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Emmanuel Macron in India for Republic Day: Reflecting the Deepening Partnership between France and India in the Indo-Pacific

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SYNOPSIS

Six months after Narendra Modi was honoured during France's Bastille Day on 14 July 2023, the Indian government returned the favour by inviting Emmanuel Macron for its 75th Republic Day on 26 January 2024. These high-level visits underscore a growing bilateral relationship between France and India, which has experienced unprecedented expansion across cultural, economic, diplomatic, and, most importantly, strategic domains. Nuclear energy, aerospace, research and development, arms exports, and collaborative military exercises contribute to the strengthening of bilateral ties. The emergence of the Indo-Pacific framework provides an opportunity for both countries to further enhance their relations.

COMMENTARY

Emmanuel Macron is the [sixth](#) French head of state to be invited as chief guest of India's Republic Day since 1976, [more](#) than any other country. In July 2023, Indian troops participated in the [military parade in Paris](#). This time, the French president's visit to Delhi on India's 75th Republic Day was highlighted by a [contingent](#) of French Foreign Legionnaires opening the ceremony, accompanied by two French Rafale fighters and an MRTT tanker aircraft flying over Kartavya Path.

France and India have maintained a longstanding bilateral relationship dating back to the 17th century when the French monarchy pursued the ambition of building a colonial empire in South Asia. This has led to France's lasting presence in India,

notably in Pondicherry. After India's independence in 1947, the two countries continued to foster strong relations, culminating in a [strategic partnership in 1998](#). France is one of the few countries that did not condemn India's [nuclear tests](#) and supports India's goal of becoming a member of the [UN Security Council](#).



French President Emmanuel Macron meets with the President of India, Smt Droupadi Murmu, at Rashtrapati Bhavan on 26 January 2024 for India's 75th Republic Day. Bilateral ties between France and India continue to be bolstered by convergent foreign policies, especially by collaborations in the Indo-Pacific. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Strategic Autonomy

The French and Indian diplomacies have consistently adopted convergent foreign policies characterised by a commitment to strategic autonomy, signifying the promotion of multilateralism and a rejection of "bloc politics" reminiscent of the Cold War.

Today, the ["puissance d'équilibre"](#) advocated by President Macron resonates with India's concept of [multi-alignment](#), theorised by Foreign Minister Dr S. Jaishankar. France holds memberships in the G7, UN Security Council, NATO, and European Union (EU), while India is a member of the G20, BRICS, Quad, and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Moreover, the two countries collaborate in the Indian Ocean region through various forums, including the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS).

A notable example of their autonomous posture in contemporary geopolitics is the two-state policy in response to the current crisis in the Middle East. India and France have opted to deploy [military vessels under national command](#) to ensure freedom of navigation in the Red Sea, collaborating but not entirely relying on the US-led operation Prosperity Guardian.

This shared vision of international relations has allowed India and France to develop a comprehensive defence partnership.

Defence Contracts and Beyond

Following its independence in 1947, India sought to diversify its sources of military equipment, leading to a substantial growth in French arms sales to the country. [From](#)

[2002 to 2023](#), France was the second-largest supplier of arms to India, following Russia, and India stands as France's primary client. The two countries are currently exploring new areas of bilateral cooperation, encompassing defence, nuclear energy, and technology transfers – a prospect actively pursued by India's defence industry.

Several contracts stand out as emblematic. [Six Scorpène-class submarines](#), constructed by shipyards in Mumbai, are now in service, and 36 Rafale fighter jets were delivered to India between 2020 and 2022. In 2023, after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's attendance at the July 14 celebrations, India announced the acquisition of three additional submarines and [26 Rafale jets](#). In January 2024, India and France unveiled a "[defence industrial roadmap](#)" for cooperation on defence production, aiming for future collaboration in "co-design and co-development" spanning defence aerospace, autonomous vehicles, and cyber defence.

The decision to engage in defence cooperation is not politically neutral. It entails the sharing of training standards, operational culture, technological processes, and doctrinal implementation, solidifying the bilateral relationship over several decades. In addition to these civil-military collaborations, armed forces participate in several [bilateral](#) and [multilateral](#) military exercises throughout the year.

An Indo-Pacific Momentum

While both countries adopted Indo-Pacific strategies in 2018, the strategic upheaval caused by [AUKUS in 2021](#) has notably shifted France's focus towards the Indian Ocean, particularly India, as a new cornerstone of its foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific.

A "[Franco-Indian roadmap for the Indo-Pacific](#)", signed in 2023, outlines 12 points as pillars of collaboration in the broader region. The roadmap encompasses issues such as seabed exploration, space cooperation, maritime collaboration, solar alliance, the Franco-Indian campus, and the Pacific Ocean region. New avenues of cooperation have emerged, including those related to the Indo-Pacific, strategic technologies like artificial intelligence, and climate change.

The French territory [La Réunion](#) is gradually evolving into a strategic platform for Franco-Indian military collaboration in the region. The two countries signed a logistics cooperation agreement in 2018 for Indian naval forces to access the Réunion base. Joint patrols involving an Indian P8I aircraft are regularly conducted. With a range of 2200 km, this aircraft can monitor the entire eastern coast of Africa from Réunion.

Avenues for Further Engagement

The Franco-Indian partnership could easily extend to other countries on specific issues, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), with whom a [trilateral](#) initiative was established in September 2022. The initiative details cooperation on nuclear energy, environmental protection, and climate change between the three countries. These trilateral partnerships have the potential to expand to include other "like-minded partners" such as Indonesia or Singapore. These nations share a commitment to non-alignment, and both France and India have had bilateral engagements with them for decades.

Furthermore, while the Indian Ocean is a large component of the Franco-Indian bilateral relationship, both diplomacies are considering enhanced collaboration in the Pacific Ocean region. According to a joint [statement](#) issued on 14 July 2023: “In 2018, India and France agreed on a ‘Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region’. We are now ready to extend our joint efforts to the Pacific.”

Both countries are already implementing forums for Pacific Island countries, such as the [France Oceania Summit](#) and the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC). France is a resident power in French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, and Clipperton. India has a privileged relationship with Fiji, where there is a significant Indo-Fijian diaspora (nearly 40% of the population). Additionally, India is a dialogue partner of the Pacific Islands Forum – the principal institution in the wider Oceania region. The Pacific region is emerging as the new frontier for Franco-Indian collaboration.

Conclusion

Convergence and complementarity do not necessarily imply alignment or alliance.

The French and Indian Indo-Pacific strategies primarily respond to national imperatives. It is essential for France to establish itself as a legitimate regional power without aligning with any other regional power. Meanwhile, the challenging relations with powerful neighbour China and the rivalry with Pakistan remain pivotal geopolitical factors for India.

Each strategy possesses specificities and may, at times, limit the prospects of Franco-Indian collaborations, especially in their relationships with the two major powers – the United States and China. Initially, Modi extended a Republic Day invitation to US President Joe Biden, who did not [respond positively](#), positioning Macron as a prestigious Plan B. In contrast, France is not part of the Quad and maintains a singular relationship with China, particularly at the UN Security Council.

Russia represents another significant point of divergence between France and India. Despite Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Moscow remains a crucial partner for Delhi. On 26 January, the [Rafales, Sukhoi-30s and MiG-29s](#) flying over Kartavya Path provided a tangible example of India's multi-alignment.

However, these divergences are not expected to impact the Franco-Indian relationship, as the two countries are now committed to long-term engagement.

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