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India-France partnership

Published On: 10-02-2023

Why is in news? The celebration by India and France of 25 years of their strategic partnership (January 26) presents an important opportunity for both to introspect on their relations

An overview of Bilateral Relation

India and France have traditionally close and friendly relations.

The signing of a Strategic Partnership in 1998 between France and India under President Jacques Chirac was the first step in a partnership that has grown to encompass multi sectoral cooperation, across nuclear, space, defence, cyber security, intelligence-sharing and counter-terrorism initiatives.

Political relation

India and France have had regular exchange of visits at the highest level. They also have a range of regular institutional dialogue.

India-France Strategic Dialogue takes place between NSAs from both sides.

The countries decided to deepen their bilateral strategic partnership by signing various new agreements during the visit of President Macron to India in March 2018.

Both countries concluded a bilateral agreement on “Exchange and Reciprocal Protection of Classified or Protected Information”.

They also issued a “Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region” to maintain the safety of international sea lanes, for countering maritime terrorism and piracy and for building maritime domain awareness.

India and France also signed an “Agreement for the provision of reciprocal logistics support between their Armed Forces” to extend logistical support on reciprocal access to their respective facilities for their armed forces.

Defence Cooperation

France has emerged as a key defence partner for India, becoming the second largest defence supplier in 2017- 2021.

France has emerged as a major strategic partner for India with crucial defence deals and increased military to military engagement.

A key example of this is the inducting of the French Scorpene conventional submarines, being built in India under technology transfer agreement of 2005, and the Indian Air Force having received 36 Rafale fighter jets.

The Tata group has also tied up with Airbus to manufacture C-295 tactical transport aircraft in Vadodara, Gujarat.

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This line is expected to be expanded into other civilian and military aircraft manufacturing in a joint venture with France.

These relations are further fortified with the robust network of military dialogues and regularly held joint exercises — Varuna (navy), Garuda (air force), and Shakti (army).

The importance of the defence partnership was further underscored in the recent statement by the French Ambassador to India, Emmanuel Lenain — that France is a willing partner for India as it builds its national industrial base for the defence industry and for critical strategic defence projects.

Economic Relation

According to data from the Embassy of India in Paris, in the period April 2018 to March 2019, India-France bilateral trade stood at \$11.89 billion (+4.15 %) as compared to the corresponding period the previous financial year.

India's exports to France were valued at \$5.23 billion, up 6.78 %. Meanwhile, French exports to India increased by 2.17 % during the same period to \$6.66 billion.

Indo-French sales in defence rack up huge numbers, with the Rafale deal costing around €7.87 billion, and the sale for the 'Project 75' (P-75) to build six Scorpene submarines costing around €3 billion.

Geopolitical relation

France was among the first countries with which India signed a civil nuclear deal. Paris also played a critical role in limiting India's isolation in the non-proliferation order after the 1998 nuclear tests.

In a sign of expanding cooperation, France supports India's bid for permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council as well as its entry into the Nuclear Suppliers Group.

An area of importance for both is climate change, where India has supported France in the Paris Agreement expressing its strong commitment towards mitigating climate change impact.

New Delhi and Paris, as part of their joint efforts on climate change, launched the International Solar Alliance in 2015.

While there are divergences over the Ukraine crisis, there is a broad understanding of each other's position and both countries are working together to coordinate on playing a constructive role in the crisis.

Both countries share concerns over the rise of China and its aggressive behaviour, regionally and globally, and have committed to working together to ensure that there is no imbalance in the Indo-Pacific.

Maritime times in Indian Ocean

The deepening of the strategic partnership is also visible in their maritime cooperation. India and France are resident powers of the Indian Ocean and in the Indo-Pacific.

The importance of the Indian Ocean Region was visible during the visit of French President Emmanuel Macron's visit to New Delhi in 2018 when the leadership of both countries welcomed the "Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region" which presented a blueprint for a strengthening of ties.

In operational terms, Franco-Indian joint patrolling in the Indian Ocean signals New Delhi's intent to engage with like-minded partners in expanding its footprint in the Indian Ocean.

Maritime security has further gained momentum as both countries have articulated their common vision for a free, fair and open Indo-Pacific.

As both countries share a comprehensive strategy for the Indo-Pacific (it seeks to provide comprehensive solutions for maritime security, regional cooperation, and climate change adaptation), India and France in September 2022 agreed to set up an Indo-Pacific Trilateral Development Cooperation Fund that will support sustainable innovative solutions for countries in the region.

The two partners have formed a trilateral grouping with the United Arab Emirates to ensure maritime domain awareness and security from the east coast of Africa to the far Pacific.

Potential Areas of cooperation

India's partnership with France is built on common values and goals.

Both have underlined the 'importance of maintaining strategic autonomy with a shared understanding of global risks in many domains.

There is a high-level India-France political dialogue that is ongoing in defence, maritime, counterterrorism and the Indo-Pacific.

They are now forging ahead with cooperation in issues such as digitisation, cyber, green energy, a blue economy, ocean sciences, and space'.

The Way Ahead

India and France understand each other's interests and dependencies, be it in relation to China or Russia. In the marking of a long strategic partnership, a common interest in enhancing strategic autonomy and improving resilience, there is much ground ahead for further collaboration.