

# Macron in India: A visit with a difference

Guided by their desire for strategic autonomy, India and France have been traditional partners. It's time for them to take the lead and shape narratives as well as emerging institutional frameworks

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**O**n the last day of his visit to India, French President Emmanuel Macron went to in Varanasi for a cruise on the Ganga with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. This was the culmination of a visit with a difference.

Macron's trip touched upon two aspects of the bilateral relations, the ancient and the modern (and strategic). Before the visit to the Ghats, Macron offered to Modi, an original copy of the *Bhagavad Gita* translated from Sanskrit into French in the early 20th century by the great French scholar Émile Senart. This symbolises the first aspect of the relations, but perhaps more important in today's world there is the 'strategic' angle.

Addressing the French community in Delhi, the young President explained: "geopolitical context is deeply changed. India rightly fears the reorganisation of the world; she fears forms of hegemony in the region and in particular in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. And why not name it, she fears a Chinese hegemony".

He reminded his countrymen: "France is a power of the Indian and the Pacific Oceans; we are present at the Reunion, we are also there in French Polynesia and New Caledonia. And we are a maritime power, it is often forgotten but France is the second maritime power in the world. We have a strong navy, we have nuclear submarines equipped like few other powers in the world; a maritime surveillance capability through our own satellites and technologies; it is obvious we are a military and intelligence power ranking us among the first nations in the world". France is now ready to share this power with India.

Before concluding, Macron quoted the Australian Prime Minister, who spoke of "freedom of sovereignty"; he then added: "This renewed strategic partnership is reflected by the confirmation of a defense link that has already materialised in some very important contracts, be it in the naval or aviation domain, in the engine industry ... a coming generation of a new partnership on development of engines (the Kaveri for the Tejas), but also enhanced cooperation in terms of spatial surveillance or in terms of intelligence".

A vast programme, symbolising the special relations between France and India, which celebrate 20 years of 'strategic partnership'; the accord signed in 1998 by French President Jacques Chirac and Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee is the oldest such partnership.

Over the last two decades, it has grown steadily, no major political difference having darkened the sky between Paris and Delhi.

Between 1947 and 1954, the relations were often tense due to the issue of the



French settlements in India which would only be solved with the de facto transfer of Pondicherry to the Union of India at the end of 1954.

What is less known is that despite differences, India and France continued to work together. This was perhaps one of the most trying times on the ground, particularly in Pondicherry. A contract had, however, been signed with Dassault in June 1953 for 70 planes; in October 1953, while another 35 were sent with the Dixmude aircraft carrier, four planes reached India by air. The remainder 32 aircraft would be delivered in early 1954. And those were the difficult days between the two nations!

Since the signature of the 1998 Strategic Agreement, France has constantly been supportive of India.

On his arrival, Macron stated that the visit would open a new era in the strategic partnership for the coming decades: "Our two democracies have common concerns, like terrorism, lots of common risks and common threats. But we have to protect this history and the state of freedom".

The French President also said "I want my country to be the best partner in Europe. This is a strong message. I want Indian citizens coming to France for studying, becoming entrepreneurs and opening start-ups".

Some 14 bilateral agreements were signed at Hyderabad House, strengthening the bilateral economic, political and strategic ties between the two countries. The joint statement affirmed: "Both leaders agreed to deepen and strengthen the

bilateral ties based on shared principles and values of democracy, freedom, rule of law and respect for human rights".

A message for China?

And on the emotive side, it recalled "the valiant sacrifices made by Indian and French soldiers during the First World War". The Indian Prime Minister agreed to participate in the closing of the First World War Centenary celebrations, which will take place on November 11 in Paris.

And there is, of course, the ₹59,000 crore deal for 36 Rafale fighters in September 2016; it will soon prove to be a game changer, mainly due to the offset clauses forcing the French to reinvest in India 50 per cent of the total deal's amount, but also for India's western and northern fronts.

Delhi also knows that it needs to diversify its diplomatic relations if it wants to play a major role in the world. Here too, France could be a crucial partner. According to the Joint Statement: "The leaders reiterated that this cooperation will be crucial in order to maintain the safety of international sea lanes for unimpeded commerce and communications in accordance with the international law". It may translate into a logistics accord allowing India access to the strategically important French base in the Reunion Islands near Madagascar. Another possibility is the opening to India of the French facilities in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa where India's rival China has already a military base. This is part of India's new maritime strategy.

The shortest article of the Joint Statement is worth noting: "The leaders

noted ongoing discussions between Defence Research and Development Organisation and SAFRAN on combat aircraft engine and encouraged necessary measures and forward-looking approaches to facilitate early conclusion". The idea is to develop an M88 engine for the Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Tejas with Safran, one of Dassault's partners in the Rafale deal.

There is also a vibrant educational cooperation between Indian and French Universities and academic institutes; a host of agreements were signed during the Knowledge Summit, the first Indo-French conference on research and higher education in presence of the French and Indian Minister of education.

The Joint Statement spoke of increasing the number and quality of student exchanges, with the aim of reaching 10,000 students by 2020. An agreement for the mutual recognition of degrees should "facilitate the pursuit of higher education by Indian students in France and French students in India and enhance their employability". The cherry on the visit's cake was the co-hosting of the International Solar Conference (ISA). An alliance of more than 121 countries launched at the UN Climate Change Conference in Paris in November 2015, the ISA wants to create a coalition of solar resource-rich countries and address each participant's special energy needs.

All this does not mean that the practical collaboration will be easy, but it is worth a try.

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