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Multiplying the Synergy of India and France in the Indo-Pacific Region

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The presence of France's President, Emmanuel Macron, at Kartavya Path to witness the 75th Republic Day celebrations in New Delhi was not the first of its kind. This was the sixth time when a French leader was invited as a Guest of Honour to India's celebration of democracy. However, the style and symbolism of this visit were unique and unparalleled. The roadshow and the *Chai par Charcha* between the heads of the two states in Jaipur not only threw the spotlight on the diverse culture, customs, and traditions of India, but the payment made for tea through UPI set the stage for the perfect synthesis of what the two nations want to do together, as stated by President Macron.¹ Further, the joint statement released after the visit covering issues from 'seabed to sky' is a testimony to the unveiling of 'Horizon 2047' between Paris and New Delhi. The visit has set the tone to transform the enthusiasm and ambitious goals that each wants to achieve collectively in the larger Indo-Pacific region.

At a time when the waters of the Indo-Pacific are churning due to larger contestations between the United States of America and China, the Indo-French partnership showcases the potential to shape and materialise cooperation. Like India, France is also a traditional and residential player in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). In addition, France also has a significant presence and outreach in the Pacific Ocean through its overseas island territories that include French Polynesia, New Caledonia, and Wallis and Futuna. This complements India's ambitions to reach the islands of the Pacific Ocean, especially through the Forum for India-Pacific Island Cooperation (FIPIC). The aspiration of taking forward this partnership across the length and breadth of the region can be witnessed through the shift in the focus areas of both countries from the 2018 Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region² to the Comprehensive Roadmap for the Indo-Pacific finalised in 2023.³ In this context, trilateral cooperation with Australia and triangular development provides much-needed impetus to go ahead.

Undercovering the Indian Ocean through Trilateral Cooperation

Apart from the defence cooperation (including the recent deal on Rafale Marine Fighters and Scorpene class submarines), which remains one of the pillars of the India-France partnership in the Indo-Pacific region, trilateral cooperation and triangular development have emerged as essential takeaways from the Modi-Macron meeting.⁴ The bilateral interests of both nations to deal with the evolving security dynamics are feeding into each other's broader interests and taking the relationship forward. Paris needs New Delhi, which is centrally located in the IOR, with two island territories across its eastern and western seaboard, to deal with the emerging inter-state competition

and non-traditional challenges. Similarly, India needs France, which not only has an overseas territory of Mayotte and La Reunion islands in the Western Indian Ocean (WIO), but also has a strong francophone influence in the vanilla group of islands and the Eastern Coast of Africa, all of which would allow New Delhi to expand its reach in its backyard further. The emphasis on the extension of the joint surveillance mission, currently operating in the Southwest Indian Ocean, to India's neighbourhood⁵ to secure the entry and exit points of the Indian Ocean speaks about the intention of taking the cooperation further to the South and Southeast of India in the Bay of Bengal region.

In this context, the revival of the India-France-Australia trilateral relations as posited by the French President in the joint statement⁶ will act as a stepping stone in enhancing the security of the IOR. To this end, a cooperative mechanism by using the island territory of La Reunion (France) in the WIO, India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the East, and Cocos (Keeling) of Australia near its western coast will ensure robust surveillance and reconnaissance covering the entire stretch of the IOR. India is already deploying its P-8I on the French territory in the WIO, and the intention of taking such bilateral cooperation further with like-minded partners like Australia is reflected in the talks that are underway for strategically using Cocos (Keeling) for joint surveillance. But the need of the hour desires that this bilateral cooperation must now be transformed into a trilateral which will not only enhance interoperability between the militaries of the three countries but also assist in effectively and economically dealing with non-traditional challenges like piracy, drug trafficking and smuggling, and illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing which is a concern for one and all in the region. To this end, cooperation between the three nations can also be extended to include niche areas like hydrographic surveys, anti-submarine warfare, and anti-drone warfare.

Meeting of Minds: Triangular Development as a Case in Point

Meeting larger areas of interest, such as support for climate change mechanisms, resilient infrastructure, reformed multilateralism, and upholding sovereignty and strategic autonomy, ensures that India and France can carry out triangular development in the Indo-Pacific region. This will not only supercharge the bilateral partnership between New Delhi and France but will also provide the right opportunity to strike the nodes in third countries, thereby further expanding their outreach to the countries of the Global South. It will also help create positive branding amongst the citizens of the respective countries. Both nations have made significant progress in the areas of climate change, like being co-founders of the International Solar Alliance (ISA) and willing to cooperate through the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (India launched CDRI, while France has

recently shown its interest in being the next co-chair). Reiterating the need for the early launch of the Indo-Pacific Triangular Development Cooperation Fund is a step in the right direction.⁷

One of the ways can be creating institutional mechanisms in the region, similar to the opening of a solar academy in Senegal, West Africa. Robust institutional arrangements comparatively cast a longer shadow on the relationship and have the ability to withstand the ebbs and flows of evolving times. In this direction, both countries can capitalise on the agreed roadmap on blue economy and ocean governance and jointly build research institutes, particularly in the Indian Ocean, where both have considerable stakes and influence. France has several research institutes, such as the Louis Malarde Institute, the Centre for Island Research and Environmental Observatory, the Research Institute for Development, and many others in the Pacific region.⁸

As India and France take a step further by engaging and multiplying their synergy and convergences in the Indo-Pacific through trilateral partnerships and triangular development, they must also navigate carefully through their divergences. For instance, while the former has long endorsed anti-colonialism and also played an important role in the national movement of several countries, the latter has been a colonial power in the Indo-Pacific region.⁹ Therefore, the joint approach of both countries needs to take into account this sensitivity as they dive deep into the waters of the Indo-Pacific, especially the island nations for whom sovereignty remains the core national interest. Further, there is a different perception of China between India and France. While India's ties are nose-diving with Beijing, particularly after the Galwan crisis, France seems to be having a muddled approach when dealing with China in the region.¹⁰

Despite the above mentioned divergences that seem to make the India-France relationship parallel to each other, history is testimony to the fact that the sum of this partnership is greater than the parts. From being one of the few countries to support India during its first nuclear test, to respecting each other's strategic autonomy, both the residential players of the IOR have travelled far to take the relationship on a journey of co-development through trilateral initiative and triangular development.

NOTES:

¹ Geeta Mohan, "Chai with PM Modi, paid through UPI, 'unforgettable' memory for President Macron," *India Today*, January 27, 2024, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/emmanuel-macron-pm-modi-upi-chai-republic-day-chief-guest-jaipur-france-2494286-2024-01-27>. Accessed on January 31, 2024.

² Ministry of External Affairs, "Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region," March 10, 2018, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/29598/Joint+Strategic+Vision+of+India+France+Cooperation+in+the+Indian+Ocean+Region+New+Delhi+10+March+2018>. Accessed on January 28, 2024.

³ Ministry of External Affairs, "India-France Indo-Pacific Roadmap," July 14, 2023, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/36799/India+France+IndoPacific+Roadmap>. Accessed on January 29, 2024.

⁴ Ministry of External Affairs, "India - France Joint Statement on the State Visit of H.E. Mr. Emmanuel Macron, President of French Republic, to India (25 - 26 January 2024)," January 26, 2024, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/37534/India+France+Joint+Statement+on+the+State+Visit+of+HE+Mr+Emmanuel+Macron+President+of+French+Republic+to+India+25+26+January+2024>. Accessed on January 27, 2024.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ministry of External Affairs, "Horizon 2047: 25th Anniversary of the India-France Strategic Partnership, Towards A Century of India-France Relations," July 14, 2023, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/36806/Horizon+2047+25th+Anniversary+of+the+India+France+Strategic+Partnership+Towards+A+Century+of+India+France+Relations>. Accessed on January 29, 2024.

⁸ Shourya Gori, "The Pacific Frontier of France," Observer Research Foundation, August 04, 2023, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-pacific-frontier-of-france>. Accessed on January 28, 2024.

⁹ Akash Sahu, "The India-France Partnership: New Avenues for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific," *South Asian Voices*, December 27, 2023, <https://southasianvoices.org/the-india-france-partnership/>. Accessed on January 30, 2024.

¹⁰ Harsh V. Pant, "Macron's Muddled China Outreach," Observer Research Foundation, April 13, 2023, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/macrons-muddled-china-outreach>. Accessed on January 29, 2024.