

# Issue Brief

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Indo-French  
Defence Ties:  
Past, Present,  
&  
Future

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# *Indo-French Defence Ties: Past, Present, and Future*

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## **Abstract**

This paper offers an analysis of the Indo-French defence partnership, tracing its historical roots, current strategic engagements, and future trajectories. It begins by contextualising the bilateral relationship within the evolving global order and the shared pursuit of strategic autonomy by both nations. The historical section highlights how both countries have aided each other from the colonial era to wars fought by Independent India. The present-day collaboration is explored through joint exercises, maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, and logistical agreements like the Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (MLSA).

Looking ahead, the paper outlines co-development initiatives in aerospace, submarine technology, and semiconductor fabrication, alongside expanding MRO capabilities and space cooperation. It underscores the growing role of private industry and MSMEs in strengthening bilateral defence manufacturing. The document concludes by situating Indo-French ties within contemporary geopolitical shifts especially in West Asia, Africa, and the Indo-Pacific and argues for deeper strategic engagement to uphold multipolarity and global security.

**Keywords:** Strategic Autonomy, Indo-Pacific, Co-development, Multipolarity, Strategic Partnership

## **Introduction**

In the rapidly changing world order, Multilateralism is slowly upending Multipolarity, with economic and trade activities taking a lead over the security needs. The continuance of these economic activities is a must for both, the Global South to move towards steady development, and Global North to maintain its relative stature in the world order. India and France can be considered to be the most appropriate representations of the Global South and the Global North, as both are known to vie for strategic autonomy in the changing global order. It has also brought them to sign a Strategic Partnership on 26 January 1998, covering areas of defence, civil nuclear energy, space and security. On the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of this Strategic Partnership, “Horizon 2047”, a new initiative was unveiled in July 2023 summit.

## Past

Historically, India and France have had defence related interactions since the fading of the Mughal Empire. The French fought against the British for establishing themselves in India but did not succeed and were restricted to only five enclaves at Pondicherry (present day Puducherry including Karaikal, Yanam, Mahe) and Chandernagore (present day Chandannagar), all later incorporated into independent India. Moreover, the Sikh Army under Maharaja Ranjit Singh, also saw participation of French soldiers.

During World War I, over 1,30,000 Indian soldiers served in France in many battles, Flanders and Somme being the famous ones. Some 9000 Indian soldiers soaked the French countryside with their blood, not returning to their loved ones, in a way repaying a debt of sorts. In World War II, Pondicherry was the first French Overseas territory to abandon the Vichy Regime (which had collaborated with the Nazis) and join the 'Free French' under General Charles de Gaulle. Post-Independence, Ouragan (Toofani) and Mystere Aircrafts, AMX-13 Light Tanks were procured from France which were used during the 1965 and 1971 wars. Later, in the 80s it was the French Mirage 2000 which secured our airspace, saw action in Kargil and destroyed Balakot terror camps in the IAF cross-border strike against Pakistan. In the latest, during Operation Sindoor from 07 to 10 May 2025, French weapons like the Scalp and Hammer missiles were used for accurate destruction of targets. We see the Raffle Aircrafts soaring high with IAF, soon a Naval version of which along with Six French Scorpene Submarines will protect our Seas too.

## Present

India and France, both have stakes in the Indo- Pacific region, that was realised much before the current West Asia and Red Sea conflicts. In 2018, an agreement on 'Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region', covering the French Mayotte and Reunion Islands was accepted. This Strategic vision was extended to the Pacific portion of the Indo- Pacific region, where the French have territories of New Caledonia and French Polynesia. It is beneficial for both to ensure peaceful economic activities across the Indo-Pacific region. These security interests in the Indo- Pacific regions also follow PM Modi's Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) vision and resonate with similar views of President Macron.



To ensure this kind of security, there is a need for constant maritime cooperation, a 24x7 real-time interaction between the two countries, providing valuable information for improved coordination and participation to keep the Indo-Pacific region safe. While this is happening through the Multinational platform of the Combined Maritime Force in the Western Indian Ocean, it also involves information gathering and disseminating institutions which cover the Indo-Pacific region, such as the Indian Navy's Information Fusion Centre- Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), European Maritime Awareness mission in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASoH), Regional Coordination Operations Centre (RCOC) Seychelles, as also ReCAAP Singapore and RMIFC Madagascar.

Collaboration through agreements like Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (MLSA) signed in 2018 between the two countries has present and future implications. With each side agreeing to the others use of its military bases for fuel, spares and services, it extends the reach of the Indian Armed Forces to French bases in Indian Ocean (Reunion and Mayotte), Pacific Ocean (French Polynesia and New Caledonia), Africa and other parts of the world. MLSA was validated recently when a French Rafale aircraft, that was participating in Exercise Tarang Shakti in 2024 developed technical issues and were rectified using spare parts sourced from IAF's inventory. There are other multinational military exercises like Desert Knight (Air Forces of UAE, France & India) wherein the armed forces of both the countries engage, then there are a few very focussed bilateral ones that ensures practical coordination between India and France' armed forces:

- **Exercise Varuna.** Naval Exercise that aims to improve Indo-French naval cooperation and tactical coordination.

- **Exercise Shakti.** Army Exercise to improve jointness between both sides to carry out military operations in a sub-conventional arena.
- **Exercise Garuda.** Air Force exercise which provides the grounds for both air forces to expand operational capability and interoperability.
- **Exercise FRINJEX.** The first of its kind was held in March 2023 between the amphibious forces of both countries and was mainly aimed at joint humanitarian assistance and disaster relief for a displaced population.

## **Future**

The current geopolitical pulls and push in Europe (Ukraine War), West Asia (Gaza, Syria and Iran), burning Africa, the Taiwan issue and the two giants China and USA flexing their muscles for control over the Indo – Pacific region have made the world very unstable. With the past and present looked into, it is time to see where the future may take Indo-French defence ties in this rapidly changing geopolitical world.

## **Strategic Partnership**

During the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Strategic Partnership in 2023, both have agreed to build strong Defence Industrial Capabilities together. India's Defence and Aerospace Industry is growing rapidly and France is an important partner to complement the progress. A technical office of DRDO is being set up at Paris and the current bilateral programmes that will benefit both and also other countries are enumerated below:

- Joint Development of Combat Aircraft Engine
- Helicopter Engine Development for the Indian Multi Role Helicopter Programme
- Development of Indian Submarine fleet post success of the Scorpene Submarine Construction Programme
- Transfer of Technology for Forging and casting of Shakti Helicopter Engine
- MoU between Garden Reach Shipbuilders (India) and Naval Group (France) to collaborate in the field of surface ships
- French National Centre for Space Studies (CNES) and the Indian Space Research Organisation in 2019 have agreed to establish a system of 8-10 satellites for a maritime surveillance system in India

### ***Military Cooperation***

India and France have, in principle, agreed to increase the interaction between militaries of both the countries. We will from now probably see an increase in the frequency and volume of the bilateral military exercises. While both the countries are engaging positively wherein defence matters are concerned, a need does exist to improve military intelligence sharing mechanism for anti-terror and cyber-terror issues. In future, as Indian maritime capability grows, the responsibility of keeping the trade routes open may exist for not only Indian Ocean but also the Pacific part of the Indo- Pacific region. For ensuring the security of sea routes for trade and economic activities, there may be a requirement for both India and France to individually or collectively project military force in faraway places.

### ***Defence and Aerospace Industry Manufacturing***

Private Defence and Aerospace Companies of both the countries can uplift the defence ties to an altogether different level. In addition to the strategic partnership, there is a lot that is happening in the private Defence and Aerospace Sector. French companies have evaluated and already given contracts to Indian Companies, Mahindra and Dynamatic Technologies for Falcon Aircrafts and Tata Advanced Systems for the Rafale.

It is a well-known fact that the Indian defence manufacturing sector is financially very competitive. In recent years, there are a number of success stories wherein Indian defence companies have produced quality goods and that too at a reasonable cost. Moreover, India's defence export has seen an upward curve, Rs. 23,622 in FY 2024-25, a 12.04 % increase over the year before. Hence, a French collaboration with the Indian Defence and Aerospace Industry will result in dual benefits for France i.e. a diversified steady supply chain and considerable savings to its national coffers.

### ***MROs Services of the Indian Defence Industries***

Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) of India have indigenised 12,300 items for the Maintenance Repair Overhaul (MRO) of Indian Defence Equipment and varies from parts as simple as nuts, bolts and springs to complex Line Replaceable Units (LRUs). In addition to spare parts, entire MROs of major platforms such as aircrafts, ships and tanks are now being given to the Indian Defence and Aerospace Industry. This can be easily replicated for France's MRO requirements. For best outcomes, it has to be an Indian industry led effort as well as joint effort of both French and Indian Industrialists with the backing of both

governments. It may be pertinent to state that French MRO Programmes for Rafale & Mirage Aircraft in India, are already taking shape.

### ***Semiconductor and AI: The Chips War***

There is a Chips / Semiconductor Competition that is going on and all electronics (including defence ones) need these aplenty. The industry is concentrated in USA, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan and Netherlands and with unpredictable supply chains, both India and France have taken initial steps with the Governments facilitating and the Private Industry participating. France's Semiconductor industry faces challenges of high cost of advanced integration, supply chain complexity, and talent retention while Indian Semiconductor industry lacks mature fabrication ecosystem, IP creation, and skilled workforce. In India, the three States of Assam, Gujarat and Maharashtra are witnessing investments to the tune of thousands of crores by the private players for infrastructure and skills required for this industry. Once all the pieces are in place, the costs of these electronic chips will be a fraction of what they are being produced for today. In the future, India's design talent may be combined with French fabrication expertise to co-develop next generation chips for defence, AI and other sectors. The affordability of Indian manufacturing will definitely help both the countries move towards strategic autonomy in this new essential requirement with assured supply chains.

### ***Space Cooperation***

India and France share a five decades old space partnership and well established space programmes. It was France which helped India in the infrastructure building for the ISRO facilities from where we have seen launch of Indian spacecrafts that have created history by landing on Moon and Mars. However, it is the Indian Private Sector (majorly startups) which was allowed entry in 2020 that will bring rich dividends. Over 200 companies have since entered this domain. The decision of putting new private industry winds into the sails of the Indian Space Programme has already started giving benefits. Providentially, India and France, in March 2024, have agreed to increase interaction with emphasis on Defence Space Industrial Cooperation. This will soon ensure a more robust understanding of each other's capabilities and needs in the Defence Arena of this vertical.

## **Indo – French Relevance in Contemporary Geopolitics**

China's challenge to USA's hegemon status has resulted in the world undergoing tectonic geopolitical shifts. A short look at the current fluctuations in the world tells us how the Russian influence over Europe and its economy, through its competitively priced gas imports, has been negated somewhat by the Ukraine War. Similarly, the Russian and Chinese block suffered a setback in West Asia, having been pushed back in Syria, Lebanon and Iran. In Africa, a surge of Nationalism and Coups mainly in few Francophone countries has allowed a power vacuum with reducing influence of the collective West. This geopolitical empty space is being filled by the Russian security (Private Wagner Group) and Chinese Economic Diplomacy (Belt & Road Initiative). In the Pacific, USA's economic influence is waning and it is trying its best to ward off the Chinese economic challenge in the numerous Island Nations through QUAD and AUKUS.

With both India and France being proponents of strategic autonomy and a multipolar world, the Indo – French Strategic Partnership can play a major role in current geopolitics. In West Asia, India's growing economic influence with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and France's defence partnership with UAE, Saudi Arabia etc., may provide a very robust environment for growth and development of the region. The Indo – French diplomacy may provide the balm to sooth the wounds of West Asia once the current fires die down. In Africa, France may look up to India, champions of the global South and with deep historic and economic ties, to maintain its relevance and together challenge the Chinese economic influence. It's in the Indian Ocean part of the Indo – Pacific arena where this strategic partnership can bring out most results. With the strongest Navy available in the region and excellent efforts to ensure free movement of trade across the Indian Ocean, India and France can leverage their military, economic and diplomatic strengths to keep the Indian Ocean Region free from conflict and with secure sea lanes of communications for all.

## **Future Strategic Engagement**

India and France are correctly poised to take this strategic engagement into the future, it will mainly be in deepening of the defence and maritime cooperation, jointly leading military and economic initiatives in the Indo-Pacific and West Asian countries. With a growing Navy and expanding security role in the Indo-Pacific, India will likely complement France by using French military assets and overseas territories for providing security in the Indo-Pacific for free movement of trade and commerce and humanitarian assistance in times of natural calamities.



In the economic front, there are already over a thousand French companies working in India employing over 300,000 persons. The French are a large FDI source for India investing mainly in Defence, Automotive, IT, Energy and Luxury Sectors. Along with increasing ties in Defence & Aerospace, Semiconductors & Space programmes are another two future synergetic areas with historical ties between France' CNES and ISRO and the now growing Private Indian players in both.

The two form an interesting Global North and Global South partnership and can address Challenges like Climate and Biodiversity, conflict resolution and the most important UN Reforms. In future, France can support in all EU-India initiatives while India can reciprocate by addressing French Global South issues in Africa and other regions. There will be challenges like resource constraints, diverging priorities in geopolitics etc. but working together these can be overcome with time and tactics.

## Conclusion

The world is changing, with a very visible Geopolitical competition taking place which is pulling nations to take sides and we do not know how this will affect India and France. Some facts do remain, both countries seek strategic autonomy and both are heavily invested in attaining the same. There have been interesting positive historical bonds with not much colonial baggage between the two. The current defence ties and other interactions seem to be moving in the right direction too, with both nations accruing benefits to their armed forces as well as their respective Defence and Aerospace Industries. In the backdrop of the Geopolitical changes that are happening at a very fast pace especially in the Indo- Pacific region, it is the future of these defence ties that will be tested, with France being a NATO and EU member, while India goes along with its multi-aligned foreign policy.

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