

Strategic Analysis Paper

7 March 2019

India's Expanding Strategic Relations with Russia and France

Balaji Chandramohan
FDI Visiting Fellow

Key Points

- India will expand the scope and range of its strategic partnerships, if not create alliances, with both France and Russia.
- Future Indo-Russian co-operation could include Moscow's assistance in developing India's nuclear submarine fleet.
- India's future co-operation with France could include joint maritime military exercises.
- India's strategic alliance with France could also provide New Delhi with access to French military bases in the Indo-Pacific.

Summary

As India is trying to expand its region of influence in the Indo-Pacific and beyond, both France and Russia offer it the opportunity to form strategic bilateral partnerships, if not explicit alliances.

As India and Russia try to establish their positions in the international system, they will revisit or reset their existing bilateral relationship and will expand the range and scope of it. It is true to state that India and Russia are natural strategic partners and allies. Bilateral ties with Russia are a key pillar of India's strategic outlook on the world.

India sees Russia as a steady and all-weather friend that has played a significant role in its economic development and security. Since the signing of the "Declaration on the India Russia Strategic Partnership" in October 2000 (during President Vladimir Putin's visit to India), India-Russia ties have acquired a new dimension in terms of style and quality, with

increased political and strategic co-operation and enhanced security, trade and economic ties.

In the case of France, Paris is a credible and resourceful partner for a rising and expanding India. Deeper Franco-Indian co-operation is aided by the fact that there is no strong domestic constituency in India that is against closer strategic co-operation with France.

Analysis

Under the Declaration of Strategic Partnership, several institutionalised dialogue mechanisms have been put in place that operate at the political and official levels. Those mechanisms ensure regular interaction and follow up on co-operation activities. During the visit of then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev to India in December 2010, it was decided to further elevate the strategic partnership to the level of a special and privileged strategic partnership.

The Annual Summit meeting between the Prime Minister of India and the President of the Russian Federation is the highest institutionalised dialogue mechanism for the strategic partnership.

The two governments have also established two Inter-Governmental Commissions: one on Trade, Economic, Scientific, Technological and Cultural Co-operation, co-chaired by the External Affairs Minister and the Russian Deputy Prime Minister, and the other on Military Technology Co-operation that is co-chaired by the two Defence Ministers. Both meet annually.

Indo-Russian military technology co-operation has evolved from a simple buyer-seller framework to a much more sophisticated one that includes joint research and development, joint production and the marketing of advanced defence technologies and systems. That co-operation aside, Russia has been a longstanding partner of India in nuclear energy and recognises India as a country with advanced nuclear technology and an impeccable non-proliferation record.

The construction of the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Project (KKNPP) is a good example of ongoing co-operation in this area. Units 1 and 2 of the KKNPP (1000 MW units) are being built with Russian collaboration. Unit 1 is due to be commissioned soon, while Unit 2 is at an advanced stage of construction.

India-Russia Co-operation in Military Materiel

India and Russia have enhanced their co-operation in the key areas of rocket, missile and naval technologies. The *BrahMos* missile system is an example of this type of co-operation. That India and Russia attempted to jointly build a fifth generation fighter aircraft, no matter that the project stalled, and the Multi Transport Aircraft, as well as the licensed production in India of SU-30 aircraft and T-90 tanks, are other examples of flagship co-operation programmes presently underway in this area.

Indo-Russian military co-operation also includes rocket, missile and naval technologies and weapon systems purchase and delivery. Furthermore, it is also true that the two countries have agreed to extend indefinitely their 15-year-old partnership for producing the *BrahMos* supersonic anti-ship missile and to develop a more potent hypersonic version of the missile.

At present, India and Russia have completed the trials of the *Vikramaditya* aircraft carrier, delivery of the *Trikant* frigate, the sixth stealth frigate that Russia has built for the Indian Navy, as well as licensed production of the Su-30MKI fighter plane and T-90S tanks. The sides also noted progress in the construction of the fifth-generation fighter aircraft and multi-role transport aircraft.

It is expected that after the 2019 general election, the Indian Government will continue the earlier initiative of conducting the annual meeting of the Intergovernmental Commission for Military-Technical Co-operation, the aim of which is to further advance the operational readiness of the Indian forces on land, in the air and at sea.

India and Russia have also agreed to enhance co-operation in space technologies, which includes Russia offering the *Glonass* (Russia's equivalent of the US Global Positioning System) to India. Further, Russia has decided to set up two *Glonass* ground control stations in India. India is the only country to which Russia has agreed to give access to *Glonass* military-grade signals, which will enable the Indian military to greatly improve the accuracy of its land-, sea-, air- and space-launched weapon systems. These signals will allow missiles, including those fired from the leased Russian *Akula*-class nuclear submarine *Chakra*, to strike within half a metre of distant targets. The Indian military's access to *Glonass* has been considered important enough to find a mention in half-a-dozen joint statements issued after India-Russia annual summits. *Glonass* is still in the making and a pact on the civilian side is still to be arrived at, but India's quest for strategic autonomy in advanced technology would be well served such a pact.

The *Glonass* system began in 1976 as an alternative to the US-controlled Global Positioning System. The first *Glonass* satellite was launched on 12 October 1982. Currently, the system is co-ordinated by 23 satellites. Russia says that *Glonass* provides full global coverage. In December 2012, India and Russia signed a memorandum of understanding to collaborate on the *Glonass* programme.

Apart from *Glonass*, India-Russia co-operation on the *Arihant* submarine is well-established. It is also expected that, as India seeks to acquire more nuclear submarines, it will seek again to co-operate with Russia. India and Russia, both of which wish to assert their positions in the evolving international order, continue to find it mutually rewarding to co-operate in defence and other strategic sectors.

India-France Strategic Co-operation

As with Russia, India also shares a mutual all-weather friendship with France.

If India is to establish its credentials as a Great Power in and beyond South Asia, it needs partners and allies that would be willing to allow it to expand its strategic presence and strengthen its capabilities. The Indo-French strategic partnership agreement was concluded

in 1998, just after India conducted its *Pokhran-II* nuclear weapons tests. France, despite being a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), continues to maintain a military and industrial strategy that seeks to guarantee its strategic autonomy and India happens to be a natural strategic partner, if not an ally, for Paris in Asia. It is also worth noting that the French military presence in India during colonial times was much lower key than it was in other colonies, such as Vietnam and several African countries. There is, therefore, no strong domestic political imperative in India that is against closer strategic co-operation with France.

But India and France will have areas of differences, such as if the Kanak independence movement in New Caledonia continues to grow. Given the significant Indian-origin population in the French overseas territory, India might attempt to play a greater diplomatic role in resolving the dispute. That move would have to be approved by the French Government, however. India will also need French assistance to establish itself more prominently in the Francophone countries of Africa, which is an overall part of its African policy. Another area of disagreement was the intervention of France in the Libyan conflict, when India abstained from voting in the United Nations. A similar situation could yet arise in Syria, leaving New Delhi to make tough decisions.

For both India and France, strategic autonomy is at the core of their defence policies and diplomacies. India and France are collaborating on projects for the *Scorpène*-class submarine and upgrades of *Mirage-2000* aircraft. Steps, too, are being taken for the early finalisation of the SRSAM (Short Range Surface to Air Missile) project.

The *Scorpène* submarine deal, valued at US\$3 billion, was signed in October 2005 with a subsidiary of the Thales group and DCN. Mazagon Dock Limited (MDL) will assemble six submarines in accordance with a technology transfer agreement. These submarines will be armed with 36 MBDA SM 39 *Exocet* anti-ship missiles.

Apart from that, 49 *Mirage-2000*s are being upgraded at a cost of US\$3 billion. After Russia, France has been perhaps India's second-most-trusted arms supplier and the provision of military materiel is one of the most important aspects of the Indo-French strategic partnership. Further co-operation comes in the form of an agreement between the French National Centre for Space Studies (*Centre national d'études spatiales*, or CNES) and the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) to jointly develop a space-based maritime surveillance system. Paris is also on the record as supporting New Delhi in its quest for a permanent seat on a future, reformed iteration of the United Nations Security Council.

For a rising and expanding India, France is a credible and resourceful partner. The value of Indo-French strategic ties was underscored on the French side in its White Paper on Defence released in 2013. That paper noted the strategic significance of the French Indian Ocean Territories and India. It is there that an even deeper strategic partnership between India and France is possible.

The Indo-French geopolitical convergence must also be viewed in the context of France's military bases in the Indian Ocean. France already has a naval force deployed in the Gulf of Aden to fight Somali pirates in the area. France administers the territories of La Réunion,

Mayotte and the French Southern and Antarctic Territories. The former colony of Djibouti remains economically and militarily close to France, while relations with the United Arab Emirates have progressed to France maintaining a military base in Abu Dhabi.

Much of France's activities in the region have been defence-related, with Paris operating a number of military bases in the region. France maintains a naval base, Pointe des Galets, on its island of La Réunion, east of Madagascar. The base hosts three patrol vessels, a transport ship and a frigate. This helps to ensure that there is a constant French naval presence in the Southern Indian Ocean as well as in close proximity to the sea lines of communication off the southern and eastern coasts of Africa.

The overseas department of Mayotte is home to the 270-strong *Détachement de Légion étrangère de Mayotte* (Foreign Legion Detachment in Mayotte, or DLEM). The smallest unit in the Foreign Legion, the DLEM is able to act as a fast reaction force, and contributes to regional security by conducting maritime surveillance in the Mozambique Channel, humanitarian assistance operations and holding training exercises with the armed forces of neighbouring countries, particularly Madagascar.

France also bases members of its armed forces in Djibouti. The 5th Overseas Interarms Regiment (*5e Régiment Interarmes d'Outre-Mer*) of the French Army is based in that country. France also bases some of its fighter aircraft at Ambouli airport in Djibouti. The military presence in Djibouti ensures that France has a constant strategic presence in East Africa, as well as along the crucial sea lines of communication between the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea. The latter reason is highly significant, as it carries the bulk of France's energy imports. The United States and Japan also operate bases in Djibouti, as does China. It is possible that as India extends its strategic partnerships with the United States and Japan, France too will join a democratic coalition or alliance.

From France's point of view, the French bases in La Réunion, Mayotte, Djibouti and the United Arab Emirates have led to a "*quadrilatère français*" in the Indian Ocean region. This "French quadrilateral" covers the areas of the region that are most significant to France's interests. These include the south-western section of the Indian Ocean, which contains France's Southern and Antarctic Territories and its former island colonies. It also covers the sea lines of communication from the Middle East to Europe, which includes the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea.

The region is important to France, due to its strategic location and energy security needs and it will co-operate with India in the Indian Ocean both in the short and medium terms. As a leading military power, France's military presence in the region – which includes its contributions to the European Union's Operation *Atalanta* anti-piracy taskforce – could be drawn upon to ensure that its energy security requirements are addressed.

It is likely, therefore, that India will continue to expand its strategic co-operation with both France and Russia as it works to secure its own strategic ambitions.

Any opinions or views expressed in this paper are those of the individual author, unless stated to be those of Future Directions International.

Published by Future Directions International Pty Ltd.
Suite 5, 202 Hampden Road, Nedlands WA 6009, Australia.
Tel: +61 8 6389 0211
Web: www.futuredirections.org.au