

Strategic convergence between India and France runs deep. As PM Modi visits the French capital, bilateral ties are set for a boost, even as both nations together review the turbulent international landscape.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ascent to power has not just brought about a more frenetic form of Indian diplomacy but has also resulted in what may be called "personalised diplomacy". Modi believes that taking time out with global leaders and investing in personal relations makes a difference in relations between States. To his credit, he has made enormous efforts to cultivate global leaders and leverage it to India's benefit. Who can forget "chai pe charcha" with former US President Barack Obama at Hyderabad House in 2015 when Modi was relatively new to the game of global diplomacy. After eight years of non-stop interaction with world leaders, I would single out two leaders with whom Modi has struck a really close and trusting relationship. One is obviously the Japanese leader Shinzo Abe who has since retired from political life.

The other leader is the French President Emmanuel Macron. In June 2017, as I was packing my bags for retirement after 36 years in the Indian Foreign Service, I got a call from the then foreign secretary and the present External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar informing me that the PM will be making a visit to France shortly to meet the newly elected French leader Emmanuel Macron. This was brilliant on the part of Modi because Macron was a completely unknown quantity at the time and Modi was one of the first overseas leaders to visit him in Paris after the latter's election. Macron had stormed into the French presidency, much like Modi when he became Indian PM in 2014. Since then, the two leaders have met on numerous occasions, and it is fair to say they get along like a house on fire.

The strategic convergence between India and France is not skin-deep. It is based on the fundamental conviction of both countries in a multipolar world and in the concept of strategic autonomy. More importantly, France has stood by India through thick and thin, beginning with 1998 when India conducted nuclear tests and the entire world was ranged against us. Since then, India and France have deepened their strategic partnership to such an extent that there is really no outstanding problem or irritant in the relationship today.

The visit by Modi to France on May 4 will not just be to congratulate Macron on his stunning re-election but also to survey the international strategic landscape and take stock of bilateral ties. The war in Ukraine will certainly figure in the discussions. France, of all countries, should be able to understand where India is coming from on this issue. Modi has met Putin umpteen number of times and Macron has spoken to Putin for several hours on the phone. Indeed, if there are two major leaders in the world today who are capable of picking up the phone and talking to Putin, it is Macron and Modi. Can they jointly explore, even tentatively, how to bring this horrific war in Europe to an end?

Bilateral defence ties are in fine fettle and France has largely stuck to the promised delivery of Rafale aircrafts to India. The challenge here is to move from a buyer-seller relationship to an investor-investee one by making defence equipment in India accompanied by a transfer of technology. Again, France has done this before (think submarines and light helicopters) and is well placed to do so in the future, such as making military engines in India for combat aircraft.

France is a preferred partner in the Indo-Pacific and there is now a blueprint for cooperation in this field in the form of a Joint Strategic Vision for cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region concluded by both countries in 2018.

The shared concerns of India and France go beyond maritime security, ensuring respect for international law by all states, freedom of navigation and overflight, fight against organised crime and combating climate change. One important development is the idea of Franco-Indian joint patrolling in the Indian Ocean. The joint naval exercises in the form of Varuna have proceeded apace and moves are afoot for mutual and complete maritime domain awareness in the Indian Ocean region.

Space has always been central to the strategic partnership of our two countries. Again, for the first time, the two countries concluded a Joint Vision for Space Cooperation in 2018. The vision document talks of bringing societal benefits of space technology, situational awareness in space domain and cooperation in satellite navigation and related technologies. As for nuclear energy, the two leaders must review progress in the joint construction of the world's largest nuclear park in Jaitapur, Maharashtra. The project has stalled a bit and it could do with some political impetus. Apart from the above traditional areas, discussions between the two leaders may dwell on newer areas of cooperation such as connectivity, climate change, cyber-security and science and technology. In these important areas, the two leaders will be briefed by officials about progress made so that roadblocks, if any, can be tackled.

It is important to remember that France holds the rotating presidency of the EU till the end of June this year. In this regard, two issues will be of cardinal interest to India. One, Modi must brief Macron on the FTA and the Investment Agreement that India is negotiating with the EU and persuade Macron to weigh in favourably with the Brussels bureaucracy and other stakeholders. Two, it would be useful for Modi to hear first-hand about France's assessment of the Sino-Russian axis and EU's own choppy relations with China. Macron will doubtless be interested in hearing our assessment of the situation in Ladakh and the state of Sino-Indian ties such as they are.

The PM's visit to France on May 4 is a crucial one. I fully expect the M&M jodi (Modi and Macron) to interact warmly with each other and reinforce their "dosti". The two leaders may as well sing in unison: "yeh dosti hum nahin todenge".

GS World Team Input

IN THE NEWS

India –France Relations

- India considers France as its "goodwill partner".
- Diplomatic relations between the two countries were established in 1998.
- France was one of the first countries with which India signed a nuclear deal.
- Cooperation between the two countries is growing on a large scale in areas such as science and technology, culture, trade, investment, and education.
- In 2021, India and France launched the Indo-French Environment Year. The main objective was to increase the strength of cooperation between countries in making the planet green.
- The two countries have also mutually signed an agreement regarding the provision of a 'Logistics Support Agreement'.

Defense Cooperation

- Defense cooperation is an important aspect of the Indo-French strategic partnership. India considers France as 'one of the most reliable defense partners'.
- There has also been an exchange of regular visits between India and France at the level of the Chiefs of Defense.
- There are also regular defense exercises between the two countries like Shakti (Army), Varuna (for Navy) and Garuda (for Air Force).
- India signed a contract with the French company in 2005 to build six Scorpene submarines at Mazagon Dockyard in India through a technology-transfer arrangement.

Defense exercise between India and France

India and France conduct the following defense exercises:

- ▣ Varuna, which is a Naval exercise.
- ▣ Abhyas Shakti which is a naval exercise Army Exercise
- ▣ Desert Night-21 which is an Air exercise
- ▣ Garuda, (an Air exercise)

Space cooperation

- Space cooperation is considered 'unique' and 'historic' in Indo-French relations. Together they have given new heights to various aspects in the field of space science, technology and experiments.
- Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) and French National Space Agency (CNES) have successfully carried out two space missions.
- India and France agree on social benefits from space technology, meeting global challenges and exploring the solar system.
- TRISHNA (High Resolution for Natural Resource Assessment- TRISHNA) is the third joint satellite mission of India's space research organization ISRO and France's CNES.
- TRISHNA is used for ecosystem stress monitoring and water use monitoring.

Indian Diaspora in France

There are over 1 lakh NRIs in France, mainly originating from former French colonies.

The French Overseas Territories of Reunion Island, Martinique, Guadeloupe and Saint Martin also have a large number of people of Indian origin.

Most of them were taken to these areas as indentured labourers during the colonial period.

Expected Question (Prelims Exams)

Q. Consider the following statements in the context of Indo-French relations:-

1. Diplomatic relations between the two countries were established in 1988.
2. Varuna, which is an army exercise, is conducted between the two countries.
3. TRISHNA is a joint satellite mission of India's space research organization ISRO and France's CNES.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2
- (b) 2 and 3
- (c) 3 only
- (d) 2 only

Expected Question (Mains Exams)

Q. India and France share a multifaceted and active strategic partnership. How is the Indo-French strategic synergy important in the European perspective? Also discuss the importance of strengthening India's ties with France. (250 Words)

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Note: - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC main examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.