconcile our common will to cooperate and the necessary respect for the rules the international community has set itself".

Chirac's words were not mere political niceties. When India conducted its nuclear tests in Pokhran in May 1998, France was one of the few countries which did not condemn Delhi (or impose sanctions). This was greatly appreciated in Delhi and when Prime Minister Vajpayee returned Chirac's visit in October 1998, the new strategic dialogue could take its first concrete steps. These events set in motion a closer collaboration. From the friendship mentioned by de Gaulle, the relation had become a partnership.

Though President Chirac's visit to India in February 2006 was marred by the *Clémenceau* controversy, it further cemented the close relations between the two nations. On the eve of the visit, France's ambassador Dominique Girard had summed up the relations: "Our two nations now more than ever before have a major responsibility in relation to the rest of the international community and the promotion of peace and development. The strategic partnership that they have forged with one another must be based on sound and coordinated defence systems." The following visits of Presidents Nicolas Sarkozy and Francois Hollande cemented the partnership, but it needed to be taken to a new height.

### **Macron's Maiden Visit to India**

Twenty years after Chirac's historic visit, it is what was expected of President Emmanuel Macron's trip to India (9-12 Mar 2108). Macron indeed opened a new front in the relations, a sea front. His visit touched upon two aspects of the bilateral relations, the ancient and the modern (and strategic) one. To symbolise the first aspect, Macron offered to Prime Minister Modi, an original copy of the Bhagavat Gita translated from Sanskrit into French in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century by the great French scholar Émile Senart. The strategic angle was no less important.

The partnership was for the first time expanded to the Indian Ocean. Addressing the French Community in Delhi, the young President explained: "geopolitical context is deeply changed. India rightly fears the reorganisation of the world; she fears forms of hegemony in the region and in particular in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. And why not name it, she fears a Chinese hegemony."

He reminded his countrymen: "France is a power of the Indian and the Pacific Oceans; we are present at the Reunion, we are also there in French Polynesia and New Caledonia. And we are a maritime power, it is often forgotten but France is the second maritime power in the world. We have a strong Navy, we have nuclear submarines equipped like few other powers in the world; a maritime surveillance capability through our satellites and technologies; it is obvious we are a military and intelligence power ranking us among the first nations in the world."

This power, France is ready to share with India. He concluded, quoting the Australian Prime Minister, who spoke of 'freedom of sovereignty': "This renewed strategic partnership is reflected by the confirmation of a defense link that has already materialised in some very important contracts, be it in the naval or aviation domain, in the engine industry ...a coming generation of a new partnership on development of engines [the Kaveri for the Tejas], but also enhanced cooperation in terms of spatial surveillance or in terms of intelligence." Though we shall not deal with the collaboration on the Kaveri here, it could indeed be a game changer for the partnership.

### **Deepening the Partnership**

In an article for Carnegie India, C Raja Mohan and Darshana Baruah wrote about *Deepening the India-France Maritime Partnership*: “Faced with growing geopolitical turbulence and more aggressive maritime manoeuvring, India and France are eager to expand their strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific.” The authors elaborated: “As maritime security acquires greater salience in India’s foreign policy, New Delhi is increasingly looking to leverage its strategic partnerships, particularly with Paris. Although India and France have joined forces on a number of issues since 1998, regional cooperation in the Indo-Pacific has never risen to the top of the agenda. However, this may be about to change.”

The study cited a series of high-level discussions between New Delhi and Paris which focussed on the prospects of a stronger maritime security partnership: “Central to the recent discussions has been the creation of a framework for strategic coordination in the Indo-Pacific. ...As they explore their bilateral cooperation on regional security, the Indo-Pacific offers ample potential for such an enterprise.”

A highpoint of Macron’s visit was not only in the fourteen bilateral agreements signed at Hyderabad House, which should strengthen the bilateral economic, political and strategic ties between the two countries, but the following sentence of the Joint Statement: “The leaders reiterated that this cooperation will be crucial in order to maintain the safety of international sea lanes for unimpeded commerce and communications in accordance with the international law.”

It may translate into a logistics accord allowing India access to the strategically important French base in the Reunion Islands near Madagascar. Another possibility is the opening to India of the French facilities in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa where India’s rival China has already a military base.

This could be part of India’s new maritime strategy. In a commentary entitled *Pact with France boosts naval reach*, *The Deccan Herald* commented: “This will provide a huge shot in the arm to India’s naval reach in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. France retains control over the Reunion and Mayotte Islands in the Indian Ocean and New Caledonia and French Polynesia in the

South Pacific. It also has a permanent military presence in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa and in the United Arab Emirates. The recent agreement will enable Indian vessels access to facilities here. Indian naval vessels are already visiting the southern Indian Ocean.”

The article further asserted: “Access to French bases would enable our Navy to deploy there for longer periods. It is evident that Delhi and Paris have firmed up the arrangement with China in mind. With submarines and warships of the People’s Liberation Army Navy increasingly venturing into the Indian Ocean, the threat to India’s national security and economic interests is growing.”

A maritime deal with France, when finalised, could enhance India’s capacity to counter challenges from China and help protect the sea lanes used for India’s oil imports.

Raja Mohan and Baruah had noted: “India can support France’s full membership of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (Paris is currently a dialogue partner). France is already a member of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium. Paris, in turn, could help strengthen New Delhi’s engagement with the Indian Ocean Commission, as well as its maritime cooperation with the European Union.”

In the coming months, we shall see how this will translate. The scholars had added: “The range of potential agreements between India and France in the Indian Ocean is vast, and negotiating and implementing them will not be easy.”

And there is of course the Rs 59,000 crore deal for 36 Rafale fighters in September 2016; it will soon prove to be a game changer, mainly due to the offset clauses forcing the French to reinvest in India 50 per cent of the total deal’s amount, but also for India’s western and northern fronts.

Whether on the oceans or for the offsets, there is no doubt that the collaboration will not always be smooth, but trust seems to be present; it is the basic foundation of any special partnership.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Mendes-France decided to return the French Establishments to India the day after the successful conclusion of the Geneva Conference on



Indochina (20 July, 1954). See: Arpi Claude, *La politique française de Nehru – 1947-1954* (Collection des Pavillons, Auroville, 2001)

<sup>2</sup> To Indo-China in particular

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.sipri.org/contents/armstrad>

<sup>4</sup> 'Strike Force' in French, for dissuasion or deterrence.

<sup>5</sup> The Franco-British *Jaguar* aircraft purchased in 1979 is part of the British tally.

<sup>6</sup> ISNARD Jacques, (La France s'est engagée à livrer quarante Mirage-2000 à l'Inde), *Le Monde* 17 april 1982.

<sup>7</sup> As a bonus, Indian engineers received a six-month training in France with Dassault and Dassault-Systems. In 1984, they were the core group who started the Aeronautical Development Agency (ADA) in Bangalore. The ADA was to oversee the development of India's Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) programme.

<sup>8</sup> On 17 March 1998 an agreement was concluded between HAL and Dassault Aviation authorizing HAL to offer over-hauling facilities for Mirage and global customers.

<sup>9</sup> *Le Monde*, 22 December 1982

<sup>10</sup> *Indian Milan under way*, Jane's Defence Weekly, Londres, 22 Mar 1986, page 503.