

## INDIA'S REPUBLIC DAY: INDO-FRENCH PARTNERSHIP AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PAKISTAN

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



On the occasion of India's Republic Day on January 26, 2024, French President Emmanuel Macron was invited as chief guest, which further illustrates the growing strategic partnership between India and France. Last year, Prime Minister Modi was hosted by President Macron at the Bastille Day celebrations in Paris on July 14, 2023. While the invitation for President Macron was ostensibly a reciprocal gesture by India, it was also a tactful attempt by New Delhi to maintain India's illusion of global reputation after U.S. President Joe Biden declined the invitation in wake of the assassination attempt of a Sikh leader by Indian government agents on American soil. During President Macron's visit to India, some significant deals were concluded to build India as a manufacturing base and expand its footprint in the Indian Ocean Region that could have security implications for Pakistan.

### Airbus and Tata Helicopter Assembling Agreement

During the French President's visit to India, Europe's Airbus signed an agreement to assemble the H125 helicopters in India in partnership with India's Tata Advance Systems.<sup>1</sup> This is the first-ever

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of External Affairs India, "India - France Joint Statement on the State Visit of H.E. Mr. Emmanuel Macron, President of French Republic, to India (25 - 26 January 2024)" press release, January 26, 2024, [https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/37534/India\\_\\_France\\_Joint\\_Statement\\_on\\_the\\_State\\_Visit\\_of\\_HE\\_Mr\\_Emmanuel\\_Macron\\_President\\_of\\_French\\_Republic\\_to\\_India\\_25\\_\\_26\\_January\\_2024#:~:text=Prime%20Minister%20Modi%20and%20President,solutions%20for%20global%20challenges%2C%20reinvgorate](https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/37534/India__France_Joint_Statement_on_the_State_Visit_of_HE_Mr_Emmanuel_Macron_President_of_French_Republic_to_India_25__26_January_2024#:~:text=Prime%20Minister%20Modi%20and%20President,solutions%20for%20global%20challenges%2C%20reinvgorate)

joint venture between the two private companies to produce helicopters in India. It is reported that prior to this agreement, the two companies were cooperating on making C-295 transport aircraft in Gujarat, the laboratory of today's India. However, C-295 for the Indian Air Force's transport fleet was manufactured in Airbus's facility in Seville, Spain, rather than in Gujarat. It is believed that 16 aircraft will be manufactured in Seville, Spain, and are expected to be delivered by the end of 2024. An additional 40 of these aircraft will later be developed jointly in India and will start delivering between 2026-2031.<sup>2</sup>

Although New Delhi has been stressing its 'Make in India' drive to indigenously produce defence technologies, the deals with foreign defence manufacturers do not achieve this target. Though the recent agreement to develop H125 helicopters in India has a localization component, it is neither a technology transfer nor an information sharing agreement; rather these are only agreements to assemble helicopters in India that are originally manufactured outside of India.

India has been set on enhancing its tactical capabilities by bordering the mountainous terrain with China. These H125 helicopters will enhance Indian tactical airlift capabilities such as the transfer of personnel and goods along the border with China. The H125 helicopters are marketed as the 'only helicopters to have landed on Mount Everest,' which shows that these helicopters have the flight capability and durability to function in tough weather conditions as well as on dangerous terrain. After border clashes with China in May 2020 that continued in 2022 and 2023, India deployed U.S.-bought Chinook helicopters in the bordering region with China. These advancements depict India's frustrations over the lack of progress after about twenty rounds of high-level military talks between India and China.

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<sup>2</sup> Airbus, "Airbus delivers first C295 to India" press release, September 13, 2023, <https://www.airbus.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2023-09-airbus-delivers-first-c295-to-india>

**India's first helicopter Final Assembly Line (FAL) in the private sector**

**'Make in India'** programme for helicopters for India & export to neighbouring countries

Unrivaled in hot and high and extreme environments

Only helicopter to have landed on Mount Everest

Production of the first 'Made in India' H125 is expected to commence in 2026

**H125**

H125 – a multi-mission workhorse, serving missions like:

- Passenger transport - Contributing to Government of India's vision for 'Ude Desh ka Aam Naagrik'
- Emergency medical services (HEMS)
- Law enforcement
- Disaster management
- Aerial work

Helicopter capacity: Up to 6 passengers

Leading the single-engine helicopter market, the H125 is a member of Airbus' Ecureuil family, which has accumulated 38 million flight hours worldwide

Partnership between:

**AIRBUS** **TATA**

The FAL in India will include:

- Integration of the major component assemblies
- Avionics and mission systems
- Installation of electrical harnesses
- Hydraulic circuits
- Flight controls
- Dynamic components
- Fuel system and the engine

Source: Airbus, January 26, 2024

### Jet Engine Maintenance and Purchase Deals

Safran, a French company that specializes in aerospace engines, recently entered into an agreement with Indian research agencies to establish maintenance, repair, and overhaul services for advanced aviation propulsion (LEAP) engines in India.<sup>3</sup> As part of this deal, the company will also extend its services to the engines of the Rafale fighter jets that India had previously purchased for its Air Force and Navy. The agreement was signed during President Macron's visit to India. Though this would reduce the maintenance expense of the Rafale as they would not need to be sent back to Europe, it is unsure how much of technology can be made available in India to address all sorts of maintenance requirements for the aircraft and its engine.

Additionally, CFM International also announced an agreement with India's low-cost airline – Akasa Air – for the sale of about 300 LEAP 1B jet engines for its 150 Boeing 737 MAX aeroplanes.<sup>4</sup> CFM International is a joint venture of U.S.' General Electric (GE) and France's Safran Aircraft Engine and these two aerospace companies already have an agreement to assemble aircraft engines in India. GE

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of External Affairs India, "India - France Joint Statement on the State Visit of H.E. Mr. Emmanuel Macron, President of French Republic, to India (25 - 26 January 2024)" press release, January 26, 2024, [https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/37534/India\\_France\\_Joint\\_Statement\\_on\\_the\\_State\\_Visit\\_of\\_HE\\_Mr\\_Emmanuel\\_Macron\\_President\\_of\\_French\\_Republic\\_to\\_India\\_25\\_\\_26\\_January\\_2024#:~:text=Prime%20Minister%20Modi%20and%20President,solutions%20for%20global%20challenges%2C%20reinvigorate](https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/37534/India_France_Joint_Statement_on_the_State_Visit_of_HE_Mr_Emmanuel_Macron_President_of_French_Republic_to_India_25__26_January_2024#:~:text=Prime%20Minister%20Modi%20and%20President,solutions%20for%20global%20challenges%2C%20reinvigorate)

<sup>4</sup> CFM International, "Akasa Air orders more than 300 LEAP-1B engines" press release, January 26, 2024, <https://www.safran-group.com/pressroom/akasa-air-orders-more-300-leap-1b-engines-2024-01-25>

is in an agreement with India's state-owned Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) to produce fighter jet engines in India, which was signed during PM Modi's visit to the U.S. in June 2023.

Safran, GE and their joint venture CFM, are willing to invest in India, which shows a growing interest by France and the U.S. aerospace companies in jointly developing India's jet manufacturing capabilities, which aligns with the U.S. 'Indo-Pacific' Strategy. Though this would allow foreign companies to develop jet engines in India, it remains unclear as to how this would allow the transfer of knowledge, industrial capabilities, and patents to India. This is evident from the comment of Indian Ambassador to France Jawed Ashraf who said, "Safran is fully willing to do it with a 100% transfer of technology in design, development, certification, production and so on,"<sup>5</sup> which shows that the transfer of technology will be limited to the production requirements only.

### Indian Ocean Region

Another significant step taken during President Macron's visit to India was an agreement to build on their joint surveillance missions earlier conducted in 2020 and 2022 in the Indian Ocean Region. France has an overseas island of La Reunion, while India has recently built a naval base on Agaléga Island of Mauritius,<sup>6</sup> southwest of the Indian Ocean region. These joint surveillance missions would securitize strategic sea lanes of communication.<sup>7</sup> There is also a joint effort to export defence equipment to friendly countries in the region using India as a base for manufacturing the defence equipment.

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<sup>5</sup> "Akasa Air orders more than 300 LEAP-1B engines," Reuters, January 26, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/indias-tata-frances-airbus-manufacture-helicopters-together-2024-01-26/>

<sup>6</sup> Maheen Shafeeq, "Is India a Geopolitical Force in the Indian Ocean Region?," *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad*, December 2, 2023, <https://issi.org.pk/issue-brief-on-is-india-a-geopolitical-force-in-the-indian-ocean-region/>

<sup>7</sup> Ministry of External Affairs India, "India - France Joint Statement on the State Visit of H.E. Mr. Emmanuel Macron, President of French Republic, to India (25 - 26 January 2024)" press release, January 26, 2024, [https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/37534/India\\_\\_France\\_Joint\\_Statement\\_on\\_the\\_State\\_Visit\\_of\\_HE\\_Mr\\_Emmanuel\\_Macron\\_President\\_of\\_French\\_Republic\\_to\\_India\\_25\\_\\_26\\_January\\_2024#:~:text=Prime%20Minister%20Modi%20and%20President,solutions%20for%20global%20challenges%2C%20reinvalidate](https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/37534/India__France_Joint_Statement_on_the_State_Visit_of_HE_Mr_Emmanuel_Macron_President_of_French_Republic_to_India_25__26_January_2024#:~:text=Prime%20Minister%20Modi%20and%20President,solutions%20for%20global%20challenges%2C%20reinvalidate)



Source: Author's own research

The Indian Ocean is a critical junction for global trade as about 80 per cent of the world's seaborne trade in oil and around 100,000 commercial vessels pass through the region per year.<sup>8</sup> This showcases the vitality of these sea lanes of economic connectivity. The Indo-French initiatives in the Indian Ocean would result in an increased Indian military presence in the region, which could be intended to influence the seaborne trade.

To expand its footprint in the Indian Ocean, India has taken both solo and collaborative approaches. It has strengthened its Navy by expanding its naval fleet and has even parked surveillance and warships in the region after the alleged attack on its tanker by Yemen's Houthis. The Indo-France collaboration is critical for expanding India's footprint in the region as France is expected to provide an additional fleet of 26 Naval Rafale which will eventually join the 36 Rafale already inducted by the Indian Air Force.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, India's fleet of American P-8I multi-mission Patrol, known for their surveillance and anti-submarine warfare capabilities, is being used for the Indian naval base in Mauritius and at the French Island of La Reunion.

<sup>8</sup> Indian Ocean Rim Association <https://www.iora.int/en>

<sup>9</sup> Dassault Aviation, "India selects the Navy Rafale" press release, July 14, 2023, <https://www.dassault-aviation.com/en/group/press/press-kits/india-selects-the-navy-rafale/#:~:text=The%20Indian%20Navy%27s%2026%20Rafale,the%20air%20and%20on%20the>



## Implications for Pakistan

The agreements inked during President Macron's visit to India will have a long-term impact on Pakistan's security as well as regional stability as the majority of them are defence equipment-based. France is not only one of the biggest suppliers of defence equipment to India but now it will be a significant contributor to New Delhi's 'Make in India' initiative that aims to build India's indigenous defence manufacturing drive. India seeks to become a technological superpower, especially in jet manufacturing; however, it has failed to achieve this target even after decades of attempts to manufacture jet engines for its indigenously developed Light Combat Aircraft (LCA). This highlights India's inefficiencies and its repeated failure to develop a jet engine.

At present, the expertise to develop efficient jet engines is limited to a few countries including the U.S., UK, France, Russia and China. The jet engine manufacturing is a complex process that requires expert human resources, critical materials and extensive funding. Due to the lack of these abilities, India has encountered several challenges to develop a jet engine such as overheating and flameouts which raised concerns regarding the aircraft's overall safety in flight mode.<sup>10</sup> Although India has tested an indigenous generic engine for its missile,<sup>11</sup> the jet engine manufacturing capabilities are more extensive and require greater control over the jet engine as compared to a missile that requires almost no control after the launch. The role of French aerospace company Safran, the only French manufacturer of engines, is significant as it is expected to use India as a base to expand its outreach to India and the region and in return provide India the jet manufacturing capabilities. However, this would not allow India to take over the transfer of knowledge and patents to develop jet engines.

Additionally, an active Indian presence in the Indian Ocean, especially in the Arabian Sea, under the care of its Western allies is concerning for Pakistan as it would open another theatre for possible inadvertent escalation.

In the longer run, these initiatives could embolden India to challenge regional peace and stability. As a country with an expected expanded technology manufacturing base, India may assume a more coercive and assertive approach towards regional states, which might oblige some of the regional states to acquiesce in. Pakistan, of course, belongs in another category.

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<sup>10</sup> Air Vice Marshal Nasser Ul Haq Wyne (Retd), "India's LCA Tejas: A Strategic Investment or a Legacy Liability?," *Centre for Aerospace & Security Studies (CASS)*, September 15, 2023, <https://casstt.com/indias-lca-tejas-a-strategic-investment-or-a-legacy-liability/>

<sup>11</sup> Inder Singh Bisht, "India Test Launches Indigenous Cruise Missile," *The Defense Post*, February 23, 2023, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2023/02/23/india-launches-cruise-missile/>

With a modern defence fleet, India might not practise restraint where necessary during the conflict as well as in peacetime, which would further aggravate the volatile regional security situation. Additionally, it remains likely that India might test the defence capabilities of other states by occasionally escalating tensions on its borders. This would require Pakistan to expand and modernize its defence forces. Most importantly, among other things, this would entail Pakistan developing an upper hand in training in order to give an appropriate response in combat. Diplomatically, it would require Pakistan to candidly share its concerns with France, European Union and the U.S. regarding growing strategic imbalance in the South Asian region and maintain building a positive trajectory of bilateral ties with them in order to ensure somewhat balanced treatment in case of escalation of tensions between India and Pakistan due to India's proclivity towards of military adventurism.

### **Conclusion**

After U.S. President Joe Biden declined PM Modi's invitation to the Republic Day celebrations in the wake of the Indian government's involvement in plotting to assassinate a Sikh leader on its soil, India headed out to French President Macron to prevent its global reputation from being battered further. President Macron's prompt acceptance of the invitation (despite a very short notice) showed growing understanding between India and France. It has also assisted India in securing several defence deals during President Macron's visit to New Delhi in January 2024. Further, Airbus and Tata agreed to jointly assemble H125 helicopters in India, the French aerospace company Safran agreed to develop jet engines in India, and CFM International would move forward with the sale of engines to India's low-cost airline – Akasa Air. Additionally, the two countries have agreed to continue carrying out joint surveillance missions in the Indian Ocean region as they did in 2020 and 2022. These developments will likely have a long-term impact on regional security and stability as India would not only be tempted to escalate military and diplomatic tensions sporadically against Islamabad but also assume a more rigid and assertive posture vis-a-vis Pakistan. It would be prudent on the part of Pakistan to closely evaluate the security and diplomatic implications of these developments in order to adopt measures that preclude any ill-conceived adventurism by India, yet again.