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## Indo-French NSA Level Meet and Strategic Implications

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Ajit Doval, India's National Security Advisor (NSA), met his counterpart, Emmanuel Bonne, Diplomatic Adviser to the French President, on January 5, 2023, for a bilateral strategic dialogue. The meeting was aimed at promoting a strategic partnership to ensure peace, stability, and security in the Indo-Pacific based on shared beliefs. Both leaders reaffirmed their commitment to rule-based international order and strategic autonomy in the emerging Indo-Pacific construct<sup>1</sup>. The bilateral issues covering cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, space, cyber, and nuclear energy domains remained the focus areas. The two sides discussed the prevailing global security environment, the scope for expanding the existing defence cooperation, and jointly developing future technologies in line with the 'Make in India' or 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' priorities.<sup>2</sup>

### **Historical Bilateral Engagements**

Historically, France and India have had cordial relations, and since the two countries formed a strategic partnership in 1998, there has been significant progress in all areas of their bilateral cooperation thanks to frequent high-level meetings. Defence, counterterrorism, nuclear energy, and space exploration head of state/government level interactions and collaboration<sup>3</sup>. Mirage -2000 deal, followed by Nuclear Peace Cooperation, cemented the bilateral relations with India, soon becoming a preferred defence acquisition partner with France. France was the first country with which India signed a treaty agreement on public cooperation in the field of nuclear energy to enable India to resume full civil nuclear cooperation. France was the first country with which India entered into an agreement on nuclear energy following the waiver given by the International Atomic Energy Agency and the Nuclear Suppliers' Group. France has consistently supported India's growing international role in every international forum, including India's permanent membership to the UNSC.<sup>4</sup> A landmark civil nuclear cooperation agreement was signed between India and France during then Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh's visit to France. The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and its French counterpart, the Centre National de Etudes Spatiales (CNES), are holding an umbrella agreement that has been operating since 1993 and has successfully integrated space programmes like Mega-Tropiques and SARAL. On the defence cooperation front, after the Indo-French Air Exercise, Garuda IV, in June 2010, the first joint military exercise, called Shakti, was held in October 2011, followed by an Indo-French Naval Exercise in July 2012.<sup>5</sup> Subsequently, these exercises have been a part of joint training programmes on both sides. It is evident that both nations, over the last few years, have developed very strong defence ties while strengthening the bilateral two-decade-long relations of nuclear peace cooperation along with technology, space, and cyber domain joint developments.

## Strategic Partnerships

France has supplied India with military aircraft since the 1950s. France has consistently proven to be a dependable supplier and almost a dependable partner who has resisted any pressure against this partnership. This tie began in 1953 with the purchase of a first-generation jet fighter named the Toofani for the Indian Air Force (IAF), the Dassault Ouragan. Later in 1956, the IAF also received the Dassault Mystere IV, which was used in the 1965 and 1971 wars with Pakistan.<sup>6</sup> The single-engine Mirage 2000 fleet of multirole aircraft from Dassault, which was introduced at the beginning of the 1980s succeeded the Mystere IV. Since then, the Mirage-2000 has been the frontline multirole fighter in the IAF and has proven its mettle during the Kargil war in 1998. India and France formed a strategic partnership that has since grown into a close bilateral relationship with closely overlapping views on a number of global issues.<sup>7</sup> The main pillars of this strategic partnership are defence and security cooperation, space and cyber domain cooperation, and civil nuclear cooperation. Indian warships are able to use French bases in the Indian and southern Pacific oceans. India has for a long time also been utilising the space launch station in French Guiana for its space programmes.

The Indian Ocean Region, climate change, and sustainable growth and development within the framework of rule-based governance in the Indo-Pacific umbrella are just a few of the new areas of cooperation in which both countries have increased their involvement. During President Macron's visit to India in March 2018, the two agreed to establish an annual Ministerial Defense Dialogue, the first of which took place in October 2018. This was followed by regular workshops and service chief-level visits to enhance defence cooperation. On September 23, 2016, the Inter-Governmental Agreement (IGA) for India's purchase of 36 Rafale jets in flyaway condition was signed and will be fully implemented before the end of 2022.<sup>8</sup>

The Indian Navy, during their recent acquisition trials, have found Rafale-M to be a better aircraft over US FA-18 for the operations from the latest Indian Aircraft Carrier – INS Vikrant, commissioned into the Navy last year.<sup>9</sup> The contract for six Scorpene submarines was signed in October 2006. By way of 'Transfer of Technology' (ToT) agreement, Mazagaon Docks Ltd. will be able to construct all six vessels. The project is currently being implemented. The first submarine, INS Kalvari, was commissioned in December 2017. Similar cooperation is taken up in the nuclear, cyber, and space domains. The mature outlook of both countries on the recent Ukraine conflict has strengthened these ties better.

Early in March 2023, French President Emmanuel Macron is scheduled to travel to New Delhi, where he will hold bilateral talks with PM Modi about the Indo-Pacific region, climate change, and strengthening strategic relationships in defence and security.<sup>10</sup> This would be a great opportunity for India to not only strengthen its defence, space, and peaceful nuclear ties but also to engage in taking forward the strategic cooperation in bilateral air, land, and maritime exercises, especially focused towards securing the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and blocking the expansionist ambitions of China. His subsequent visit to India for the G20 Summit in September 2023 would be a landmark visit in many ways. The visit would not only be to honour India's G20 presidency but also signal the strong diplomatic, defence, and economic relations between the two nations.

### **Future for India and Indian Armed Forces**

India, in the past, has immensely benefited from a strategic partnership with a technically advanced nation like France. Despite France not being a member of either the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) or the Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) trilateral, Indo-French ties on Indo-Pacific issues have been growing in almost every domain. Today, the IAF has a state-of-the-art Rafale in its inventory to thwart the threat from China. The Indian Navy's close monitoring of the Rafale-M is also a clear indication of the growing mutual trust and deep relations between the two nations. The major gains for the Indian Armed Forces are through the commitment by France towards assisting the AtmaNirbhar initiative by way of technology transfer and joint development programmes aimed at enhancing indigenous development of defence equipment in India. The recent bilateral NSA-level talks have provided an impetus to this effort, and the Indian Armed Forces, especially the IAF, would immensely gain from this bilateral relationship.

**NOTES:**

<sup>1</sup> “Doval meets French counterpart, discusses Afghanistan, Indo-Pacific”, *Indian Express*, January 07, 2023 at <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/ajit-doval-french-counterpart-strategic-partnership-india-france-8363985/>. Accessed on January 07, 2023

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> “India-France Bilateral relations,” *Ministry of External Affairs*, [https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-France\\_Relations.pdf](https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-France_Relations.pdf). Accessed on January 07, 2023

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Air Marshal B.K. Pandey (Retd), SP’s Aviation at <https://www.sps-aviation.com/experts-2023speak/?id=19&h=Indo-French-Cooperation> Accessed on January 07, 2023

<sup>7</sup> *Embassy of India, Paris*, <https://www.eoiparis.gov.in/page/bilateral-brief/>. Accessed on January 07, 2023

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> “India’s future airborne fighter: the Rafale M outperforms the F-18,” *Air&Cosmos*, <https://aircosmosinternational.com/article/india-s-future-airborne-fighter-the-rafale-m-outperforms-the-f-18-3408>. Accessed on January 07, 2023

<sup>10</sup> “Ahead Of G20, German, French Heads To Visit India; Green Hydrogen, Indo-Pacific On Agenda,” *Business World*, January 08, 2023, <https://www.businessworld.in/article/Ahead-Of-G20-German-French-Heads-To-Visit-India-Green-Hydrogen-Indo-pacific-On-Agenda/07-01-2023-460810/>. Accessed on January 08, 2023.