



France: India's Natural Ally

This editorial is based on [“India, France and what keeps their ties ticking”](#) which was published in The Hindu BusinessLine on 19/07/2023. It talks about the compatibility of India diplomatic ties with France and the scope of strengthening the same even more.

For Prelims: [India-France strategic partnership](#), [Rafale deal](#), [NATO](#), [AUKUS](#)

For Mains: India-France Relations

Celebrating [25 years of the India-France strategic partnership](#) was at the top of the agenda during the Prime Minister's two-day visit to France which ended with a number of agreements and a slew of defence deals.

The visit marked the two countries launching an **“Indo-Pacific Roadmap”** covering security, the environment and renewable energies etc. as well as a **“Horizon 2047”** agenda for the wider relationship, covering a deeper military industrial relationship, cooperation in digital technologies, transition towards a low-carbon economy, urban transition, trade and investments, and people-to-people contacts.

While India's ties with each of the [P5 countries of UNSC](#) is unique, the feature that sets apart the India-France relationship is the **geopolitics sans value judgements**. It would not be wrong to say that of all the countries that the PM has visited, especially in the West, **France is perhaps the one with which India has the most common ground.**

How are India's Diplomatic Ties with France?

▪ Pillars of Relationship:

- India and France share **long-standing cultural, trade and economic linkages**. The **India-France strategic partnership, signed in 1998**, has gathered significant momentum over time and has today evolved into an even closer multifaceted relationship that spans diverse areas of cooperation.
- Both countries have held on to three pillars in the relationship:
 - **Non-interference** in each other's internal affairs
 - A steadfast belief in **strategic autonomy** and non-alignment
 - The **refusal to pull the other into its own coalitions** and alliances
- In this and many other ways, their relationship has proven itself to be different from the other major partnerships that India has built across the world.

▪ France's Response on India's Affairs:

- The Indo-French ties are built on a respect for each other's strategic autonomy. **France has remained steadfast in its refusal to comment on India's internal affairs or its foreign policy choices.**

- While France has taken a leading role in the western pushback to Russia's war in Ukraine, it has **not joined other western countries in publicly exhorting India to change its stand.**
 - Even when [India abstained from voting on the resolutions](#) at UNSC and UNGA, **no word of disappointment was expressed by France** given the fact that it co-authored a UNSC resolution with Mexico (to ensure unhindered humanitarian inside the conflict zone);
 - Even when [India conducted its nuclear tests in Pokhran \(Pokhran-II\)](#), the **French diplomats in the UNSC did not join the US-led move to impose sanctions on India.**
 - It even stepped in with **uranium supplies to power the Tarapur reactors.**
- **Defence Partnerships at Core:**
 - At the core of the Indo-French relationship is the defence partnership; France comes across as a **far more willing and generous partner when compared to other western countries.**
 - Starting with the [Rafale deal](#) to the **latest acquisition of 26 of the aircraft's marine version**, the French have been willing to give the Indians some of their best defence systems.
 - Meanwhile, technology transfers by France have already helped India construct [six Scorpene-class submarines](#) with another three now being procured to boost the navy's falling numbers.
- **Similarity in Stand on NATO+:**
 - France announced publicly that it **disapproves of a [North Atlantic Treaty Organisation \(NATO\)-plus partnership plans](#)**, that would see the Trans-Atlantic alliance build direct ties with Japan, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea and even India.
 - India has also rejected the plan saying that **NATO "is not a template that applies to India".**
- **Strategic Partnerships:**
 - France had been non-problematic about the **"Quad-Plus" coalitions**, first floated in 2020, (but were dropped after [US-France rift over the AUKUS agreement](#)).
 - France is also the **only country the Indian Navy has conducted joint patrols with so far**, and future plans could involve the **use of French international territories** in Reunion, New Caledonia and French Polynesia, and even **India's Andaman Islands**, for port calls and reconnaissance by both navies on a bilateral basis.
 - The **India-France Roadmap on the Indo-Pacific** released recently also clarifies that neither side is attempting to pull the other into its other regional military coalitions.

Challenges

- The diplomatic ties between France and India, despite being positive, **lack a Free Trade Agreement (FTA)** which **limits the trade potential from being utilised to its fullest.** The **slow to no progress** on the India-EU [Broad-Based Trade and Investment Agreement \(BTIA\)](#) also adds to this issue.
- While the two nations share a strong defence partnership, their **defence and security cooperation can be influenced by differing priorities and approaches.** India's regional focus and "non-aligned" policy may occasionally clash with France's global interests.
- France has also **raised concerns over India's inadequate protection of intellectual property rights**, impacting French businesses operating within India.

Way Forward

- **Leveraging Similar Ambitions to Empower Each Other:**
 - A **shared determination to maintain strategic autonomy** in a complex geopolitical landscape has helped both powers develop a degree of trust and a pragmatic partnership.
 - France is strong enough to have something to offer on the diplomatic, military, space, and nuclear sectors to India.
 - India is important enough for France when it comes to trade and defence cooperation in the context of threats like Russian aggression or terrorism in Africa.
 - Both can support each other in shaping international order or even to balance out other nations on which one of them is heavily dependent.

▪ **Better Cooperation in Indo Pacific:**

- The Indo-Pacific concept has provided a useful frame for the thriving Franco-Indian relations. France, more than the Quad partners, has a **direct interest in the stability of the Indian Ocean** owing to its **overseas territories and military bases** in the Indian Ocean.
- The Indo-Pacific forum between the two should be able to **better assist in ensuring strategic interests and bilateral cooperation.**

▪ **Potential Areas of Cooperation with France:**

- France plays a **critical role in India's ambitious plans to expand domestic weapon production** with increased private and foreign investment.
- Discussions should **encompass emerging areas of collaboration**, including **connectivity, climate change, cyber-security, and science and technology.**

Conclusion

France and India are two major powers, one in Europe and the other in Asia, with a similar conception of the world. In effect, both countries follow an independent foreign policy and practise strategic autonomy, which they hope will enable them to shape a multipolar world. More crucially, both these powers realise that there is a much better chance of this happening if they work in close concert.

Drishti Mains Question:

“France, which has valued independent foreign policy, is India’s natural partner in building the new coalitions for an uncertain era.” Comment.

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