

French Connection

Indo-French defence cooperation is moving from arms trade to comprehensive security

INDO-FRENCH DEFENCE RELATIONS have long been dominated by arms trade. These relations date back to the early years of Independent India. Despite its early commitments to non-violence, the new Republic had to cope as early as October 1947 with the reality of Pakistani raids in Kashmir. Limited indigenous production capacity constrained the Indian leadership to look for foreign suppliers to help build up its military forces. Although Great Britain was an obvious choice, the willingness to avoid falling into the trap of a post colonial relationship led India to diversify its supplies.

Yet, the evolution of the defence relationship between India and France did change over the years and tended to reflect the evolutions of the international system. Thanks to India's anti-Imperialism, it is only after the French withdrawal from Indochina that India and France started developing constructive ties but even then, the relation remained confined to isolated arms deals.

The relation evolved significantly after 1962, due to the combined impact of Algeria's independence and the Sino-Indian war. Although the ensuing military buildup benefited mostly the Soviet Union, the Sixties were nevertheless a decade of strengthening of the Franco-Indian bilateral relations, France being the first Western country to lift the post-1965 arm embargo on India. Although not the most important supplier, France soon emerged as one of India's most reliable provider.

Until the Eighties, the Soviet Union dominated India's defence acquisition programme. However, although a distant second, France did provide some diversification to India from Soviet sources, and in 1982, was the second major power to sign a memorandum of understanding on supply of defence equipment. The Mirage 2000 fighter aircraft, whose upgradation is being currently negotiated by the two countries,



MEETING AT SEA Indian and French ships during exercise Varuna

also had air surveillance radars and anti-tanks missiles purchased by India during the same period.

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The de-hyphenation of France defence trade and foreign policy meant that for a long time, the relation between the two countries was almost purely commercial. It however took a new turn in the Nineties when the two countries decided to expand their dialogue beyond defence procurements. France has been quicker than most in recognising the economic and political potential of India in the aftermath of Cold War and by 1995, had began talks to revitalise the Defence Cooperation Working Group.

However, it took until 1998 for the two countries to establish a strategic dia-

logue. France did not condemn India's nuclear tests and, from 1998, started supporting India's bid for a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council. After 2000, the biennial strategic dialogue between the National Security Advisors of the two countries and the annual High Committee on Defence Cooperation led to more substantive discussions, global issues being gradually added to defence procurement.

Military to military contacts also increased. Visits of the chiefs of the military services began to occur on a regular basis after 1998. Indian and French navies started joint exercises the same year, and in 2003, regular air force exercises were taking place. Despite occasional setbacks due to an increasingly competitive environment, defence sales also expanded with India purchasing additional Mirage 2000, Exocet missiles and Scorpene submarines. Today, France is competing for the contract of the future Indian Air Force medium multi-role combat aircraft.

India is today courted by everyone and can take comfort in the fact that all the countries competing for its defence



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STRENGTH IN NUMBERS Navy chiefs' with interests in the Indian Ocean in New Delhi

market share, with nuances, a similar regional threat assessment. This however creates an additional constraint as it has to choose between various suppliers. India cannot risk alienating major partners at a time when its concerns regarding a more assertive China and other regional risks are growing, hence the need to enlarge the defence and security cooperation further.

The two countries have convergent strategic interests which are deemed to grow in the years to come. The security of the Indian Ocean is an example of this growing convergence. The maritime dimension has been for a long time part of the strategic dialogue. France is recognised by India as a littoral state of the Indian Ocean and the two navies have been conducting regular joint exercises since 1998. But the security situation of the Indian Ocean has evolved since then. Common users as well as littoral states face new challenges. Despite a strong commitment of the international community, piracy remains a flourishing activity, gradually expanding off the coast of Somalia to the South and South East of the Indian Ocean. Among the many actors who contribute to fighting piracy, India and France are among the few with strong economic interests in the South of the Indian Ocean. However, piracy is only a symptom of a deeper and more worrying phenomenon which roots are not at sea. Piracy and state failure are two sides of the same coin.

The consequences of the phenomenon could, in the future, go much further than the current economic impact of piracy alone which have so far been successfully mitigated by a strong pres-

ence of foreign marines, in the area. They could include the radicalisation of piracy itself, leading to new form of terrorism, but also create the condition for outside states to undermine the stability of substantial part of the Indian Ocean region, whose development could then, at the very least, slow down.

India and France have therefore a common interest, not only in coordinating their respective action in the area but also enlarge it in order to better cover the entire area. They would also benefit from joining their strength in terms of capacity building in the judicial and other fields.

Taking preventive actions and developing the area is probably the best way to arrest the deteriorating security situation in the Indian Ocean. India has yet to realise the potential of a greater cooperation with France which would work towards a greater involvement of the European Union in the Indian Ocean region, leading to an enhanced security condition in the area. In March 2008 for example, the European Commission approved an operational programme for the littoral states and the islands of the Indian Ocean regrouped in the Indian Ocean Commission: The Comores Islands, Madagascar, Mauritius, and the Seychelles.

The problem in the Indian Ocean region is less a strategic shift, which would ultimately mean the replacement of former powers by new ones working towards the establishment of a new regional order, than the risk of a growing strategic and political vacuum in the region because the littoral states or even outside powers are unable or unwilling

to prevent the slow but steady deterioration of the regional political environment. The growing importance of the region and its numerous problems are currently not being matched by European or Indian capacities. Hence, there is the need for greater cooperation.

The problem of Afghanistan and the related issues have to be understood in the same perspective. Afghanistan will continue to affect regional stability for years. The centre of gravity of terrorism will change over time but will not disappear from the region. The experiences of the Nineties which led to 9/11, need to be addressed seriously as the world faces a common problem emanating from familiar quarters.

China's rise could also become a major issue soon. India is concerned about an economically and militarily powerful China on its land and maritime borders. Europeans in general, worry that such a China might be tempted to erode the foundations of the international system. Yet, Beijing's actual intentions are not yet clear and the worse can never be taken for granted. The future is by definition to be 'defined' — this provides one more reason for a regular dialogue.

The defence relation between India and France is good. However, there is scope for improvement even if incremental and slow. New challenges exist today that did not exist earlier. New issues will inevitably emerge. Only a more regular dialogue on strategic and security issues at all levels will allow a pragmatic relationship to deepen as the regional security situation evolves. ||

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