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India and France: A Growing Convergence of Interests

Sinderpal Singh

SYNOPSIS

The India-France relationship is increasingly a key strategic relationship, with implications for countries located across the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Their mutual quest for strategic autonomy in their defence relationships, while simultaneously leveraging on their close defence relationships with the United States, has led to an increasing convergence of strategic outlooks. This is especially apparent when it comes to negotiating China's growing military presence in the Indian Ocean region as well as in weapons sales, development, and production between the two countries.

COMMENTARY

The India-France relationship does not get the same analytical attention as India's relationship with the United States (US) or other members of the Quadrilateral Initiative (QUAD), namely Japan and Australia. This is despite France and India sharing a long history of close bilateral ties, with the 1998 Indian nuclear tests marking a high point in their post-Cold War relations. France was one of the first countries to demonstrate an appreciation of India's security compulsions leading to the nuclear tests. In the aftermath of the tests, sanctions were imposed on India, and France was one of the first few countries to normalise relations with India. More recently, India's relations with France have progressed significantly in the areas of defence and politics. This paper first charts the broad strategic alignment towards global affairs which drives their relationship. The second part looks at the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) as an increasingly key space for growing defence relations between the two countries. The third part examines the defence procurement, development, and production relationship between them, especially in the aftermath of AUKUS's announcement.

Strategic Autonomy as Shared Outlook

France, as part of the Cold War “Western” alliance, has had a close defence and strategic relationship with the United States, while India, especially since the early 2000’s has also progressively deepened defence and strategic ties with the United States. However, both countries are keen to preserve a certain amount of autonomy in their conduct of foreign policy, making it a point to depart from US-led positions on certain global issues. This impulse to preserve autonomy allows both sides to pursue deeper ties with each other in the area of defence, with less apprehensions about straying from the US on certain issues. India’s recent decision to not publicly criticise Russia directly, as well as abstain on resolutions in the United Nations on the Ukraine crisis is a case in point. France, while it strongly criticised Russia for its invasion of Ukraine, has been quietly sympathetic of India’s position in this issue. Similarly, the recently announced AUKUS trilateral security agreement between the US, the UK, and Australia has further strengthened French instincts to maintain independent and diversified defence relationships. In this context, deepening the defence relationship with India has become even more significant for France.

The Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific

France, with its overseas territories of Le Reunion and Mayotte in the southwest Indian Ocean, considers itself a resident Indian Ocean power. Additionally, it has a significant military presence in Djibouti and the United Arab Emirates. India and France, under their mutual logistics support agreement, have sought to leverage their strong defence ties to further the presence of their navies across the Indian Ocean region. The Indo-Pacific, as both a geographical signifier and a strategic declaration, is deeply contested and varies even between states who deploy the term in policy discourse. India and France, however, broadly converge in both their geographical framing as well as the strategic implications of the Indo-Pacific. Geographically, both see the Indo-Pacific as including the whole of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and strategically, both view the Indo-Pacific as a means to manage China’s growing presence in the IOR via other means beyond solely leveraging on US-China rivalry. This, to some extent, is informed by both countries’ desire to carve areas of autonomy in their defence policies while still benefiting, when needed, from US-China rivalry via their close defence relations with the US.

To this end, France’s Indo-Pacific strategy has set the stage for a broader European interest in and articulation of Indo-Pacific strategies. This is advantageous to India as it widens the range of countries concerned about China’s growing presence in the IOR with whom India is simultaneously developing defence ties. More specifically, India and France, in conjunction with certain European Union member states, have sought to address the non-traditional needs of littoral states in the IOR and have increasingly emphasised capacity building in dealing with issues such as illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing in the IOR. This allow India and France, in conjunction with other EU states, to further provide alternatives to China’s economic presence in the region while avoiding the pitfalls of being drawn directly into US-China tensions across the Indian and Pacific Oceans. It also demonstrates the ability for India, France, and other like-minded countries to pursue joint strategies in the IOR, independent of the US and its relationship with China.

Arms Sales, Development and Production

A key aspect of the India-France relationship is the arms relationship, comprising French sales of fighter jets and other military equipment to India since the late 1990s. This relationship has progressively grown and by 2021, France was India's second biggest arms supplier after Russia, with French arms imports increasing ten-fold between 2017 and 2021. This relationship was also shaped, to some extent, by India's quest for autonomy in its defence policy and a conscious policy of pivoting away from heavy dependence on Russian arms imports to an equally dependent relationship on US arms imports. France, with its deeply developed defence relationship with India and its keen sense of maintaining its own strategic autonomy, has proven an important source of diversity for India's arms imports.



The Dassault Rafale multi-role fighter aircraft. India is one of the largest markets for France's defence industries. *The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.*

In recent years, the arms relationship between the two countries has progressed beyond mere arms sales. India's long-term strategic aim is to be less dependent on arms imports and instead develop its own domestic capacity for arms production. This has been a key plank of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's agenda since 2014, and France has been at the forefront of efforts to co-develop and co-produce defence equipment within India. There are also plans for technology transfer from France to India in the defence industry sector, especially in the aftermath of the AUKUS trilateral security pact announcement. France plans to re-assert its reputation as a key weapons producer as well as a partner willing to transfer defence technology to its strategic partners, with India now seen as France's main strategic partner in the Indo-Pacific region. The India-France collaboration in this domain is expected to get a further boost in the aftermath of AUKUS as India launched the fifth, made in India, French-designed, Scorpene-class submarine in February 2022. This defence collaboration has extended into the domain of space technology, with France being India's third strategic collaborator in space technologies after the US and Japan.

Conclusion

The India-France relationship does not get the analytical attention it deserves. Their mutual quest for autonomy in their foreign and defence policies, even as they leverage their strategic partnership with the US, is a key shared outlook. This has allowed India and France to develop a deep and growing defence partnership within the IOR, based on converging interests in this region. The deep strategic trust between the two countries have allowed them to collaborate in defence co-development and co-production, even as France remains a major arms supplier to India.

Sinderpal Singh is Senior Fellow and Coordinator of the South Asia Programme, Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, RSIS.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg | W: www.rsis.edu.sg