

Indo-French harmony

PM Modi and President Macron deepen ties
to work around global uncertainties

Much like the pioneering India-France strategic partnership of 1998, the agreements signed during President Emmanuel Macron's visit are set to strengthen bilateral cooperation at a time of global flux. The Joint Vision Statement on the Indian Ocean Region is clearly aimed at countering China's growing presence in the region. And the International Solar Alliance, recommitment to starting the Jaitapur nuclear power plant, and joint ventures on climate change cooperation are reactions to the U.S. abdicating its role by announcing its pullout from the Paris accord. The "reciprocal logistics support" agreement, which Prime Minister Narendra Modi called a "golden step" in defence cooperation, is a signal to Russia and to the U.S. that both New Delhi and Paris feel the need to diversify strategic postures beyond their current choices. Finally, by bringing 61 countries into the ISA, India and France are proposing an alternative leadership model for the less developed world, challenging the geopolitical power structure configured around fossil-fuel energy resources. Notably, Mr. Modi and Mr. Macron declared they would ensure cheaper solar energy and increase avenues for financing, something that has created heat at the WTO. The daunting task ahead is made clear by Mr. Macron's assertion that \$1 trillion is needed to reach the ISA goals by 2030: India and France have so far committed \$1.4 billion and \$1.3 billion, respectively.

There are other contradictions that New Delhi and Paris must contend with. For example, India's solar power tariffs stand at about ₹2.40 a unit and there is little scope to make the domestic industry profitable, as Mr. Modi wants, unless the cost of solar panels and other components are brought down drastically. At the same time, more thermal power, for which tariffs are higher but which is less fickle than solar or wind power, is being produced than the demand. France's nuclear power story is a success, but negotiations between EDF and NPCIL for the Jaitapur plant, billed as the world's biggest, have made very slow progress. While the two countries have committed to start construction by end-2018, they have missed deadlines multiple times. Bilateral cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region too is more symbolic than substantive today, and much will depend on how closely the Indian and French navies and intelligence work together in the future. The presumed joint message to Beijing may also be blurred by Mr. Macron's parallel commitment to help "lead" the Belt and Road Initiative with China. As two pluralistic democracies with a firm belief in a multipolar world order and in the future of Eurasia, India and France have numerous strategic convergences. But common ambitions to cooperate on the world stage, as projected by Mr. Macron and Mr. Modi, must be grounded in some hard realities as well.