

Indo-French partnership gets Republic Day boost

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French President Emmanuel Macron will be the guest of honour at our Republic Day celebrations on January 26, 2024. It is not that French presidents have not been invited in the past for our Republic Day parade, but two reasons make it special this time around. One, this is the first time President Macron is being bestowed this honour; two, the French President agreed to the invitation at short notice knowing that he was filling in for the United States (US) President Joe Biden who could not make it for a variety of reasons.



PREMIUM

Prime Minister Narendra Modi with French President Emmanuel Macron at the Elysee Palace in Paris on July 14. (AP)

Prime Minister (PM) Modi was the first overseas visitor to call on French President Macron soon after the latter's win at the presidential elections in May 2017. I was India's ambassador to France when Modi met Macron for the first time, and their instant chemistry was there for everyone to see. It was, therefore, something of an anomaly that previous French presidents such as Jacques Chirac, Nicolas Sarkozy and Francois Hollande have all made it as our guest of honour for Republic Day, but Macron is making it only now. It also comes close on the heels of the honour bestowed on PM Modi on Bastille Day celebrations on July 14, when Indian armed forces marched past the Champs Elysees. The decision by President Macron to visit us on January 26, therefore, shows rare magnanimity and a special commitment to the Indo-French strategic partnership.

The strategic partnership between France and India is multifaceted, but so are the relations India shares with major countries. What sets the Indo-French relationship apart is that it is a partnership devoid of any contention and one characterised by irreversible excellence. Indeed, there is an all-party consensus in both countries about the overriding importance of the Indo-French strategic partnership as a pillar of stability in an international order characterised by strategic turbulence. For these reasons, the Indo-French strategic partnership offers endless possibilities limited only by human imagination on both sides.

The traditional trifecta in the relationship used to be dominated by the defence, space and nuclear dossiers. And this gave the ties the solid foundation that has kept it in good stead. But over the last five years or so, the relationship has grown exponentially to cover new areas such as energy, the climate crisis, innovation and frontier technologies.

Defence and space will continue to be important. On defence, relations must go forward based on joint-designing and co-production. If need be, trilateral cooperation, like the one we have with the UAE, France and India, can be leveraged. For instance, there is no reason why Rafale aircraft cannot be produced in India for obviously the Indian market but also for markets like the UAE, Qatar and Egypt. The Horizon 2047 document puts space at the heart of the strategic relationship and asserts that access to space, space technologies and applications using space capabilities are at the centre of innovation, scientific development and economic growth. A bilateral strategic space dialogue has been institutionalised recently.

France is a resident power in the Indian Ocean with a large amount of real estate. India has strong strategic interests in the Indian Ocean. Both countries thus have vital stakes in the Indian Ocean and have adopted an Indo-Pacific Roadmap. Interestingly, they had agreed on a Joint Strategic Vision in the Indian Ocean Region in 2018, which has now been extended to the Pacific. This significant Indo-French cooperation is aimed at advancing economic and security interests, ensuring equal and free access to global commons, building sustainability partnerships and advancing the rule of international law based on sovereignty and territorial integrity. This will require pooling of our maritime resources which go beyond joint exercises and interoperability of security assets. I would go one step further and suggest that both countries share French military bases in the Indo-Pacific to substantially achieve these strategic objectives.

India and France have also drawn up a road map on cyber security and digital technology. Both countries have affirmed their commitment to an open, secure, stable and peaceful cyberspace. While welcoming the potential offered by the development of Artificial Intelligence (AI), particularly in the fields of sustainable development, e-governance, autonomous transportation, smart cities, health, education and agriculture, both countries have recognised the need for building an international, legal and ethical corpus to ensure that AI serves mankind in accordance with international law. India and France have also adopted a roadmap on Green Hydrogen to establish a reliable and sustainable value chain

aimed at both countries being world leaders in decarbonised hydrogen. It is immediately clear that France and India are collaborating in frontier technologies to shape the norms, values and rules for tomorrow.

So, what explains the exceptional and growing trajectory of the Indo-French strategic partnership? Some fundamental leitmotifs in bilateral relations are evident. First and foremost is the strategic congruence between the two countries with similar underpinnings of strategic autonomy and an independent foreign policy. Second is the total trust and reliability factor that has undergirded the relationship, whether it was the period post-1998 Indian nuclear tests, support for India in multilateral forums or fully respecting our security concerns when it comes to defence supplies. Most importantly, there is mutual understanding between the two countries about total non-interference in the internal affairs of the other country. It is entirely fitting, therefore, that France is the country of honour at our Republic Day celebrations on January 26, 2024. It is almost as if when India was searching for a replacement for Biden, Macron said to Modi: “Main hoon na”!

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