

INTERVIEW | ALEXANDRE ZIEGLER

‘When you look at the facts, there is no scandal in Rafale deal’

French Ambassador says Dassault Aviation has been providing fighter jets for several years to India, building a relation of trust

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Despite the ongoing controversy over the Rafale fighter jet deal, French Ambassador to India Alexandre Ziegler insists that there is “no scandal”. He says the strategic relationship between India and France is “built on trust”.

With the visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to France and French President Emmanuel Macron’s visit to India, how do you view the progress of economic partnerships between the two nations?

■ Our relations are excellent. We have been developing, nurturing and strengthening our strategic partnership for decades...Our trade has grown by 20% last year and it is now balanced, [the bilateral trade between India and France stands at €16 billion] which is a good news for both countries. It shows that

it’s a real partnership. It’s not somebody approaching the other partner as a market or for revenue...But we have committed to double these trade relations in the next few years.

On the investment side, we are one of the top five major investors with around four lakh people employed by French companies in this country, including a large part in Karnataka. We have major players ... like Alstom, Schneider Electric, Saint-Gobain and Safran which are actually ‘making in India’ before the ‘Make in India’ motto was introduced.

What is very unique to India is the amount of innovation within these investments. Out of the top 40 French companies, almost 30 have established R&D centres in this country [like the ones] built by Schneider Electric in Bengaluru, Saint-Gobain in Chennai and Michelin in Pune. The relation we are developing with India is not about market share, trade figure but a long-term partnership based on innovation.

But President Ram Nath Kovind this year said bilateral trade was far below potential. What measures are the two countries taking to scale it up?

■ I think trade figures are not showing the full picture of our economic relations.



We have expressed our willingness to help India’s manned space mission Gaganyaan.

When you look at investments, our market share here and ‘Make in India’ is far more significant than the bilateral trade. Yes, we have to do better and we should do better. Large companies will contribute to it.

But we have to work more

on bringing small and medium enterprises to India and Indian SMEs to France as well. I think helping SMEs to get access to our respective markets is really a key priority for us in the years to come. Because they are the ones which are actually bringing value, new technologies and [creating] jobs.

Besides exploring new opportunities in traditional sectors, what partnerships France is exploring in emerging areas of counter-terrorism and maritime and cyber security?

■ Counter-terrorism has become a key part of our strategic dialogue. We now have very strong cooperation of sharing intelligence, training our respective counter-terrorism forces and working on

an exchange of experience.

We are also working much more on one very important aspect of counter-terrorism which is cybersecurity and combating illegal and terrorist content on the Internet. Because I think that radicalisation now is very much coming directly to your bedroom through the Internet. We should engage more through international cooperation on how we prevent this content [reaching] your teenagers. That is one of the aspects of the cooperation that is growing a lot...What should be Internet regulation? Not an absolute control but being able to detect illegal content. Financing of terrorist groups is also a topic on which France and India are cooperating quite a lot.

Space cooperation is

another exciting area, how is it progressing?

■ India is actually our first partner outside the EU on space cooperation ... Space has become a strategic issue and we decided when the two leaders [Prime Minister Modi and President Macron] met... to [take it to] another level and reaffirm our commitment but also give some concrete measures on what we should do together. We have already launched two joint programmes.

We should work on an additional one in the coming months. We have expressed our willingness to provide help [for India’s] manned space mission, Gaganyaan. We signed a very concrete MoU between [French space agency] CNES and ISRO couple of months ago.

A lot of questions are being raised by political parties as well as industry people on the ‘Rafale deal’.

■ Honestly, I have a very simple answer to all of this, just look at the facts. Look at the track record of our relationship as far as our strategic partnership, ‘Make in India’ and our cooperation in aeronautics is concerned. Dassault Aviation has been providing fighter jets for [so many years] to India.

So it’s a relation of trust that has been built. Look at the facts when it comes to offsets, pricing, the process and numbers, don’t look at the tweets.

Honestly, when you really look at the facts, there’s no scandal. There [shouldn’t] be any reason for controversy.