

Indo-French Strategic Symbiosis: Implications for Strategic Stability in South Asia

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Abstract

How does the Indo-French strategic alliance manifest, and what are its implications for the regional strategic stability of South Asia? This paper examines the above critical question by analyzing the alignment of France and India in advancing their respective strategic interests within the contemporary geopolitical landscape. Beyond economic and commercial synergies, the partnership is strategically oriented toward countering China's growing influence in Asia-Pacific. This paper identifies and evaluates the primary factors driving the Indo-French strategic alignment, tracing its historical evolution and examining its manifestations in enhanced cooperation in nuclear technology, advanced defense capabilities, and military modernization. These developments are analyzed in the context of South Asia's strategic stability, emphasizing how the deepening partnership supports India's assertive strategic posture and military ambitions, thereby exacerbating the region's security dilemmas. Furthermore, the paper critically assesses the implications of joint efforts in developing nuclear-capable platforms, such as the Rafale fighter aircraft, and how these efforts challenge the principles of the nuclear non-proliferation regime. Through this analysis, the article highlights the broader ramifications of the Indo-French partnership for the regional security dynamics of South Asia.

Keywords: South Asia, Strategic Stability, Indo-Pacific, Geopolitics, Nuclear Non-proliferation.

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Introduction

In an increasingly multipolar international security environment, the evolving Indo-French strategic alliance raises critical questions about its potential to redefine regional stability in South Asia and its influence on global nuclear governance frameworks. Recent years have witnessed a significant strengthening of Indo-French relations, marked by deepening strategic cooperation and alignment of geopolitical aspirations. During French President Emmanuel Macron's visit to New Delhi in January 2024, the two states signed pivotal agreements for joint military production, including conventional Scorpene submarines for the Indian Navy and H125 helicopters through industrial partnerships.¹

The leadership of the two states reaffirmed their commitment to bolster their existing strategic partnership and expand its scope. This paper builds an understanding of key strategic convergences and drivers of the Indo-French alliance system. The paper further examines how Indo-French collaboration may reshape regional security dynamics and influence global nuclear governance mechanisms. To achieve this, the analysis is organized into three sections: the first section explores the primary factors driving India and France closer together while the second section examines the key aspects of their defense cooperation. The last part of this paper assesses the broader implications of this partnership for regional security and its impact on international nuclear norms.

Key Convergences and Drivers of Indo-French Strategic Partnership

India has developed extensive strategic relationships with several major powers to address the growing demands of its defense and security sectors. To solidify its role as a net security provider in the Asia-Pacific region to the West, Premier Narendra Modi's government has actively pursued defense cooperation with numerous regional and extra-regional powers through effective military diplomacy. In the twenty-first century, India has gradually reduced its reliance on Russian weaponry, with arms imports from Russia now accounting for less than half of New Delhi's total arms imports in rece-

1. Manoj Kumar, "India, France agrees on Joint Defence Production," *Reuters*, 27 January 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/india-france-agree-joint-defence-production-statement-2024-01-27/>.

-nt years.² Given the US efforts to dissuade India from relying on Russia-supplied defense equipment,³ New Delhi's strategic collaborations with Western states have already witnessed significant growth. Over the past two decades, India has cautiously engaged with the US and France to acquire advanced and sophisticated weapons-related technologies, thereby reducing its reliance on Moscow.

Against this backdrop, India and France forged a renewed strategic partnership in 1998.⁴ Since then, France has emerged as India's most trusted and least controversial strategic partner. The Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi highlights that this strategic partnership has expanded to include multiple sectors, such as security, space, defense, and civil nuclear cooperation.⁵ A shared convergence of interests has drawn Paris and New Delhi closer. This strategic partnership is characterized by a confluence of three common and interconnected elements, including a shared, though not identical, vision for the broader Asia-Pacific (now Indo-Pacific) region. This entails several strands: first, the containment of China's growing influence within Asia and beyond; second, advocating for adjustments of the contemporary international order—as per the evolving circumstances thereby accommodating geopolitical aspirations of both states;⁶ and third, pursuing a strategic relationship centered on arms transfers and civil nuclear cooperation, primarily driven by shared commercial interests. The converging characteristics of this bilateral relationship are outlined and discussed below.

The Indo-Pacific Concept: French and Indian Perspectives

The US has introduced the “Indo-Pacific concept,” while divorcing from the Asia-Pacific framework to counter China's growing influence by uplift-

2. K. Alan Krontadt, “India-Russia Relations and Implications for U.S. Interests,” *Congressional Research Service*, 24 August 2022. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47221/3>.

3. K. Alan Krontadt and Shayerah I. Akhtar, “India-U.S. Relations: Issues for Congress,” *Congressional Research Service*, 16 June 2023. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R47597.pdf>.

4. “India – France Relations,” *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*, January 2016. http://www.mea.gov.in/portal/foreignrelation/france_jan_2016.pdf

5. “India France Relations,” *Ministry of External Affairs*, August 2013. https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-France_Relations.pdf

6. Mariya Gringberg, “Flexibility in Order: Three Conditions that Preclude Change in International Order,” *Notre Dame International Security Center*, 13 March 2021. https://ndisc.nd.edu/assets/423360/grinberg_ndisc_seminar_12.03.21.pdf.

-ing India's stature as a key partner in this region. India and France both endorse the "Indo-Pacific" concept, while holding distinct perspectives on the "Indo-Pacific," rooted not in geographical considerations but in the strategic interpretation and construction of this concept. The "Indo-Pacific" is a "geographical translation of a strategic concept" designed to provide a shared framework for shaping and defining policies.⁷

India and France share a unique foundation in their bilateral relations with two states i.e., the US and China, leading to distinct approaches to the "Indo-Pacific" concept and divergent responses to China's peaceful rise. France defines the "Indo-Pacific" region geographically as extending from "Djibouti to French Polynesia and the shores of East and Southern Africa to the American coasts."⁸ France views itself as a significant player and a resident power in the "Indo-Pacific" region. France holds over 2 million square kilometers of territory in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), which includes a dozen islands, each surrounded by 200 nautical miles of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ). This accounts for nine out of eleven million square kilometers—approximately 93% of France's total EEZ located in the Indo-Pacific.⁹

France also regards itself as the guardian of the strategic maritime route between the Cape of Good Hope and the Gulf countries. While France is widely acknowledged as a significant European power, it views itself as a key stakeholder in the IOR, primarily due to its perceived littoral presence and economic interests in the area.¹⁰ France has two significant islands in the IOR, Réunion Island and Mayotte, which host a dedicated force of 2,000 French troops. Additionally, two patrol boats and French frigates are stationed on Réunion Island.¹²

7. Fraderic Grare, "Exploring Indo-Pacific Convergences: The Australia-France-India Trilateral Dialogue," *The Washington Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (2020): 157.

8. Grare, "Exploring Indo-Pacific Convergences," 159.

9. Ministry of the Armed Forces, "France's defence strategy in the Indo-Pacific. Paris: Ministère des Armées," 2019. https://dkiapcss.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/France-Defence_Strategy_in_the_Indo-Pacific_2019.pdf

10. David Brewster, "The Mozambique Channel is the next security hotspot," *The Interpreter*, 19 March 2021. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/mozambique-channel-next-security-hotspot>.

11. Alistair Cole and Jean-Pierre Cabestan, "The Ties That Bind: Protection and Projection in France's Indian Ocean Islands of Mayotte and Réunion," *Geopolitics* (2024): 15.

Control over these islands is crucial for France to uphold its “Indo-Pacific” strategy and advance other strategic interests, including military protection, addressing security concerns, and safeguarding economic priorities.¹² French military bases in Djibouti and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) further enhance its presence and strengthen its capacity to exert influence in the IOR.¹³

India in parallel professed its “Indo-Pacific” doctrine in 2018 through Premier Modi’s address at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June, where he emphasized the importance of preventing the resurgence of geopolitical rivalries in the region. New Delhi’s vision of the “Indo-Pacific” is frequently regarded as an extension of its Act East Policy.¹⁴ Although New Delhi asserts a policy of non-alignment in the ongoing geopolitical rivalry, its closer strategic collaboration with Washington is primarily driven by its geopolitical priorities in the region. Nonetheless, despite its confrontation with Beijing, New Delhi cautiously maintains a degree of cooperation with China.

France’s presence in the region has traditionally remained uncontested. To further enhance its presence, India emerges as the most logical partner to assist France in achieving its strategic objectives. In recent years, there has been a significant increase in maritime security collaboration between India and France.¹⁵ The evolving geostrategic environment in the region acts as a catalyst, bringing India and France closer. The gradual decline of American hegemony globally, China’s expanding influence in Europe, Africa, and the Mediterranean, along with the strengthening ties between China and Russia, are key factors prompting India and France to view each other as vital partners in diversifying their strategic alliances.

France’s Defense Strategy in the Asia-Pacific region primarily focuses on countering China’s anticipated expansion of its military footprint in the bl-

12. Cole and Cabestan, “The Ties That Bind,” 2.

13. Isabelle Saint-Mézard, “The French Strategy in the Indian Ocean and the Potential for Indo-French Cooperation,” *RSIS*, March 2015. https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/189458/PR150312_French-Strategy.pdf

14. Allan Gyngell, “To Each Their Own Indo-Pacific,” *Australian Outlook (Australian Institute of International Affairs)*, May 29, 2018. <http://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/to-each-their-own-indo-pacific/>.

15. Shreya Sinha, “India’s Military Modernization: Role and Impact of France,” *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, vol 10, no. 3 (2023): 325-341.

-ue waters of the Indian Ocean in the coming years.¹⁶ The US-led alliance system has identified India as a key balancer and stabilizer to counter China in the broader Asia-Pacific region. French President François Hollande once remarked, “India reassures, whereas China is scaring.”¹⁷ Similarly, while discussing the Indo-French defense relationship, French Minister of Defense Jean-Yves Le Drian stated in July 2013, “In the South Asian region, India appears to us as a factor of stability.”¹⁸ This confluence of interests drives both states toward closer bilateral cooperation.

France’s “Indo-Pacific” strategy emphasizes that, in light of the ongoing strategic competition between China and the US, France remains steadfast in its commitment to promoting a multilateral international order in collaboration with partners like India.¹⁹ France’s pivot to the “Indo-Pacific” and its aspiration to shape regional norms are directly influenced by China’s expanding presence in the region.²⁰ As a self-proclaimed resident power in the region, France carefully navigates its relationships amidst the shifting regional balance of power. Experts suggest that France should leverage the development of the trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, commonly known as AUKUS, as an opportunity to explore deeper cooperation with other Asian and non-aligned states.²¹

By leveraging its assets, including geographic resources, consistent military deployments, and strong relations with local powers, France can position itself as a balancing power in the region rather than becoming entangled in the competition between the US and China.²²

16. “France’s defence strategy in the Indo-Pacific,” 9.

17. Yves-Marie Rault, “France & India: Decoding the Strategic Partnership,” *Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies*, November 2013. <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/175040/SR147-Yves-IndiaFrance.pdf>

18. Rault, “France & India: Decoding the Strategic Partnership.”

19. “France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy,” *Government of France*, https://ambafrance.org/IMG/pdf/en_indopacifique_web.pdf

20. Mahima Duggal, “The China Factor in France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, Vol 5, No. 4 (2022): 5.

21. Eric Frecon, “France’s Third Path for the Indo-Pacific? Credentials and Challenges,” *ISEAS Perspective*, Vol 12 (2022): 2.

22. Jérémy Bachelier and Céline Pajon, “France in the Indo-Pacific: The Need for a Pragmatic Strategic Posture,” *Focus Strategique*, 2023. https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/ifri_bachelier-pajon_france_in_the_indo-pacific_oct2023.pdf

Aspirations to Amend the International Order – A Shared World View

The liberal international order experienced the unchallenged primacy of the US following the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. In recent years, the structure of the international order underwent increased scrutiny as rising dissatisfied powers i.e., China and Russia seem to have challenged the US' sole ability to maintain and preserve the existing order. The US National Security Strategy (NSS) of 2022 identifies China and Russia as states pursuing revisionist foreign policies.²³ There is a growing consensus that the international order is rapidly transitioning towards multipolarity. Although several states, including China, India, and France, emphasize the importance of embracing and upholding multipolarity, there is a noticeable divergence in their perspectives regarding the structure and composition of this emerging multipolar world order.

While some states, particularly close allies of the US, advocate for an international system dominated by a single superpower with power distributed among a few major powers,²⁴ while others call for greater²⁵ representation of emerging powers in global decision-making processes. This indicates that while some states pursue revisionism, they aim to seek amendments to the international order rather than its complete overhaul or destruction. France and India are among the states that increasingly align with Western powers in the ongoing geopolitical rivalry and advocate for selective revision of certain components of the existing international order.

Observers note that India, despite its growing alignment with the US and other Western states following the demise of the Soviet Union, maintains a revisionist orientation at the global level.²⁶ Without directly challenging the US-led liberal political order, New Delhi pursues a form of revisionism aim-

23. "National Security Strategy," *The White House Washington*, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>

24. "Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense – Issues for Congress," *Congressional Research Services* (2024): 42, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/R43838.pdf>; "Wang Yi Elaborates on an Equal and Orderly Multipolar World and a Universally Beneficial and Inclusive Economic Globalization," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, 07 March 2024.

25. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's address to United Nations General Assembly on 26 September 2020, cited in "Indian and United Nations," *Permanent Mission of India to the United Nations New York*, https://www.mea.gov.in/Images/amb/India_United_Nations_new1022.pdf

26. Takenori Horimoto, "Explaining India's Foreign Policy: From Dream to Realization of Major Power," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 17, no. 1 (2017): 475.

-ed at modifying specific aspects of the global order to establish itself as a prominent actor in the evolving international system. One notable example is its advocacy for revising the composition of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to secure permanent membership. This aspiration is reinforced by India's ongoing efforts to establish hegemony in its immediate neighborhood and to expand its political and military influence in the Asia-Pacific region.²⁷ In this way, the Modi government aims for India to emerge as a proactive and influential player on the international stage, rather than a reactive one.²⁸

France, in contrast, has remained politically aligned with the Western camp since the onset of the Cold War. Despite its long history as a unique and dominant European great power, France has consistently played the role of a guardian of the liberal international order alongside other Western powers. Nevertheless, successive leaderships in Paris have cautiously²⁹ pursued the ambition of restoring France's lost glory in the post-war era. This strategy has largely revolved around leveraging France's participation and influential role in key international institutions such as the UNSC. Taking on the responsibility of promoting shared global objectives, France has strongly advocated multipolarity to preserve its great power status instead of promoting the sole leadership of any single state, including the US.³⁰ French leadership has often been critical of US policy approaches on the global stage, particularly regarding issues such as the invasion of Iraq, socio-economic disparities between the Global North and South, and the use of veto power by permanent members of the UNSC, especially in matters involving war crimes.³¹

27. Sufian Ullah, "Realignments and evolving nuclear capabilities in the Indian Ocean: effects on security environment," *Australian Journal of Maritime and Ocean Affairs*, Vol 13, No. 4 (2021): 262-273.

28. Harsh V. Pant, "Introduction," in *The Rise of the Indian Navy: Internal Vulnerabilities, External Challenges*, ed., Harsh V. Pant (New York: Routledge, 2016): 6.

29. Pernille Rieker, "French Status Seeking in a Changing World: Taking on the Role as the Guardian of the Liberal Order," *Fr Polit* 16 (2018): 421.

30. Alexei Chikhachev, "Saving the Hegemony: French Perspective on the Changing World Order," *Russian International Affairs Council*, 18 September 2023. <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/saving-the-hegemony-french-perspective-on-the-changing-world-order/>.

31. "Why France wishes to regulate use of the veto in the United Nations Security Council," *Ministere De L'Europe Et Des Affaires Etrangeres*. <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/france-and-the-united-nations/france-and-the-united-nations/france-and-the-united-nations-security-council/why-france-wishes-to-regulate-use-of-the-veto-in-the-united-nations-security-65315/>; Elisabetta Martini, "UN Security Council Reform: Current Developments," *Istituto Affari Internazionali*. <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iai0926.pdf>

France actively supports India's bid for a permanent seat on the UNSC.³² Additionally, during the first presidency of Donald Trump, President Macron took a critical stance against the Trump administration's hardcore unilateral policies. The Paris Peace Forum is seen by some experts as an effort to replicate aspects of the UN.³³ Therefore, while Paris aims to preserve the Western-led contemporary world order, it also aspires to introduce adjustments to the international system that counter US hegemony and advocate for a more balanced distribution of power.

French President Emmanuel Macron appears to aspire to a leadership role within the European Union (EU) following Brexit. In light of President Trump's retreat from commitments to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members, Macron urged EU member states to develop a coordinated defense strategy, with France positioned to play a central role.³⁴ To project a more assertive European posture under French leadership, Paris may leverage its military capabilities to expand its presence in the Asia-Pacific region and deepen strategic cooperation with India.³⁵ The US is unlikely to oppose such partnerships, particularly those that do not overtly pursue revisionism, actively resist China's expanding geopolitical and military influence, and contribute to sharing the burden of maintaining a stable regional and global order.

Therefore, while committed to the shared goal of preserving the liberal international order, both India and France share a common objective of pursuing selective revisions to the existing international system.³⁶ In the post-Cold War era, India effectively leveraged its shared vision with France for a multipolar international system to secure strategic benefits. Rakesh Sood, India's former Ambassador to France, highlights that French leadership has

32. Nadia Sarwar, "Expansion of the United Nations security Council," *Strategic Studies* 31, no. 3 (2011):272.

33. Chikhachev, "Saving the Hegemony."

34. Julie Gaubert, "Macron calls for coordinated EU nuclear defence strategy – with France at Centre," *Euro News*, 02 February 2020. <https://www.euronews.com/2020/02/08/macron-calls-for-coordinated-eu-nuclear-defence-strategy-with-france-at-centre>

35. "France in the Indo-Pacific: Proactive Power and Solutions Provider," *The Foundation for Strategic Research*, <https://www.frstrategie.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/fiches-indo-pacifique/2023/anglais/No.4%20-%20Military%20presence%20and%20defence%20diplomacy.pdf>

36. R. Sharma, "UNSC Reform and India's Candidacy: A Critical Analysis," *Journal of Defense Studies*, 10, no. 3 (2016): 37-51.; P. Saroj and A. Choudhury, "India's quest for Permanent Seat at United Nations Security Council: An Analysis," *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews* 5, no. 4 (2018):

been apprehensive of “American Triumphalism.”³⁷ Over the past two decades, India has effectively leveraged its stance of “strategic non-alignment” to its advantage. This extends to the issue of Afghanistan, where both India and France refrained from actively joining the US-led security forces in the war against terrorism. While being a part of the Western alliance system, France consistently seeks to maintain strategic autonomy in its decision-making. This is exemplified by France taking divergent positions from the US on various issues. On the other hand, despite its growing inclination towards the US over the past two decades, India has successfully projected an image of strategic autonomy. This serves as a significant factor for the convergence of interests between Paris and New Delhi. French leadership has even likened India’s nuclear policy to Charles de Gaulle’s pursuit of strategic autonomy.

Confluence between Arms Import and Export

With a 47% surge in defense exports over the past decade, France has overtaken Russia to become the world’s second-largest arms exporter, accounting for 11% of all global arms transfers.³⁹ The Indian military is one of the key consumers of French-manufactured defense equipment. France’s strategic cooperation with India is primarily driven by its commercial approach to arms deals rather than constituting a formal “strategic alliance.” France has traditionally adhered to this commercial approach in its policy of supplying military hardware to South Asian countries. Interestingly, at one point in history, both Pakistan and India acquired similar French weapons, such as the Alouette III helicopters.⁴⁰

During the Cold War, France maintained an ambiguous stance on conflicts between Pakistan and India. However, this approach shifted in the post-Cold War era when India appeared to move away from its traditional policy

37. Rakesh Sood, “Emmanuel Macron is new French President: Merci France – says Europe,” *Observer Research Foundation*, 10 May 2017. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/emmanuel-macron-is-new-french-president-merci-france-says-europe>.

38. Saroj K. Aryal and Manish J. Pulami, “India’s ‘Strategic Autonomy’ and Strengthening its Ties with the U.S.,” *Przegląd Geopolityczny*, Vol 44, (2023): 116-128.

39. Pieter D. Wezeman, Katarina Djokic, et al., “Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2023,” *SIPRI Fact Sheet*, March 2024. https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/fs_2403_at_2023.pdf.

40. Jerrold F. Elkin and W. Andrew Ritzel, “The Indo-Pakistan Military Balance,” *Asian Survey* 26, no. 5 (1986): 526.

of non-alignment and began aligning more closely with Western states.⁴¹ In February 2000, Indian Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee stated in an interview with a French newspaper that France needed to “make a strategic decision between India, a great democratic power, and Pakistan, a little country under military dictatorship.”⁴² This statement was effectively a virtual ultimatum to France, urging it to openly choose between the two South Asian countries. It reflected India’s view that Franco-Pakistani relations posed a significant obstacle to advancing its defense cooperation with France. As a result, France has adopted pro-India positions on several issues, driven by its close ties with New Delhi.

Following the establishment of a strategic partnership with India, New Delhi has sought to leverage the relationship to secure France’s political support in multilateral forums while also expecting France to discontinue arms transfers to Pakistan. Recently, France supported India’s stance on terrorism in the aftermath of the Pulwama attack and opposed any formal discussions in the UN regarding Jammu and Kashmir, maintaining that differences between India and Pakistan should be resolved bilaterally.⁴³ This enhanced strategic cooperation is driven by a combination of commercial interests and shared perceptions and goals shaped at the systemic level. After the collapse of the Soviet Union which was the main supplier of weapons to India, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders called for massive investment in India’s defense capabilities and urged the government to leverage bilateral relations with strong powers like France.⁴⁵ In 1991, the Congress government introduced an economic policy aimed at opening India’s market to the global economy and seeking alternative international partners. This policy attracted high-tech and defense sector companies from France, such as Dassault and Aérospatiale, to establish a presence in India. It paved the way for increased Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and

41. Several experts believe that India’s foreign policy in post-Cold War era reflected that non-alignment became irrelevant and lost its meaning. For details, see Arijit Mazumdar, “India’s Search for a Post-Cold War Foreign Policy: Domestic Constraints and Obstacles,” *India Quarterly*, vol 67, no. 2 (2011): 119.

42. Constance Roger, “Indo-French Defence Cooperation: Friends in Need or Friends Indeed?,” *Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies* (March 2007): 21, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/55131/IPCS-ResearchPaper7-Constance.pdf>

43. “Security situation in Kashmir – Reply by the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs to a written question in the National Assembly,” *French Embassy in New Delhi*, 19 November 2019. <https://in.ambafrance.org/France-calls-for-restraint-in-Kashmir-dispute>.

44. Mazumdar, “India’s Search for a Post-Cold War Foreign Policy,” 165-182.

facilitated the entry of multinational corporations into the Indian market.⁴⁵ This economic engagement was complemented by France's diplomatic support to India on several key global issues. In January 1998, President Jacques Chirac emphasized that India's exclusion from the global nuclear order was unacceptable and needed to be rectified.

Interestingly, France refrained from condemning India's nuclear tests conducted in Pokhran in 1998. Unlike Russia, it did not support the Clinton Administration's sanctions against India following Pokhran II and even advocated for the lifting of these sanctions.⁴⁶ C. Raja Mohan observes that the nuclear tests had the potential to open new avenues for both commercial and political ties between India and France.⁴⁷ France portrays India as a responsible nuclear weapons state, basing its position on the notions that India has been a steadfast supporter of non-proliferation, conducted its nuclear tests solely through its capabilities, and firmly opposes exporting its technical knowledge to other countries.⁴⁸ Similarly, President Chirac also indicated his support for India securing a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

Emmanuel Bonne, the diplomatic advisor to President Macron, reaffirmed France's support for India's bid for a permanent seat on the UNSC during the 36th session of the strategic dialogue between the two states in 2023.⁴⁹ France's support for India's stance is rooted in its vision of a multipolar world, as opposed to a US-dominated unipolar order. This is evident in the French political leadership's desire to counter US unilateralism and its concerns about the hegemony of a hyperpower.⁵⁰ More recently, France has emerged as one of the major nuclear exporters advocating for an India spec-

45. Sanjay Gupta, "The changing patterns of Indo-French relations: From Cold War estrangement to strategic partnership in the twenty-first century," *French Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 3/4 (2009): 254.

46. C. Raja Mohan, "India and Nuclear Weapons," IPG 498 (1998): 381, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/ipg/ipg-1998-4/artmohan.pdf>

47. Mohan, "India and Nuclear Weapons."

48. Constance Roger, "Indo-French Defence Cooperation: Friends in Need or Friends Indeed?," *Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies* (March 2007): 11.

49. "France reiterates support for India as a permanent member of UNSC," *Business Standard*, 05 January 2023. https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/france-reiterates-support-for-india-as-a-permanent-member-of-uns-123010501186_1.html.

50. Michel Duclos, "Jacques Chirac – The Explorer of the Multipolar World," *Institute Montaigne*, 4 October 2019. <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/expressions/jacques-chirac-explorer-multipolar-world>.

-ific waiver in its bid for membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG).⁵¹ These aspects demonstrate France's unequivocal support for India, which serves as a solid foundation for a robust and effective strategic partnership between the two nations. The 2008 White Paper of France highlighted that Asian powers were expected to grow significantly in importance by 2025. It projected that India's gross domestic product could triple over the next two decades and warned that regional conflicts in Asia might spiral out of control.⁵²

France recognizes India as a major client for military equipment purchases. Given India's aspirations for an ambitious regional role, which necessitates substantial military modernization, the Indian defense industry presents a vast and lucrative market for French arms exports. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), France has become the world's second-largest arms exporter, with its arms exports increasing by 47% over the past decade.⁵³ The surge in France's arms exports is driven by significant demand from countries like India, which has not only emerged as the world's largest arms importer⁵⁴ but also as the largest recipient of French arms exports.⁵⁵ French defense cooperation with India accounts for 30% of India's total arms imports.⁵⁶

Premier Modi's assertive foreign policy approach has further accelerated defense cooperation between India and France. Following Premier Modi's visit to France in April 2015, French arms exports to India surged by approximately 72% during the period from 2015 to 2019, and this upward

51. Ji Yeon-Jung, "A Path to NSG: India's Rise in the Global Nuclear Order," *Rising Powers Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (2017): 25.

52. Bruno Tertrais, "The French White Paper on Defense and National Security: Towards a Stronger and More Streamlined Force," Madrid: Real Instituto Elcano, August 7, 2008, p. 3; "The French White Paper on Defence and National Security," *Odile Jacob Publishing Corporation* (2008): 33, https://koziej.pl/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/France_White_Paper_English2008.pdf

53. "European arms imports nearly double, US and French exports rise, and Russian exports fall sharply," *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)*, 11 March 2024. <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2024/european-arms-imports-nearly-double-us-and-french-exports-rise-and-russian-exports-fall-sharply>.

54. According to SIPRI estimates, India is the largest arms importer with a 9.8% share of all arms imports all around the world. For details, see Wezeman and Djokic, et al., "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2023," *SIPRI Fact Sheet*, March 2024.

55. "European arms imports nearly double, US and French exports rise, and Russian exports fall sharply," *SIPRI*.

56. "European arms imports nearly double, US and French exports rise."

has continued to date.⁵⁷

Salient Aspects of Indo-French Strategic Cooperation

Indo-French cooperation spans the nuclear, military, and high-technology domains. The two nations formalized their bilateral strategic partnership in January 1998 during French President Jacques Chirac's visit to New Delhi.⁵⁸ Within just five months, this partnership faced its first test when France responded moderately to India's nuclear tests and chose to be among the few states that refrained from imposing sanctions on New Delhi.⁵⁹ India's decision to trigger a nuclear arms race in South Asia slightly strained its relations with countries such as the US, Germany, Japan, and Australia. However, the French government's moderate stance provided India with the diplomatic breathing room it needed to reassert its status as a so-called responsible nuclear state.

This supportive stance resonated positively with the Indian leadership, further encouraging the establishment of a deeper partnership with Paris. As a result, defense cooperation between the two countries has grown significantly, increasing multifold since then. India has traditionally procured Mirage 2000 aircraft and Scorpène-class submarines from France. In a significant move, India committed to purchasing 126 Rafale aircraft from Dassault Aviation at a time when France faced challenges in securing buyers for this platform. This purchase order not only provided a significant boost to the French defense industry but also strengthened bilateral relations between the two countries.⁶⁰ Traditionally, India has relied heavily on Russia for the procurement of defense equipment. However, the acquisition of Rafale jets from France, which boasts a technological edge over the Russian Sukhoi 30 MKI, is altering this dynamic by reducing India's overreliance on Moscow as its primary strategic ally.

57. Elizabeth Roche, "India was world's second-largest arms importer in 2015-19: Report," *Mint*, 10 March 2020. <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/arms-imports-from-russia-decreased-in-2015-19-due-to-drop-in-india-sales-report-11583772984894.html>

58. Jean-Luc Racine, "The Indo-French Strategic Dialogue: Bilateralism and World Perceptions," in Summit Ganguly, *India as an Emerging Power*, (New Delhi: Routledge, 2003), 153.

59. "Modi's visit to France and Europe-India ties," YouTube video, 1:08:16, posted by "Brookings Institution," 11 July 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cHSPSO0PwXw>.

60. Mukesh Shankar Bharti, "Indo-French Defense Partnership and Regional Balance in South Asia" *The Copernicus Journal of Political Studies*, No 1-2 (2022): 74.

During President Macron's visit to New Delhi on India's 75th Republic Day, both states announced a "Defense Industrial Roadmap" aimed at deepening collaboration on defense production, with a focus on the joint development of military hardware.⁶¹ The Indo-French defense cooperation seeks to transcend the traditional buyer-seller dynamic by creating synergies between France's expertise in arms production and India's expansive defense market. This defense cooperation operates across four key streams: the exchange of high-level visits, joint military exercises, training and arms procurement, as well as collaborative research and development programs.

India and France regularly engage in strategic dialogues to address global issues. Frequent ministerial and high-level military visits further strengthen agreements and drive cooperative actions between the two states. India and France regularly conduct joint military exercises, including participation in multilateral drills, to enhance interoperability. The Shakti exercises⁶² held biennially and alternately in France and India, focus primarily on counter-terrorism operations.⁶³ Naval exercise Varuna⁶⁴ is conducted annually, alternating between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. It focuses on advanced naval operations, including air defense, anti-surface warfare, and anti-submarine warfare.⁶⁵ These exercises, conducted since 1983, have become a cornerstone of bilateral cooperation between India and France.⁶⁶ These exercises, conducted since 1983, have become a cornerstone of bilateral cooperation between India and France. In the air force domain, the two states regularly hold Exercise Garuda, a key component of their defense collaboration. The most recent iteration took place in Jodhpur, India, from October 26 to November 12, 2022, featuring

61. Suhasini Haider and Dinakar Peri, "India-France Defence Ties Take a Big Leap," *The Hindu*, 30 January 2024. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-france-announce-defence-industrial-roadmap-space-defence-cooperation-after-modi-macron-meet/article67780915.ec>.

62. Shakti literally means "power" in Sanskrit. The term is used for the bilateral military exercise conducted between India and France.

63. "France and Security in the Indo-Pacific," *Ministere Des Armees*, https://franceintheus.org/IMG/pdf/France_and_Security_in_the_Indo-Pacific_-_2019.pdf

64. Varuna refers to a goddess associated with oceans and water. Naval exercises terms as Varuna symbolize maritime cooperation.

65. Dr Sheryn Lee and Dr Ben Schreer, "Europe and the Indo-Pacific: Evolving Security Engagement," in *Asia-Pacific Regional Security Assessment 2022: Key Developments and Trends* (London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2022), 236.

66. Remy Davison, "Containing the Dragon: The European Pivot to the Indo-Pacific," in Chin-Peng Chu and Sang-Chul Park, eds., *Strategies in Changing Global Orders: Competition and Conflict versus Cooperation* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2023), 126.

the participation of Rafale fighter aircraft.⁶⁷ These regular military exercises highlight the depth and strength of the security relationship between India and France.

France's vested interests in the "Indo-Pacific" framework act as a catalyst for deepening its collaboration with India. The traditional areas of strategic cooperation have officially expanded to include the maritime domain. In January 2017, India and France signed a White Shipping Agreement, enabling the exchange of information related to commercial shipping. This agreement facilitates the development of a shared maritime awareness to monitor and track movements at sea.⁶⁸ This was followed by an agreement in October 2017 to enhance information-sharing arrangements and improve maritime domain awareness. On March 10, 2018, during President Macron's visit to New Delhi, Prime Minister Modi and President Macron signed the Joint Strategic Vision for Cooperation in the IOR.⁶⁹ Both sides agreed to strengthen their collaboration in the provision of arms and military logistics, with a particular focus on the western Indian Ocean.⁷⁰

In 2019, Paris and New Delhi signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on "Joint Maritime Domain Awareness in the Indian Ocean," aimed at enhancing cooperation between the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and France's National Centre for Space Studies (CNES).⁷¹ This agreement established the foundation for space cooperation between India and France, facilitating collaboration on the joint development of maritime surveillance satellites. These satellites aim to enhance monitoring capabilities across regions spanning from the Mediter-

67. Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "India, France Conclude Garuda Exercise 2022," *The Diplomat*, 18 November 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/11/india-france-conclude-garuda-exercise-2022/>; "Exercise Garuda – VII at Air Force Station Jodhpur," Ministry of Defence and Press Information Bureau, 18 October 2022. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1871611>

68. C. Raja Mohan and Darshana M. Baruah, "Deepening the India-France Maritime Partnership," *Carnegie India* (26 February 2018): 5, https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/Mohan_Baruah_Deepening_The_India_France_Maritime_Partnership.pdf,

69. Yong Deng, *China's Strategic Opportunity: Change and Revisionism in Chinese Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 180.

70. Deng, *China's Strategic Opportunity: Change and Revisionism in Chinese Foreign Policy*.

71. Mukesh Shankar Bharti & Akshithaa Singh, "India and France bilateral partnership for advancing strategic autonomy in the Indo-Pacific region: Special reference to the Indo-French strategic partnership," *Cogent Social Sciences* Vol 9, No. 1 (2022): 7.

-ranean Sea to the Indian Ocean.⁷² This collaborative framework is designed to establish an operational system capable of detecting, identifying, and tracking various ships. With France's military facilities on Réunion and Mayotte islands, these Indo-French agreements are poised to significantly enhance the Indian Navy's operational flexibility, providing it with diversified strategic options in the region.⁷³

In the domain of military procurement, the Indian Air Force (IAF) has acquired several major weapons systems from France, including Alouette helicopters, Mirage fighter aircraft, and most notably, 36 nuclear-capable Rafale fighter aircraft. The induction of the Rafale jets has significantly enhanced India's air combat capabilities, further strengthening its strategic edge.⁷⁴ The Indian Army has been consistently procuring Milan anti-tank missiles from France since 1984.⁷⁵ In the naval domain, one of the most significant agreements is the P-75 Scorpene Project, signed in 2006. This deal involves the procurement of six Scorpene-class submarines for India as part of a joint initiative between the French company Direction des Constructions Navales Services (DCNS) and Mazagon Docks Limited (MDL) in Mumbai.⁷⁶ These submarines are being constructed under a transfer of technology (ToT) agreement, which aims to enhance the technical expertise of the Indian defense industry in shipbuilding and submarine construction. This includes critical skills such as hull fabrication and systems integration.⁷⁷ Five of the Scorpene-class submarines—INS Kalvari, INS Khanderi, INS Karanj, INS Vela, and INS Vagir—have been commissioned in recent years.⁷⁸ The sixth and final submarine, INS Vagsheer

72. "India And France To Jointly Build Maritime Domain Awareness Satellites Starting in 2019," Space Watch Asia Pacific. <https://spacewatch.global/2018/08/india-and-france-to-jointly-build-maritime-domain-awareness-satellites-starting-in-2019/>

73. Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "What's behind the rising India-France maritime activity in the Indo-Pacific?," Observer Research Foundation, 27 March 2020. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/whats-behind-the-rising-india-france-maritime-activity-in-the-indo-pacific-63753>.

74. Gaurav Kampani, "India's Quest for the 'Credible' in the Nuclear Deterrence," in *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Politics*, eds., Sumit Ganguly and Eswaran Sridharan (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 599.

75. B. Krishnamurthy, *Indo-French Relations: Prospects and Perspectives* (Michigan: Shipra Publications, 2008), 72.

76. Priya Tyagi, "Aerospace and Defence News," in *Indian Defence Review*, ed., Bharat Verma 27, no. 3 (2012): 59-72.

77. Shreya Sinha, "India's Military Modernization: Role and Impact of France," *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, vol 10, no. 3 (2023): 325-341.

78. "India's Military Modernization: Role and Impact of France," *Journal of Asian Security and*

heer, was launched in April 2022. India has initiated a new deal worth USD 6 billion for the procurement of 26 Rafale Marine aircraft, aimed at bolstering the Indian Navy's expanding aircraft carrier capabilities.⁷⁹ Reportedly, France has responded positively to India's tender for the 26 Rafale Marine aircraft. If the deal is successfully finalized, it will increase India's total inventory of Rafale aircraft to 62.⁸⁰ The Rafale Marine is a modified version of the original Rafale aircraft, designed specifically to meet maritime operational requirements. It is currently deployed on the French Navy's aircraft carrier, Charles de Gaulle. Once deployed aboard INS Vikrant, the Rafale Maritime will significantly enhance the Indian Navy's power projection capabilities, strengthening its ability to maintain sea control and dominance in the IOR.

The Indo-French joint research and development programs play a pivotal role in advancing New Delhi's "Make in India" initiative by supporting the growth of its indigenous and state-controlled defense industry. Notably, Safran, a leading high-tech industrial group in France, has contributed significantly by manufacturing rocket propulsion systems for India's Vikas and Ariane rockets, which are integral to India's space launch capabilities.⁸¹ Safran has a long-standing partnership with Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL), collaborating on the production of Shakti (Ardiden) engines for helicopters and components for Rafale aircraft.⁸² The French company Snecma collaborates with India's DRDO in developing Kaveri engines for the IAF. Additionally, French company GIAT Industries partners with DRDO in the production of light tanks. The seven largest French defense companies, spanning aerospace, naval, and land sectors, actively participated in the Indian DefExpo held in February 2020. Additionally, DRDO and the French company MBDA are collaborating

Security and International Affairs; Xavier Vavasseur, "Indian Navy Commissions 5th Scorpene Submarine INS Vagir," *Naval News*, 23 January 2023. <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2023/01/indian-navy-commissions-5th-scorpene-submarine-ins-vagir/>.

79. Manjeet Negi, "France responds to India's bid for acquisition of 26 Rafale Marine fighters," *India Today*, 20 December 2023. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/rafale-marine-aircraft-france-indian-navy-ins-vikrant-ins-vikramaditya-defence-ministry-arms-deal-2478550-2023-12-20>.

80. "Indian, French governments negotiating 26 Rafale marine fighter jet deal," *Business Standard*, 14 June 2024. https://www.business-standard.com/external-affairs-defence-security/news/indian-french-governments-negotiating-26-rafale-marine-fighter-jet-deal-124061400348_1.html.

81. "Fifty years of Indo-French Space Cooperation," *Diplomacy and Beyond*, 4 April 2017. <https://diplomacybeyond.com/india-france-indo-french-space-co-operation/>.

82. "We propose full technology transfer for engine to power next gen fighters: French manufacturer Safran," *The Economic Times*, 05 Feb 2020.

on the joint development of short-range surface-to-air missiles (SR-SAM) tailored for Indian naval defense applications. In the civil nuclear cooperation sector, the Indo-US nuclear deal played a transformative role by opening the international nuclear market to India, enabling access to nuclear fuel supplies, reactors, and other related equipment and facilities. However, even before the US Congressional approval of the Indo-US nuclear deal, France became the first NSG member state to sign an MoU with India in September 2008. Before this, in March 1983, the two countries had signed an agreement for the supply of enriched uranium to fuel the US-built nuclear power plant at Tarapur.⁸³ In April 1992, French officials announced their unwillingness to extend the supply agreement for enriched uranium unless India agreed to implement full-scope safeguards under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).⁸⁴

On 30 September 2008, India and France signed a landmark nuclear energy agreement that allowed New Delhi to procure nuclear equipment and fuel.⁸⁵ In 2008, French company Areva signed an agreement with the Nuclear Power Corporation of India (NPCIL) to supply 300 tons of uranium annually. Additionally, a deal worth US\$ 12.3 billion was signed for the construction of six nuclear power plant (NPP) units in Jaitapur, Maharashtra.⁸⁶ In 2011, the French Ambassador to India affirmed that the NSG decision to restrict the transfer of enrichment and reprocessing (ENR) technologies to non-NPT signatories did not undermine the waiver granted to India in 2008. He emphasized that “nothing in the existing and future guidelines shall be interpreted as detracting from that exemption.”⁸⁷ France's commercial interests significantly influence its nuclear diplomacy and its support for India's potential inclusion in the NSG, despite India not being a signatory to the NPT. In 2010, France, alongside the US, encouraged Japan to finalize a nuclear agreement with India.

83. “AROUND THE WORLD; France Signs Agreement On Uranium for India,” *New York Times*, 25 March 1983. <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/03/25/world/around-the-world-france-signs-agreement-on-uranium-for-india.html>

84. “India Nuclear Chronology,” *Nuclear Threat Initiative*, December 2010. https://media.nti.org/pdfs/india_nuclear.pdf

85. Jaclyn Tandler, “French Nuclear Diplomacy,” *The Non-Proliferation Review*, Vol 12, No. 2 (2014): 125-148.

86. Mukesh Shankar Bharti and Akshithaa Singh, India and France bilateral partnership for advancing strategic autonomy in the Indo-Pacific region: Special reference to the Indo-French strategic partnership,” *Cogent Social Sciences*, Vol 9, No. 1 (2023): 10 and Sitakanta Mishra, “India's Civil Nuclear Network: A Reality Check,” *Air Power Journal*, Vol 5, No. 4 (2010): 117.

87. Satish Kumar, ed., *Indian's National Security Review 2012* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2012)

More recently, India and France have engaged in discussions on an agreement to collaborate on the development of small modular nuclear reactors (SMRs).⁸⁸ In addition to supporting India's membership in the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), France actively backs India's bid for inclusion in the other three major multilateral export control regimes: the NSG, the Wassenaar Arrangement, and the Australia Group.

Impact on Regional Stability and Global Nuclear Norms

The strategic cooperation between India and France significantly contributes to India's increasingly assertive military posture. In August 2019, Prime Minister Modi described New Delhi's relationship with Paris as an "alliance."⁸⁹ The growing convergence of interests between India and France, coupled with their continuous military cooperation—largely driven by commercial interests rather than shared strategic objectives—has raised concerns about its negative impact on strategic stability in South Asia.

The French leadership regards India as a stabilizing factor in South Asia, partly due to the perceived threat of China's growing influence, and uses this rationale to justify the sale of military equipment to India's vast defense market. However, France's supply of nuclear-capable Rafale fighter jets raises concerns about undermining the spirit of global non-proliferation norms by transferring nuclear-capable delivery systems to a non-NPT signatory. This move not only challenges the principles of non-proliferation but also risks destabilizing strategic stability in South Asia, where heightened military capabilities could further escalate regional tensions. Despite upgrades to the existing fleet of the IAF, the Rafale is likely to assume the role of air-based nuclear strike capability. In the French Air Force,⁹⁰ The Rafale is equipped to carry the Air-Sol Moyenne Portée-Amélioré (ASMP-A) nuclear cruise missile. These fighter jets have been used in exercises to rehearse nuclear strike missions, demonstrating their capability to deliver nuclear warheads effectively.

88. Sudhi Ranjan Sen, Rajesh Kumar Singh, and Ania Nussbaum, "France and India to Discuss Accord on Small Nuclear Reactors," Bloomberg, 24 January 2024. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-01-24/france-and-india-discuss-partnering-on-small-nuclear-reactors-as-macron-visits>.

89. "Modi's visit to France and Europe-India ties."

90. Yogesh Joshi, Frank O'Donnell and Harsh V. Pant, "India's Evolving Nuclear Force and its Implications for U.S. Strategy in the Asia-Pacific," Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College (June 2016): 8.

In May 2024, France successfully tested an upgraded version of the nuclear-capable ASMP-A missile, launched from a Rafale fighter jet.⁹¹ In addition to France's submarine-based nuclear capabilities, Rafale's employment in a nuclear role is a key component of its overall nuclear deterrence strategy. Experts highlight that the Rafale is already utilized for nuclear missions in the French Air Force, suggesting that India could potentially adapt the aircraft to serve a similar role within the IAF.⁹² As an 'omnirole' aircraft, the anticipated induction of 26 Rafale Marine aircraft into the Indian Navy for deployment on aircraft carriers is expected to significantly bolster the Navy's contribution to New Delhi's nuclear triad. Given the Rafale's advanced capabilities, it would be unrealistic for India's adversaries to view this aircraft solely as a conventional asset. The Rafale is capable of carrying various types of warheads, including nuclear payloads, while achieving a maximum speed of Mach 1.8.⁹³ The Rafale is equipped with highly advanced and lethal missiles capable of striking targets with remarkable accuracy, achieving a circular error probable (CEP) of 8-10 meters.⁹⁴ The Rafale is equipped with laser designation pods for precision targeting in air-to-ground operations, alongside advanced electronic warfare capabilities.

These systems enable the aircraft to simultaneously track up to eight different targets, significantly enhancing its situational awareness, combat effectiveness, and ability to engage multiple threats in dynamic operational environments. The Rafale aircraft is equipped with the Meteor, one of the most advanced beyond visual range (BVR) air-to-air missiles. With a striking range of 120-150 km, the Meteor is a strategic weapon that provides the Rafale with a significant advantage in air superiority.⁹⁵ Reports indicate that the Rafale aircraft will be deployed in two equally sized squadrons: one at an air base in West Bengal and the other at the Ambala

91. "France Successfully Tests Launch of Upgraded ASMPA_R Nuclear-Capable Missile from Rafale Fighter," *Global Defence News*, 22 May 2024. <https://armyrecognition.com/news/aerospace-news/2024/france-successfully-tests-launch-of-upgraded-asmpa-r-nuclear-capable-missile-from-rafale-fighter>.

92. Hans M. Kristensen & Matt Korda, "Indian nuclear forces, 2018," *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 74, No. 6 (2018): 363.

93. "Dassault Rafale and FA-18E Super Hornet," *Armed Forces*, https://armedforces.eu/compare/multirole_aircraft_Dassault_Rafale_vs_FA-18E_Super_Hornet

94. "France confirms delivery of 600 AASM guided bombs to Ukraine," *Global Defence News*, 19 January 2024. <https://armyrecognition.com/news/army-news/2024/france-confirms-delivery-of-600-aasm-guided-bombs-to-ukraine>.

95. Gilles Bouquerat, "France and South Asia," in Sumit Ganguly and Frank O'Donnell, eds., *Routledge Handbook of International Relations of South Asia* (New Delhi: Taylor and Francis, 2022).

Air Base Station, which is strategically located just 220 kilometers from the Pakistani border.⁹⁶ Rafale fighters would enhance India's offensive capabilities by providing the ability to launch standoff weapons for counterforce strikes. This capability allows India to execute both short and long-range missions against Pakistan. By offering a combination of air superiority and advanced reconnaissance capabilities, the Rafale fighter jet could potentially tempt Indian leadership—particularly those inclined toward counterforce strategies—to consider employing it in a nuclear first-strike role.⁹⁷ This would involve targeting selected military assets on land and at sea with precision strikes. This potential for escalation is underscored by remarks made by Prime Minister Narendra Modi following the February 2019 crisis. He expressed regret over the absence of the French Rafale fighter jets, suggesting that their presence could have yielded better outcomes for the IAF in its close engagements with the Pakistan Air Force.⁹⁸

Therefore, Rafale fighter jets are not merely force multipliers; they pose a broader strategic risk by potentially undermining the nuclear deterrent capability of adversaries. This capability could destabilize the delicate balance of deterrence in South Asia. It is important to recognize that the acquisition of the Rafale fighter jets is occurring amid growing concerns about the potential erosion of India's No First Use (NFU) nuclear doctrine. These concerns are compounded by India's increasingly assertive posture and its willingness to contemplate pre-emptive nuclear first strikes against Pakistan.⁹⁹

South Asian strategic stability is already undermined by existing military asymmetries, and India's ongoing force modernization further exacerbates this imbalance. Despite having greater military resources compared to its regional counterparts, India has, in recent years, significantly expanded its capabilities. These include acquiring a diverse range of nuclear-capable delivery systems, ballistic missile defense (BMD) systems, and anti-satellite

96. Dinakar Peri, "Five Rafales arrive at Ambala airbase," *The Hindu*, 29 July 2020. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/rafale-jets-ambala-induction/article61678277.ece>.

97. Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang, "India's Counterforce Temptations: Strategic Dilemmas, Doctrine, and Capabilities," *International Security*, Vol 43, No 3 (2019): 7-52.

98. Shishir Gupta, "If we had Rafales, we'd have shot down 4-5 Pakistani jets after Balakot: IAF ex-chief Dhanoa," *The Print*, 20 February 2020. <https://theprint.in/defence/if-we-had-rafales-wed-have-shot-down-4-5-pakistani-jets-after-balakot-iaf-ex-chief-dhanoa/363080/>.

99. Aqeel Akhtar and Sufian Ullah, "India's Sea-based Nuclear Forces and Strategic Stability in South Asia," *Australian Journal of Maritime and Ocean Affairs*, Vol 15, No. 1 (2023): 54-68.

(ASAT) weapons, as well as developing a substantial stockpile of fissile material. Additionally, India has incorporated other force multipliers, such as supersonic delivery systems, which enhance its first-strike and counterforce capabilities, further unsettling the strategic equilibrium in the region.¹⁰⁰ The continued support for India's military modernization by major powers, including France, exacerbates instability in the South Asian region. This support disrupts the military balance and fuels India's ambitions of establishing hegemony and supremacy in the IOR.¹⁰¹ By developing a blue-water navy, India aspires to establish pre-eminence in the IOR and extend its influence beyond. This self-assumed role as a regional policeman drives India to adopt an increasingly offensive posture, with the likelihood of leveraging its enhanced naval capabilities to assertively pursue its strategic interests.

As India seeks to dominate the Indian Ocean, it may also aim to counterbalance and potentially deny China's influence in the South China Sea in the coming years. India's Act East policy seeks to enhance its strategic presence in regions like the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea, which it views as secondary areas of maritime interest.¹⁰² Strengthening its role in these regions would grant India access to the Western Pacific, enabling potential joint operations with the US Navy. The Indian Navy is steadily increasing its presence in the South China Sea and surrounding regions through a variety of initiatives. These include participation in bilateral and multilateral naval exercises, such as the MILAN exercises, and pursuing defense partnerships with countries like Vietnam, Brunei, and the Philippines.¹⁰³ India's increasing control over sea lines of communication (SLOCs)—under the pretext of a net security provider—positions it to establish sea control and dominance in the region. While this strategy bolsters India's maritime influence, it runs counter to the interests of regional states, including Pakistan, as it may limit their access and operational freedom in these critical waterways.¹⁰⁴

100. Rizwana Abbasi and Sufian Ullah, "Rising Strategic Instability and Declining Prospects for Nuclear Disarmament in South Asia: A Pakistani Perspective," *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding*, Vol 10, No. 1 (2022): 215-241.

101. Liliang You, "Looking at the "Security Dilemma" between India and Pakistan from Structural Realism," *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research* 325 (2019): 114.

102. *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy* (New Delhi: Indian Navy, 2015): 32.

103. Sufian Ullah, "Analysing India's Naval Development Strategy," *IPRI Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2019): 86-110.

104. Sufian Ullah and Zeeshan Hayat, "India as a Net Security Provider in Indo-Pacific and

These developments exacerbate concerns and could undermine France's declared interest in maintaining stability in the region. Countries like Pakistan would likely feel compelled to adopt additional security measures to protect their vital trade routes and maritime interests within their extended EEZ. Given India's aspirations to extend its naval reach to critical chokepoints such as the Straits of Hormuz, the acquisition of enhanced capabilities for sustained maritime operations raises the likelihood of interactions—and potential confrontations—between adversarial navies. If India continues to maintain opacity regarding the co-mingling of strategic and conventional assets, such as deploying nuclear-capable missiles on surface vessels, this ambiguity could significantly heighten the risk of miscalculation during a military confrontation. Adversaries might interpret such deployments as strategic threats, potentially escalating conflicts to the nuclear level.

The Indo-French nuclear cooperation poses another challenge to strategic stability in South Asia. France was the first country to sign a civil nuclear cooperation agreement with India following the exceptional NSG waiver granted to India in 2008. Reports further indicate that French defense company Thales has expressed interest in assisting India in the construction of its fleet of nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs).¹⁰⁵ In this regard, a detailed presentation on the Barracuda-class – France's latest low-enriched uranium (LEU) fuelled nuclear-powered attack submarine (SSN) – was given to the visiting Indian Chief of Naval Staff in November 2017.¹⁰⁶ Given French expertise in the manufacturing of nuclear submarines and India's aspirations for a large fleet of nuclear submarines, cooperation between New Delhi and Paris on military nuclear propulsion and other sensitive areas is possible. The likelihood of deeper Indo-French collaboration in the nuclear domain has increased in the wake of the AUKUS deal. The AUKUS agreement, which saw Australia abandon a longstanding submarine deal with France at the last moment to instead acquire nuclear-powered attack submarines from the US and UK, strained France's ties with

Implications for the Region," *NUST Journal of International Peace & Stability*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2021): 26-39

105. "Thales Looking At Role In India's Nuclear Submarine Project," *Indo-French Chamber of Commerce*, 22 April 2018. <https://www.ifcci.org.in/communication/news/n/news/thales-looking-at-role-in-indias-nuclear-submarine-project.html>.

106. Yusuf Unjhawala, "French Barracuda Project's Utility to India," *Live Mint*, 29 November 2017. <https://www.livemint.com/Opinion/rqltXdEokaHko48UWoc7CN/French-Barracuda-projects-utility-to-India.html>.

with both countries. It encouraged France to ally with India. The advocates of possible Indo-French collaboration propagate that in the event of visible French distrust towards the US and the UK, India could use the opportunity to procure a nuclear-attack submarine from France.¹⁰⁷ Ashley Tellis, a prominent Indian-American expert in Washington, DC, has proposed the concept of a trilateral arrangement called INFRUS, involving India, France, and the US. Under this framework, Washington could potentially encourage Paris to share naval nuclear propulsion technology with New Delhi.¹⁰⁸ While many such proposals are framed under the pretext of the “China threat theory,” which underscores Beijing’s expanding influence as a shared concern for the US, India, and France, the broader systemic implications of these developments on the international nuclear order are often overlooked.

India’s plans to develop and operate a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines alongside a robust sea-based nuclear deterrent could significantly impact global non-proliferation efforts if the proposed INFRUS arrangement materializes. Any collaboration between India and France involving nuclear-powered submarine technology would raise critical concerns about the potential misuse or diversion of nuclear technologies and expertise for military purposes. India already maintains eight nuclear reactors and a substantial stockpile of reactor-grade plutonium—usable for weapons production—outside the safeguards of the IAEA.¹⁰⁹ France has transitioned to using low-enriched uranium (LEU) for its nuclear submarine propulsion,¹¹⁰ a move aligned with non-proliferation norms. In contrast, India continues to rely on highly enriched uranium (HEU) for its naval propulsion requirements.¹¹¹

107. Rahul Jaybhay, “The AUKUS Deal and India’s Submarine Dilemma,” *The Diplomat*, 14 April 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/04/the-aukus-deal-and-indias-submarine-dilemma/>.

108. Ashley J. Tellis, “Striking Asymmetries: Nuclear Transitions in Southern Asia,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (2022): 256. https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/202207-Tellis_Striking_Asymmetries-final.pdf

109. Mansoor Ahmed, “India’s Nuclear Exceptionalism: Fissile Materials, Fuel Cycles, and Safeguards,” *Harvard Kennedy School, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, May 2017. <https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/India%27s%20Nuclear%20Exceptionalism.pdf>

110. Alain Tournyol du Clos, “France’s Choice for Naval Nuclear Propulsion: Why Low Enriched Uranium was Chosen,” *Federation of American Scientists* (2016): 2, <https://uploads.fas.org/2016/12/Frances-Choice-for-Naval-Nuclear-Propulsion.pdf>

111. Sufian Ullah, “India’s Naval Nuclearization: Repercussions for Crisis Stability,” *South Asian Voices*, 27 June 2018. <https://southasianvoices.org/indias-naval-nuclearization-repercussions-stability/>.

Providing India with nuclear-powered submarines without imposing additional obligations to advance arms control or disarmament could further detach India's nuclear program from international oversight and commitments. Such assistance risks enabling India to focus its HEU resources on aggressive nuclear posturing.¹¹² In addition, India's enhanced civil nuclear capabilities may facilitate its nuclear weapons modernization, due to difficulties in the verification of dual-use goods. Through foreign cooperation with several countries including France, India will be receiving large quantities of fissile material for its civilian nuclear program allowing it to divert all its domestic reserves into the production of nuclear weapons.¹¹³ This is more probable because India does not have a Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement with the IAEA and only applies facility-specific safeguards in its declared civil nuclear facilities.¹¹⁴ Several studies highlight that India is currently the fastest-growing nuclear weapons state, with stockpiles sufficient to produce over 2,600 nuclear weapons.¹¹⁵

The Indo-French civil nuclear cooperation, by enabling a non-NPT signatory to access nuclear technologies, undermines the spirit of the international non-proliferation regime. This approach appears discriminatory, as it selectively permits India to benefit from global nuclear commerce while other non-signatories face restrictions. The credibility of the already strained non-proliferation regime depends on abandoning discriminatory practices and adopting rules-based measures that apply universally. India's access to the global nuclear market without committing to obligations under treaties like the NPT and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) raises serious concerns. It not only sets a troubling precedent but also reduces New Delhi's incentives to pursue future disarmament and arms control measures.

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Conclusion

The evolving Indo-French strategic alliance gains significance against the backdrop of growing multipolarity in the international system. Both states pursue distinct yet interconnected geopolitical ambitions, particularly in the broader Asia-Pacific region recoinced as Indo-Pacific and within the global system, fostering a closer partnership. This paper has examined the key drivers and strategic convergences that strengthen the partnership between New Delhi and Paris. Among these, the pivot to the “Indo-Pacific” to counter China’s rise, shared aspirations to partially modify the international order, and the alignment of interests as one of the world’s largest arms importers (India) and exporters (France) emerge as pivotal forces nurturing this symbiotic relationship.

By exploring the salient aspects of Indo-French bilateral ties, including defense cooperation, nuclear collaboration, and maritime security, the paper analyzes the potential ramifications of this growing partnership on regional stability. It highlights how the relationship could further disrupt the fragile security dynamics in South Asia by exacerbating existing military imbalances. Additionally, the discussion extends to the impact on global nuclear norms, emphasizing how exceptions made for India in the context of non-proliferation frameworks could weaken the credibility of international regimes like the NPT.

Since formalizing their bilateral strategic partnership in January 1998, India and France have significantly expanded their collaboration across various domains, including nuclear technology, military capabilities, and other advanced technological fields. Key milestones in this cooperation include the procurement of Mirage 2000 aircraft, Scorpene-class submarines, and Rafale fighter jets, as well as joint military exercises such as Shakti, naval exercises like Varuna, and collaborative projects in maritime surveillance satellites. Additionally, France’s consistent support for India’s membership in major export control regimes—beyond the MTCR—including the NSG, Australia Group, and Wassenaar Arrangement, underscores the depth of this partnership. This paper concludes that the bilateral strategic cooperation between India and France contributes to the former’s increasingly assertive military posture and adversely impacts strategic stability in South Asia.