

Modi-Macron effect on India-France ties: The soft power dimension

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France President Emmanuel Macron's roadshow in Jaipur along with India Prime Minister Narendra Modi predictably drew attention.



French President Emmanuel Macron, who was the Chief Guest for India's Republic Day Parade this year, first landed in Rajasthan capital Jaipur on January 25, 2024. In 2016, then French President Francois Hollande – who also happened to be the Chief Guest – landed at Chandigarh (designed by Swiss French architect Le Corbusier) – capital of Punjab and Haryana.

Macron's roadshow in Jaipur along with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi predictably drew attention. The Indian PM and French President visited several sites – Hawa Mahal and Amer Fort – and the rich heritage of Rajasthan along with its arts and crafts were showcased. It would be pertinent to point out that the state of Rajasthan receives several French tourists every year.

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Agreements signed during Macron's visit to India and discussions pertaining to global issues

A gamut of agreements between India and France were signed during Macron's visit. In the sphere of defence, some of the highlights of the visit were – an agreement for a road map pertaining to defence cooperation for defence production, as well as important agreements for furthering space cooperation. Apart from this, agreements were signed between Airbus and Tata for an assembly line for H125 helicopters in India.

Agreements seeking to strengthen cooperation in areas including renewable energy, health, agriculture and joint research were also inked. India and France also announced that 2026 would be the year of India-France innovation.

While strategic cooperation between both countries has grown significantly ever since India signed a strategic partnership with France in 1998, they have also begun to work closely on several important global issues including climate change. The need for giving a boost to Indo-France cooperation under the umbrella of the Indo-Pacific and the trilateral with UAE were also discussed by both sides. The setting up of a solar academy jointly by both countries in Senegal, under the ambit of the International Solar Alliance was also announced.

Both sides also underscored the need for reform of multilateral institutions. During the Macron-Modi talks, the situation in Gaza as well as possible impact of the current situation in the Red Sea were discussed.

Education and the people to people dimension

There was also a strong emphasis on giving a further boost to people-to-people linkages between both countries – especially in the area of education. In a tweet on January 26, 2024, the French President said that he had set a target of attracting 30,000 Indian students by 2030 (currently there are about 10,000 Indian students in France). Following PM Modi's visit to France in July 2023, when he was the Guest of Honour at the Bastille Day Parade, the French President had announced France's aim to attract 20,000 Indian students by 2025 and increase the number to 30,000 by 2030.

In his tweet, the French President also said that he was expanding the Alliance Francaise network in India and highlighted other steps for attracting more international students. Both sides announced the operationalisation of a 5-year validity Schengen Visa for Indian Masters alumni of French institutions.

Given the fact that some western countries are beginning to impose a cap on international students, while others are revising their visa regimes, more Indian students could look at France as a destination for higher education.

Many Indian students could also benefit from the expansion of Alliance Francaise network and the new pathways announced by the French President, given the benefit of French in the global job market. The other important announcement related to people to people ties was the setting up of an Indian consulate in Marseille and French Bureau de France in Hyderabad. This would be beneficial not just for tourists from both countries, but even students and professionals.

In conclusion, while there was a strong strategic and economic dimension of India's ties with France evident from Macron's India visit, there was a clear emphasis on the "Soft Power" dimension which has been a strong bond between both countries. While cooperation in the economic and strategic sphere is likely to strengthen between both countries, people to people contacts via tourism, education and the arts are likely to further grow due to some of the agreements signed during the French President's India visit.

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