

PM Modi's France visit: Shaping a multipolar world

 indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/pm-modis-france-visit-shaping-a-multipolar-world-8842678

July 17, 2023



Prime Minister Narendra Modi being received by French Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne upon his arrival at Orly Airport, in Paris, France, Thursday, July 13, 2023. (PTI Photo)

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While India has more than 30 strategic partnerships with various countries, it would be misleading to say that they all are of the same significance. Two questions are crucial in this context. One, is it a full-spectrum strategic partnership? Two, has the strategic partnership in question stood the test of time? Measured against these two criteria, **the Franco-Indian strategic partnership** comes out on top. The Franco-Indian partnership spans the full spectrum of what may be considered strategic — defence, space, climate change, critical technologies and people-to-people ties. More importantly, France has stood by India through thick and thin from the time the strategic partnership was first established in 1998.

Prime Minister **Narendra Modi has just concluded a hugely significant visit to France**. For once, words like “unprecedented” and “historic” used are not just hyperbole. This was after all France, so of course, there was pomp and circumstance. **France bestowed on PM Modi the highest civilian honour**. Our tri-services contingent, which marched past Champs-Elysees, must have made every Indian’s heart swell with pride. **Three documents, namely, the joint communique**, the Horizon 2047 roadmap and the list of specific outcomes put out by the two sides is enough to overwhelm even the most

inveterate policy wonk. Some have compared this visit to the one that PM Modi undertook to the US not so long ago. It should be obvious that the fact that PM Modi went to France so close on the heels of the US is the ultimate expression of India's strategic autonomy.

The **defence sector always grabs attention at Franco-Indian summits** and this was no exception. Key agreements: Safran, the French company and the DRDO (Defence Research and Development Organisation) will jointly develop jet engines for the advanced medium combat aircraft. Again, Safran will co-develop with Hindustan Aeronautics Limited engines for the Indian multi-role helicopter programme. Submarines are proposed to be jointly built by Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders and the Naval Group of France. In all of the above, the main takeaway is this: Franco-Indian defence ties have truly moved from a mere buyer-seller model to that of jointly designing, developing and co-producing it in India. This is a paradigmatic shift from the French side in terms of willingness to part with know-how and state-of-the-art technology. France can genuinely claim that it is one strategic partner which more than ever is contributing substantially to a Bharat which is "aatmanirbhar". Questions have been raised about the fate of the 26 Rafale marine aircraft for INS Vikrant. This will, no doubt, happen in due course. For India, following the war in Ukraine, diversification is the name of the game in defence acquisition. It is becoming increasingly clear that France will play a huge role in this.

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The Indo-Pacific, predictably enough, occupied centre stage in discussions between the two leaders. A roadmap has been agreed upon. France is not just a resident power in the Indian Ocean but has massive real estate in the form of La Reunion, New Caledonia and French Polynesia. It has a long Exclusive Economic Zone with 1.5 million citizens living there, not to mention bases in the Indo-Pacific. The roadmap already talks of cooperation being comprehensive and including the field of defence. Joint exercises between the two countries, use of French military bases by Indian forces and achieving real-time maritime domain awareness in the Indian Ocean are of paramount importance for India. Plurilateral arrangements with Australia and UAE are alluded to. More than anything else, it is refreshing to note that while there is boilerplate language on a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific, the roadmap underlines the fact that Franco-Indian cooperation seeks to secure not just economic but also security interests. This roadmap should attract attention in Beijing where it is often argued that it is "Indian Ocean", not "India's Ocean"! From our perspective, it should be clear that while we are on our own on the land border with China, in the maritime space India can count significantly on France along with our Quad partners.

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The trust developed between the two countries over the last 25 years has been unshakeable. So, the divergence between the two countries on the war in Ukraine has not been allowed to jeopardise the remarkable development of their bilateral ties. There

was a discussion at length between the two leaders on the situation in Ukraine in a spirit of mutual understanding of each other's positions. PM Modi would have benefitted enormously from the French assessment of the war in Ukraine in view of the forthcoming G20 summit to be chaired by India.

Franco-Indian cooperation on critical technologies, be it supercomputing, cloud computing, artificial intelligence and quantum technologies is crucial for India's future and may well determine the trajectory of the relations over the next 25 years. This will also give a fillip to the Indo-EU Trade and Technology Council, which has been slow to get off the blocks.

France has come to the informed conclusion that no global problem can be tackled meaningfully without India's participation. This explains the extraordinary emphasis on bilateral cooperation in the fields of climate change, energy security, biodiversity loss and counter-terrorism efforts, all of which figures prominently in the Horizon 2047 statement. This also illustrates France's determination to support India's candidature for permanent membership of the UN Security Council.

In sum, France and India are essentially taking long-term bets on each other. These are two middle powers, one in Europe and the other in Asia, with a similar conception of the world. In effect, both countries follow an independent foreign policy and practise strategic autonomy, which they hope will enable them to shape a multipolar world. More crucially, both these powers realise that there is a much better chance of this happening if they work in close concert.

The writer is former Indian Ambassador to France and currently Dean/Professor at OP Jindal Global University. Views are personal

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First published on: 17-07-2023 at 07:07 IST