

### MODI VISITS FRANCE: DIVERSIFYING OPTIONS AND IMPACT ON SOUTH ASIA

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



At the invitation of President Emmanuel Macron, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited France from July 13-14, 2023. He was invited to attend the Bastille Day celebrations, also known as the French National Day. This year was significant for Paris and New Delhi as they marked the 25th anniversary of France-India strategic partnership. During the visit, the two sides adopted a roadmap to ramp up relations till 2047 as emphasized in the joint statement issued at the end of the visit.<sup>1</sup> The statement stressed reinforcing their respective sovereignty and particularly decision-making autonomy. Among other things, this showed that India wished to project itself as a resilient global player, despite its fragile socio-political structure at home. The Indian Prime Minister's visit to France was significant owing to the type of deals concluded and their impact on regional stability in South Asia. It is also important to assess how India has diversified its military partnerships.

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, *Horizon 2047: 25th Anniversary of the India-France Strategic Partnership, Towards A Century of India-France Relations*, Press Release, July 14, 2023, [https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/36806/Horizon\\_2047\\_25th\\_Anniversary\\_of\\_the\\_IndiaFrance\\_Strategic\\_Partnership\\_Towards\\_A\\_Century\\_of\\_IndiaFrance\\_Relations#:~:text=To%20mark%20the%2025th%20anniversary,50%20years%20of%20the%20strategic.](https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/36806/Horizon_2047_25th_Anniversary_of_the_IndiaFrance_Strategic_Partnership_Towards_A_Century_of_IndiaFrance_Relations#:~:text=To%20mark%20the%2025th%20anniversary,50%20years%20of%20the%20strategic.)

## Marine Rafale

Ahead of PM Modi's visit to India, the Indian Defence Ministry approved a decision to purchase 26 Dassault Aviation Rafale fighter jets, as well as four trainers and three Scorpene-class submarines. These Rafale jets are the marine version of the 36 Rafale fighter aircraft India bought earlier. Once the 26 marine Rafale join the Indian Naval fleet, they will augment the capabilities of the Indian Navy and complement the Rafale bought by the Indian Air Force. Like France, India has chosen to operate two versions of the same aircraft over land and sea. This will allow interoperability and support in-depth strikes over land and anti-ship strikes over the sea. Due to Meteor-beyond visual range air-to-air missiles and the capability of carrying exceptionally heavy payloads, these aircraft could be used as part of a nuclear deterrent in South Asia, especially against Pakistan. Additionally, the marine version of the Rafale has been modified to allow landing on an aircraft carrier.<sup>2</sup> This new purchase is expected to complement India's first indigenous aircraft carrier, commissioned last year.<sup>3</sup>

The introduction of marine Rafale for the aircraft carrier and new submarines will widen the scope of miscalculation and coercive military activities in the Indian Ocean to influence Pakistan more than China. The new purchases could be used to observe developments at the Gwadar port. Additionally, surveillance of the activities of the Pakistan Navy is expected to further heighten. This shows that the new military gadgets would more likely be employed to carry out aerial and naval surveillance over the Arabian Sea rather than the 'Indo-Pacific.' This is where the divergence of interests with France over the 'Indo-Pacific' was prominent.

### Could the 'Indo-Pacific' be an Indo-France Playground?

France and India have hopped on the bandwagon of the U.S.-led 'Indo-Pacific' Strategy. According to France's Indo-Pacific Strategy, France would "contribute to the security of regional areas through military and security cooperation,"<sup>4</sup> in particular with India and Japan.<sup>5</sup> The sale of marine Rafale could be a way to support such cooperation. This would build Indian Naval muscle to help expand the scope of U.S. influence in the region. The two countries are also trying to support the 'Indio-

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<sup>2</sup> Astha Pasricha, "India Plans to buy the Rafale Marine Jet. What is the Rafale Marine Jet?," *Jagran Josh*, July 15, 2023, <https://www.jagranjosh.com/general-knowledge/india-plans-to-buy-the-rafale-marine-jet-what-is-the-rafale-marine-jet-1689356283-1>.

<sup>3</sup> "India gives Initial Nod to buy French Rafale Jets, Submarines," *Dawn*, July 13, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1764504>.

<sup>4</sup> Government of France, *France's Indo-Pacific Strategy*, report (Paris: Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, July 2021), [https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/en\\_a4\\_indopacifique\\_synthese\\_rvb\\_cle068e51.pdf](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/en_a4_indopacifique_synthese_rvb_cle068e51.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> "France's approach to the Indo-Pacific region," *Strategic Comments* 28, no. 6 (2022), <https://www.iiss.org/en/publications/strategic-comments/2022/frances-approach-to-the-indo-pacific-region/>.

Pacific' Strategy through a bilateral agreement and roadmap called "Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region."<sup>6</sup> The ostensible purpose of this tango was to counter the growing Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean.

Although the sale of Rafale is a significant step, there are still several unaddressed questions. For instance, the expected time of delivery of the Rafale or when these Rafale would enhance the operational capability of India's scantily trained pilots. Both France and India have joined a venture that has a vast scope and would require all hands on deck to deliver. For France, the challenge seems to be the geographical distance between it and the 'Indo-Pacific,' whereas, for India, it seems to be the lack of compelling stakes in the 'Indo-Pacific' region. Some analysts have also questioned if the two countries would be willing to send their armed forces to operate in the region in case of a high-tempo conflict.<sup>7</sup> Observers feel that while France might ally, India would back out of sending the military to counter China.

### **Is the budding of friendship motivated by 'betrayal'?**

Both France and India are agitated over exclusion from AUKUS pact (Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States). While India aspired to be part of AUKUS due to the high prestige attached to its members, France expressed its 'betrayal' as the AUKUS pact was a call to cancel France's nuclear-powered submarines deal with Australia. France stated that the loss of the deal meant the loss of jobs, but in reality, it meant a takeover of France's market by the U.S. and UK.<sup>8</sup> As a counter move perhaps, France and India joined hands. Taking advantage of the situation, India swooped in to secure a deal with France to upgrade its conventional submarines.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, France enlisted an eager buyer. This is where the two states reinforced their courtship. While the two countries have had military deals before this, a bad taste had developed in their relationship after corruption charges were filed in the Indian Supreme Court and French Anti Corruption Agency on the sale of Rafale.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, "India-France Indo-Pacific Roadmap" press release, July 14, 2023, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/36799/IndiaFrance+IndoPacific+Roadmap>.

<sup>7</sup> "France's approach to the Indo-Pacific region."

<sup>8</sup> Douglas Peifer, "French Anger over the AUKUS Trilateral Security Partnership Explained," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, September (2021): 1-8, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/2782767/french-anger-over-the-aukus-trilateral-security-partnership-explained/>.

<sup>9</sup> Gabriel Honrada, "France gives India's Subs a Stealthy Tech Boost," *Asia Times*, January 30, 2023, <https://asiatimes.com/2023/01/france-gives-indias-subs-a-stealthy-tech-boost/>.

<sup>10</sup> Jack Cinamon and Ruth Rohde, The Franco-Indian Rafale Affair, *Corruption Tracker*, September 12, 2022, <https://corruption-tracker.org/case/the-franco-indian-rafale-affair>

Prime Minister Modi's July trip to France helped secure three additional Scorpene-class submarines for India. In 2005, India ordered six Scorpene submarines under Project 75. The first submarine INS Kalvari was commissioned only in 2017, while the last submarine Vagsheer is to be delivered by 2024. This showed a lag in delivery time and raised the question of when the additional three submarines will reach India and be operationally ready to make an impact. While France has been forthcoming in selling jets and submarines, the removal of all references made to MoU between the French and Indian Naval group in joint communiqué shows that Paris is cautious in terms of the transfer of technology to India.<sup>11</sup> This caution shows that France is vigilant about not directly contributing to India's mission of being self-reliant as it would mean that France would lose a buyer.

### **Conclusion:**

The Indian Prime Minister's visit to France and the military deals reached by the two countries will have a direct impact on South Asia's strategic stability. While India is forward-thinking in expanding its military muscle in the region to influence China and Pakistan, it seems that its pace of modernization may be slowed due to late deliveries from France and even slower operational readiness due to a lack of adequate training and human resource in India. There also seems to be an issue of trust as France seems hesitant about transferring technology to India. This gives Pakistan some time to act proactively by engaging partners and modernizing its naval force. For this purpose, Pakistan must develop its indigenous sea-based technology as it could have long-term benefits. In addition to modernizing the present ships and submarines, Pakistan must invest in autonomous and unmanned underwater vehicles and Advanced AI-Based Electronic Warfare Systems. Given the global shift towards building naval capacity, Pakistan cannot afford to neglect the regional naval build-up. As the West is supporting India in building strength to 'counter' China, it remains skeptical if India would be willing to stand up to China. India appears more inclined towards building its naval muscle to influence Pakistan, unbalancing strategic equilibrium in South Asia in the process. This necessitates that the West takes a more prudent approach toward India's military modernization and avoids upsetting the delicate balance in the region.

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<sup>11</sup> Devirupa Mitra, Submarines Deal Goes Missing from India-France Roadmap Document, *The Wire*, July 15, 2023, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/submarines-missing-india-france-accident-roadmap>.