

Strengthening Indo-French Defence Ties

Background

A few weeks after his state visit to the United States, Prime Minister Narendra Modi travelled to France on 13 & 14 July as the guest of honour at France's annual Bastille Day Parade in which a Tri Services Contingent from India also participated. The visit comes as France and India have sought to deepen their cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, and in the defence, security, and technological domains.

India and France have traditionally had close and friendly relations. In 1998, when French President Chirac visited India both the countries entered into a Strategic Partnership which affirmed their convergence of views and signalled a close and growing bilateral relationship. The areas of Defence Cooperation, Space Cooperation and Civil Nuclear Cooperation constitute three principle pillars of their Strategic Partnership. There has been significant progress in all areas of their bilateral cooperation due to frequent high-level meetings.

Annual Defence Dialogue

During the visit of President Macron to India in March 2018, the two countries decided to create an Annual Defence Dialogue at the Ministerial level. Raksha Mantri Shri Rajnath Singh held the 4th India-France Annual Defence Dialogue with Minister of Armed Forces of the French Republic Mr Sebastien Lecornu in New Delhi in November 2022. The Ministers reviewed the ongoing military-to-military cooperation which has increased substantially in the recent years. One of the key areas of discussion was defence industrial cooperation with a focus on 'Make in India'. Future collaborations and potential co-production opportunities were discussed. The Ministers recognised their convergences on number of strategic & defence issues and shared the commitment to work together on enhancing cooperation in bilateral, regional and multilateral fora, with a focus on the Indo-Pacific region. France is the current Chair of Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) and Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and both countries cooperate closely in these fora. [i]

Regular exchange of visits at the level of Services Chiefs already takes place. The three Services also have regular defence exercises. FRINJEX-23 between Indian Army and French Army was conducted at Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala on 07 and 08 March 2023. [ii] A major annual aero-naval event whose first edition dates back to 1983, is "VARUNA" in which the French and the Indian Navies deploy and operate together and exemplifies the high level of trust between them. The 2023 edition took place in the Western Seaboard in January 2023. [iii] The Seventh Bilateral Air Exercise between the Indian Air Force (IAF) and the French Air and Space Force (FASF) - 'Exercise Garuda-VII' – was held at Jodhpur in November 2022. The FASF participated in the exercise with Rafale fighter jets and A-330 Multi Role Tanker Transport (MRTT) aircraft, while the IAF contingent comprised Su-30 MKI, Rafale, LCA 'Tejas' and Jaguar fighter aircraft. [iv]

Various Staff Courses, training programmes also take place regularly. Apart from Service-level Staff talks, the two sides have a High Committee on Defence Cooperation (HCDC) which meets annually at the level of Defence Secretary and the French Director General of the Directorate of International.

Major Defence-Related Projects

France has supplied India with military aircraft since the 1950s. It has consistently proven to be a dependable supplier and a dependable partner. This tie began in 1953 with the purchase of a first-generation jet fighter named the Toofani for the Indian Air Force (IAF), the Dassault Ouragan. Later in 1956, the IAF also received the Dassault Mystere IV, which was used in the 1965 and 1971 wars with Pakistan. The single-engine Mirage 2000 fleet of multirole aircraft from Dassault, was introduced at the beginning of the 1980s succeeded the Mystere IV. Since then, the Mirage-2000 has been the frontline multirole fighter in the IAF and has proven its mettle during the Kargil war in 1998.

The Inter-governmental agreement for purchase of 36 Rafale jets by India in flyaway condition was signed in New Delhi on 23 September 2016 by Raksha Mantri Manohar Parrikar and French Defence Minister Le Drian. [v] The induction of the 36 Rafales at a cost of \$8.98 billion, was completed six years later.

In the past major weapon platforms have included AMX-13 Light Tanks, Alizé Anti-Submarine Warfare Aircraft, Alouette Light Helicopters. SS11 B1 and MILAN anti-tank missiles and Air Surveillance Radars as also the engine for the Dhruv LCH.

India also operates five Scorpene-class (Kalvari-class) submarines, while the sixth is currently undergoing sea trials. These six conventional diesel-electric submarines with advanced stealth features were built at Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Limited (MDL) through a technology transfer from DCNS.

Maritime Domain

In the recent years, there has been significant progress in India-France Maritime Security Cooperation, with a focus on the Indian Ocean Region. Both countries have significant interests in the Indian Ocean Region. India, with its 7500-kilometre-long coastline and two million square kilometres of Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), is a key power in the region. The IoR facilitates much of India's trade. France, on the other hand, is a state of the Indian Ocean Area due to its overseas possessions of the Mayotte and La Réunion Islands, as well as a substantial EEZ. There are 4,100 French forces stationed in the Indian Ocean, including deployments in both overseas territories, Djibouti and Abu Dhabi.[vi] As a result of their considerable interests both countries want to ensure peace and stability in the IOR.

Both nations have a history of fruitful collaboration and engagement between their fleets. The first naval exercise between India and France took place in 1983, and it was named "Varuna" in 2001.

The two governments agreed on a Joint Strategic Vision of the India-France Partnership in the Indian Ocean Area in March 2018. The vision document stated that the two democracies "shared concerns about emerging challenges in the IOR, including the security of maritime traffic in the face of terrorism and piracy, particularly in the Horn of Africa; respect of international law by all states, an organised crime such as trafficking and illegal fishing; climate change, environmental and natural resource protection." Both parties reaffirmed their commitment to further cooperation in the IOR and indicated a willingness to collaborate with additional like-minded nations. [vii]

Recently, French Navy Ships FS Dixmude, an amphibious helicopter carrier and La Fayette, frigate visited Kochi from 06 - 10 Mar 2023 as part of circumnavigation mission. [\[viii\]](#)

Indo French Naval cooperation is a key element of strengthening regional maritime security and stability in the Indo Pacific region. The visit of the French ships significantly contributes towards strong bilateral defence ties and strategic partnership.

Defence Aspects of the PM's Visit

One of the key highlights of this visit are the defence deals worth over Rs 90,000 crore. This includes 26 Rafale M aircraft including 22 single seaters and four trainer versions. The three additional submarines from DCNS will be a part of the Scorpene deal under Ministry of Defence's Project 75 aimed at planned procurement of diesel-electric submarines for the Indian Navy. The deals will be placed before the Defence Acquisition Council (DAC) in the before being announced in France. [\[ix\]](#)

The Navy is believed to have recently shortlisted the twin-engine, Rafale-M over Boeing's F/A-18 Block III 'Super Hornet' naval fighter following trials for possible deployment aboard INS Vikrant, the newly commissioned aircraft carrier. One of the factors could also be due to the French fighter's 'commonality' with the 36 Rafales that have recently been inducted in the Indian Air Force. [\[x\]](#)

The defence major Safran will jointly design, develop, test, manufacture, and certify an engine with India that will empower twin-engine advanced multi-role combat aircraft (AMCA) and the twin-engine deck-based fighter for Indian Aircraft Carriers which includes 100% transfer of technology. The DRDO chief Dr Samir V Kamat also visited to the Safran engine factory and the R&D Centre when he attended the Paris Air Show 2023. [\[xi\]](#)

It is also reported that France has expressed its willingness to partner the DRDO, DAE, and the Navy in building six SSNs. The Navy's SSN project was approved in early 2015, with the first such 6,000-tonne boats scheduled for completion by 2032-33. The SSNs were intended to supplement and operationally support the Navy's four locally designed and constructed 7,000-tonne Arihant-class nuclear powered missile submarines (SSBNs), built with Russian knowhow and technical assistance. [\[xii\]](#)

Earlier this year, France had offered to jointly develop SSNs with India under the aegis of its atmanirbharta initiative designed to enhance self-sufficiency in materiel requirements, by transferring technology based on its Barracuda-class SSNs, the first of which, INS Suffren, was commissioned into the French Navy in mid-2022. [\[xiii\]](#)

The Prime Ministers visit will also be useful in the context of the Ukraine war, where Indian and European perceptions differ. Strengthening strategic components of the partnership with France could also reassure other EU nations that despite few differences, partnership with India continues to be crucial. After Brexit, France is now the only nuclear weapon state within the EU which is a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

Conclusion

As the Indian troops marched in the Bastille Day Parade and the Rafales of the IAF form part of the flypast the French public should be aware that the presence of these troops especially those of the Punjab Regiment not only marks 25 years of the 'Strategic Dialogue' but also the significant role it played during the First World War when the Indian

Servicemen served with credit and honour on the battle fields of France and Flanders in World War I. The Punjab Regiment had fought in France in the battle of Neuve Chapelle in World War I.

France is one of India's most trusted strategic partners and both countries look forward to celebrating 25 years of their strategic partnership in 2023. This visit will also deliver common initiatives to respond to the key challenges of our time, including climate change, biodiversity loss and the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals and will be an opportunity for India and France to reaffirm their commitment to multilateralism, including in the context of India's G20 Presidency. Defence undoubtedly remains a major pillar of our relationship. Both countries share not only interests but also values.

Endnotes

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[iii] 21st Edition of India France Bilateral Naval Exercise 'Varuna' – 2023, Indian Navy <https://indiannavy.nic.in/content/21st-edition-india-france-bilateral-naval-exercise-%E2%80%98varuna%E2%80%99-%E2%80%93-2023#:~:text='Varuna'%E2%80%93%202023-,21st%20Edition%20of%20India%20France%20Bilateral%20Naval%20Exercise%20'Varuna'%20%E2%80%93,Seaboard%20today%202016%20January%202023>

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[ix] Manu Pubby, India to buy 26 Rafales, 3 Scorpene submarines from France, The Economic Times, 11 July 2023 <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-to-buy-26-rafales-3-scorpene-submarines-from-fran>

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[x] Rahul Bedi, PM Modi's France visit critical for Indian Navy, The Tribune, 04 July 2023 <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/comment/pm-modis-france-visit-critical-for-indian-navy-521376>

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[xiii] Ibid

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