

INDIA-FRANCE MARITIME COOPERATION IN THE INDO-PACIFIC — A MÉLANGE OF DISSONANCE AND CONSONANCE

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ABSTRACT

This article critically examines the evolution and complexity of India-France maritime cooperation through the lens of strategic convergence and emerging friction points. As resident powers of the Indo-Pacific, India and France have fostered a robust maritime partnership anchored in a shared vision of a ‘free’, ‘open’, and ‘rules-based’ international maritime order. From the establishment of their strategic partnership in 1998 to continual combined naval exercises, cooperation in Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), and collaborative ventures in maritime defence industrial production, the bilateral relationship has deepened significantly. However, France’s simultaneous obligations to the EU and NATO—as well as its distinct Indo-Pacific outlook compared to other EU member-States—introduce unique dynamics into the partnership. While Paris and New Delhi align on several strategic imperatives, a closer inspection reveals undercurrents of asymmetry, policy divergences, and operational limitations that challenge the narrative of seamless collaboration. By unpacking both the harmonies and dissonances in this maritime equation, this paper argues that acknowledging and addressing these subtle yet significant cracks is essential to shaping a more resilient and strategic India-France maritime partnership in the Indo-Pacific.

Keywords: CLEMENCEAU 2025, Varuna, India-France-Australia, India-France-Uae, IPOI, Maritime Security, EU, NATO

Despite several commendable achievements and many statements of noble intent, the India-France engagement within the domain of maritime security has been unable to fully realise its enormous potential. At the level of execution, there are, of course, all the usual suspects that can readily be arrayed and which constitute palpable roadblocks — ineptitude and apathy amongst the uniformed as well as the civilian bureaucracies of both countries, institutional and individual fatigue arising from trying to do too much with too little — especially by way of physical wherewithal (seagoing assets and the infrastructure required for their logistic support), inadequate financial commitment and support, and so on. However,

there appears to be a far more disturbing set of infirmities as well. These include differing strategic priorities, varying technological levels resulting in weapon-sensor applications that remain inadequately interoperable, and perhaps most challenging of all, geopolitical constraints arising from alliance-based commitments and unpredictable political impulses amongst the leadership of other great- and middle powers.

In recognition of the several complexities that must be negotiated, the National Maritime Foundation has embarked upon a research project that seeks to collate the current state of India-France maritime cooperation (incorporating both, operational aspects and key defence projects), and to then identify the key impediments to the furthering of a more proactive dyadic defence relationship, and finally to offer a set of way-ahead recommendations for policymakers in the naval and civilian defence echelons of both nations. Quite like the rare earth metals that are not so much rare as they are scattered and hence difficult to mine, there is a fairly substantive amount of bits-and-pieces literature that peppers the academic and analytical space, but it is seldom available in collated form. Hence, it is probably useful to begin with an attempt to collate the information, accepting the risk of being overtaken by sporadic events that might well generate additional scatterings of information. This is the process to which this paper seeks to address itself.

INDIA-FRANCE STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

The geoeconomic and hence geopolitical centrality of the Indo-Pacific is now well enough known to require any great elaboration. As Vice Admiral Chauhan reminds us, this

“is a predominantly— although certainly not exclusively— maritime space, stretching from the eastern shores of the continent of Africa to the western coasts of the Americas, and from Eurasia’s southern edge to the northern coastline of Antarctica. This region is well recognised as having been restored to its historical position being the centre of global socio-cultural and economic activity. Within its vastness, encompassing 64 per cent of the world’s oceanic area, dwell half the world’s people in some 75 nation-states, accounting for nearly two-thirds of the world’s economy, and hosting seven of the world’s largest militaries. Along the many international shipping lanes (ISLs) that crisscross the Indo-Pacific, flows 50 per cent of global container traffic and 80% of global maritime oil shipments, negotiating some 65 per cent of the world’s strategic maritime chokepoints (Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb, Mozambique Channel, Malacca, Sunda, Lombok, etc).”

Among the many challenges within the realm of maritime security, China's expanding naval presence and assertive posture in the West Philippine Sea — more commonly known as the South China Sea (SCS) — and the Indian Ocean have raised security concerns for numerous regional and extra-regional actors. This has prompted the publication of a flurry of strategies for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific which seek to strengthen partnerships to ensure a 'stable', 'transparent' and 'open' region.

Within this evolving geopolitical theatre, India and France— the latter an important member-state of the European Union (EU) and a resident power in both segments of the Indo-Pacific, namely, the western Segment (the Indian Ocean) and the eastern segment (the Pacific Ocean)— have emerged as key players with converging maritime interests. Both nations maintain a significant presence in the Indian Ocean, with France possessing overseas territories such as Réunion and Mayotte in the Indian Ocean while India plays a pivotal role in creating and upholding a regional maritime security architecture through initiatives such as the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI). The two nation-states are part of several multilateral and minilateral groupings such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), the Djibouti Code of Conduct: Jeddah Amendment (DCoC-JA), the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), and the IONS, to name a few, and also lead one or more of the lines-of-maritime-thrust of the IPOI.

The evolution of the contemporary strategic partnership enjoyed by India and France can be traced back to 1988, when the erstwhile Prime Minister of India, Mr Rajiv Gandhi, signed several key agreements with France in the fields of defence, science, and technology. A decade later, in 1998, the two countries formally established a strategic partnership. In 2023, to mark the 25th anniversary of this partnership, India and France released two framework documents— the first was a roadmap setting the course for the bilateral relationship up to 2047 (the centenary of India's Independence), while the second was a roadmap specifically dedicated to bilateral cooperation contextualised to the Indo-Pacific.² It is significant to reiterate that the scope of the India-France partnership is not restricted to security and defence issues alone, but extends to areas such as civil nuclear cooperation and space cooperation. Take energy security, for instance. Here, India's effort to generate 100 GW of nuclear energy by 2047 is now being supplemented by France's commitment to co-develop modern nuclear reactors, which are crucial for energy security and will facilitate the transition to a low-carbon economy. This

joint effort strengthens civil nuclear ties and fosters collaboration in the peaceful use of nuclear energy, as demonstrated by the Jaitapur Nuclear Power Project.³

That said, both nations have, over the years, concentrated quite assiduously upon bolstering their defence cooperation, particularly in the maritime domain, through defence industrial cooperation, information sharing and exchange, and several combined naval exercises. These efforts are aimed at jointly countering the several non-traditional maritime threats that plague the Indian Ocean.

India and France signed a “Logistics Exchange Agreement” (LEA) in 2018. This is the equivalent of the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) concluded between India and the USA⁴ and the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) signed by India and Japan.⁵ The India-France LEA grants reciprocal access to each other’s naval bases, thereby allowing Indian warships to refuel and resupply at bases in the Indian Ocean, including Reunion Island in the Indian Ocean and the French base of Djibouti, on the Horn of Africa.⁶ Reciprocally, French naval vessels can use Indian bases, including those within the Andaman & Nicobar Command. This significantly enhances the strategic reach of both countries in the Indian Ocean and strengthens operational coordination between the two navies.⁷

As has been shown, India and France share a reasonably strong partnership in the maritime domain, driven by mutual interests in ensuring a free, open and rules-based Indo-Pacific. Yet, despite progress in combined naval exercises, information-sharing and maritime security dialogues, dissonances in strategic alignment remain a challenge that needs to be thought carefully about.

While both nations emphasise the Indo-Pacific in their respective approaches, their specific priorities exhibit notable differences. Insofar as India is concerned, neither the Government of India (GoI) nor the Indian Navy appear to be able to wean itself away from its traditional comfort zone of concentrating upon the Indian Ocean alone. Consequently, India appears to be quite content with having just the Indian Ocean as its ‘Sphere of Influence’. Likewise, France certainly has an articulated strategy for the Indo-Pacific but is unable to focus either its limited capacity (by way of physical platforms and infrastructure) or its capabilities for the execution of its strategy in partnership with India. This is largely because its attention is split between the sometimes-conflicting requirements of its widely dispersed overseas territories. France has thirteen overseas territories,

departments, regions and collectives scattered across the Atlantic, the Indian, and Pacific Oceans. Only half of these overseas territories, departments, regions and collectives lie in the Indo-Pacific (Reunion, Mayotte, and the French Southern and Antarctic territories [TAAF]) in the Indian Ocean, and New Caledonia, French Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna and Clipperton in the Pacific Ocean. Yet, taken in aggregate, these territories collectively host approximately 1.65 million French citizens and provide France with an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) that encompasses 10.2 million km²— the second-largest on the planet.⁸ On the one hand, these seven territories are instrumental in furthering the influence of France within the Indo-Pacific and enabling the nation to integrate into several regional cooperation mechanisms.⁹ On the other hand, while Paris recognises full well that the strategic importance of each of these territories is mirrored by the remaining six located outside of the Indo-Pacific, France simply lacks the wherewithal to exercise the myriad facets of power and influence towards which it aspires.

However, it must also be freely admitted— and that, too, with considerable admiration— that France is certainly the most effervescent member-state of the European Union (EU) and is actively involved in a number of missions/operations, including EUNAVFOR (European Union Naval Force) Operation ATALANTA, set-up to combat illicit maritime activities in the vicinity of the Horn of Africa¹⁰, the EU's Coordinated Maritime Presences (CMP)¹¹, and the recently established EUNAVFOR Operation ASPIDES that seeks to ensure the safety and security of EU commercial vessels transiting the Red Sea.¹² France also features prominently in all working groups of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) established by India,¹³ and the multinational naval coalition led by the US, namely, the Combined Maritime Force (CMF), in the latter of which France has been actively involved in Combined Task Force (CTF) 150 to combat the illicit trafficking of narcotics in the Arabian Sea.¹⁴ Additionally, the headquarters of the “Maritime Security Centre Indian Ocean” (MSCIO)— an initiative of EUNAVFOR ATALANTA established to enhance maritime security in the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, the Persian Gulf and the broader Indian Ocean— operates from Brest.¹⁵

On the other hand, however, French obligations to the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) introduce several additional layers of strategic intricacy. As a pivotal member of these entities, France must harmonise its national security interests with collective commitments that tend to influence its defence engagements outside of these frameworks. The EU's

evolving security initiatives and NATO's collective defence mandates do not always align seamlessly with India's priorities, leading to divergences or scepticism in bilateral engagements.¹⁶ This is exacerbated by New Delhi's almost reflexive negation of any overtures by NATO to incorporate India into its fold in one or another manner. In this context, Dr S Jaishankar, India's Minister of External Affairs, made it clear that NATO is an intergovernmental military alliance with 31 member states, mostly from North America and Europe and, as such, is inappropriate for India.¹⁷

As far as India's own strategic outlook is concerned, New Delhi's steadfast commitment to strategic autonomy is rooted in the country's colonial history and generates significant complexities in forging deep and trusting bilateral defence collaborations. This bitter colonial legacy leads New Delhi to intuitively emphasise self-reliance and to jealously guard its decision-making independence, leading India to engage in diverse strategic partnerships while abjuring formal alliances that could constrain its autonomy.¹⁸ There is an increasing stridency for *Atmanirbharata*—a Hindi word for self-reliance—within the Indian establishment, and while self-reliance is certainly India's official aspiration, it may not be sufficient, in and of itself, especially in a world of increasingly interdependent supply- and value chains. As Vice Admiral Chauhan has frequently pointed out, there continue to be substantial infirmities in India's ability to communicate adequately and cleverly with its external partners (including France), leading to

*“discernible confusion between the terms ‘Make-in-India’ and ‘Indigenisation’. The fact is that the former was meant to encourage largely-foreign major manufacturing-companies to set-up manufacturing-units in India — whether for consumption by the Indian market itself or for export from India to markets in other countries. As such, its principal aims were job-creation, skill-development, and the transfer and absorption of cutting-edge manufacturing-technology and management-techniques.”*¹⁹

While France has shown commendable resolve in supporting technology transfer and the *'Make-in-India'* programme, as evidenced in the *Scorpenel*/Kalveri Class submarines, obstacles in realising these objectives remain.²⁰

There is also a disturbing lack of coordination in leveraging trilateral forums to enhance maritime cooperation. India and France are involved in two trilateral forums— the India-France-UAE trilateral and the India-France-Australia trilateral. The India-France-UAE trilateral to promote collaborative projects in areas such as energy and climate change has experienced considerable difficulties in translating high-level commitments into actionable maritime cooperation.²¹

While the inaugural edition of the Maritime Partnership Exercises (MPX) series, conducted in the Gulf of Oman in June 2023, indeed, was a significant first step, it must be borne in mind that this was at the operational-tactical level. On the maritime strategic level, the absence of structured frameworks will continue to pose a challenge for sustained maritime collaboration.²² Similarly, the India-France-Australia trilateral aims to strengthen maritime security in the Indo-Pacific.²³ Once again, however, despite shared interests, the lack of a formalised structure, along with France-Australia distrust as a fallout of the AUKUS deal, has resulted in limited tangible outcomes. Although the third focal points meeting in February of 2023 reviewed progress in maritime safety and security, the dialogue between the three nations has struggled to move beyond discussion towards actual implementation of concrete maritime initiatives.²⁴

Somewhat incongruently juxtaposed against these dissimilarities in strategic alignment within the maritime domain is the clearly evident effervescence at the operational-tactical levels of maritime engagement. This defence (especially maritime) effervescence has multiple manifestations. For instance, several French defence companies—ranging from the *Naval Group* to *Safran* to *Dassault Aviation*—have made significant inroads into the Indian defence market. As a result, over the period 2019-2023, France emerged as India's second-largest defence supplier.²⁵ India has also hosted several operational stopovers by French naval warships, accounting for 16 port-calls since 2022. The purpose of these frequent visits is, of course, to enhance interoperability, foster mutual understanding, and strengthen navy-to-navy ties.²⁶ France's maritime initiatives for 2025 in the Indian Ocean region, which hold relevance for India, are briefly summarised in the succeeding paragraphs.

MISSION CLEMENCEAU 25

French naval combatants participating in “Mission CLEMENCEAU 2025” set sail from mainland France in November of 2024.²⁷ This mission involves the protracted deployment to the Indo-Pacific by a French Carrier Strike Group [CSG] known in French as a “*Groupe Aéronaval*” (GAN) centred upon the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, FNS *Charles de Gaulle*, (Figure 1 refers).

The four objectives of this mission are: (1) to support national and European operations in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean; (2) to establish interoperability

parameters with partners and allies in the Indian and Pacific Oceans; (3) to advance a free, open, and stable Indo-Pacific, reinforcing a rules-based international order,

Figure 1. Mission CLEMENCEAU 25 – Mission Plan and Exercises.



Source: Presentation delivered aboard the FNS Charles de Gaulle

and (4) to contribute to the protection of the French population and interests in the Indo-Pacific, emphasising France’s status as a coastal nation and resident power in both segments of the Indo-Pacific, and discharging the responsibility to exercise sovereignty over all its overseas territories.²⁸

Apart from the *Charles de Gaulle* herself (which this author was privileged to embark for a limited period — see Figure 2), the French CSG comprises a *Horizon* Class air defence destroyer (FNS *Forbin*), an *Aquitaine* Class anti-submarine warfare frigate (FNS *Provence*), and an air-defence frigate (FS *Alsace*), along with a *Suffren* Class nuclear-powered submarine [SSN] (the *Duguay-Trouin*), a logistic-support ship (LSS *Jacques Chevallier*) and a *Loire* Class offshore support and assistance vessel (BSAM).²⁹

As may be seen from Figure 1, the CSG participated in a variety of institutionalised bilateral and multilateral exercises, including Exercise VARUNA— an annual Indo-French exercise aimed at enhancing bilateral maritime cooperation— in the

Figure 2. The author, aboard the FNS *Charles de Gaulle* in Goa, as a part of Mission CLEMENCEAU 25



Source: From author's personal collection

Arabian Sea. This was followed by Exercise LA PEROUSE (a multilateral naval exercise involving Australia, France, India, Indonesia, Japan, Singapore, the USA), off Indonesia, designed to strengthen coordination amongst regional and extra-regional naval forces. It also took part in Exercise PACIFIC STELLAR in the Pacific Ocean, which was a Multi-Large Deck Event (MLDE) in the Philippine Sea involving ships from US Navy Carrier Strike Group (CSG) ONE, the French CSG, and the Japan Maritime Self Defence Force (MSDF).³⁰ These exercises were designed to promote a shared dedication to regional stability, advance coordination and cooperation, and demonstrate capabilities in multi-domain operations.

As depicted in Figure 3, France maintains strategic military bases and/or Strategic Strong points (SSPs) in Djibouti, Abu Dhabi, and La Réunion in the Indian Ocean. Consequently, apart from its operational dimensions, “Mission CLEMENCEAU 25” also sought to deepen and strengthen diplomatic ties with several partners and allies through enhanced port-calls by the carrier itself and/ or its escort ships.

Figure 3. French Overseas territories and military bases



Source: *Cols Bleus* (French Navy's Magazine) January 2023

As part of Mission CLEMENCEAU 25, the *Forbin* and the *Alsace*, both integral to the French CSG, visited Kochi, Kerala, while FNS *Charle de Gaulle* was berthed in Goa. This visit aimed to enhance interoperability between the navies of India and France through “Subject Matter Expert Exchanges” (SMEE), cross-deck visits, and other collaborative activities.³¹ Simultaneously, the INS *Mormugao* and aircraft of the Indian Air Force (IAF) participated in a ‘Maritime Partnership Exercise’ (MPX) off India’s western Seaboard. The MPX featured a series of advanced maritime drills including joint-and-combined air operations and maritime tactical manoeuvres.³²

However, the most significant India-France operational engagement of Mission CLEMENCEAU-25, was the conduct of the 2025 edition of the annual exercise series, generically known as the “VARUNA” series (Figure 4 refers³³). The 23rd edition of this series (which began in 2001) took place from 19 to 23 March 2025 and, building upon the experience gained in previous editions, it focused on enhancing interoperability and strengthening the strategic partnership between the two countries. At the tactical level, it involved a number of advanced maritime drills and manoeuvres in the subsurface, surface, and air domains. Importantly, the exercise involved two aircraft carriers— the INS *Vikrant* and

Figure 4. Exercise VARUNA-2024 with two Carrier Groups, 19-22 April 2025



Source: India News Network

the *Charles de Gaulle*— along with their aircraft groups (involving, *inter alia*, the French Navy's Rafale and the Indian Navy's MiG-29K fighter jets), and their respective surface and sub-surface escorts. (Figure 4 refers).

All these combined military exercises and joint defence projects are a testament to the fact that both nations are actively seeking deeper and stronger defence collaboration and the integration of assets at the operational and tactical levels of all three domains, viz., air, land, and sea.

Overlapping either side of the fuzzy line dividing strategic and operational/ tactical engagement is the area of major defence acquisition programmes. It represents a challenging and often slippery slope in the ascent towards a robust defence relationship. On the one hand, India's defence procurement processes are often characterised by significant delays, primarily due to its convoluted (almost Kafkaesque³⁴) procurement procedures, extensive approval requirements, and protracted decision-making cycles. An internal report from the Ministry of Defence highlighted that only 8-10 per cent of 144 proposed deals in the last three financial years were finalised within the stipulated time periods, highlighting the systemic inefficiencies in the acquisition process.³⁵ These bureaucratic challenges have notably impacted major procurement programmes, such as the acquisition of fighter jets (*Rafale*, *Rafale-M*) and submarines (*Scorpene*), leading to operational capability gaps within the armed forces.

On the other hand, it is increasingly evident that India and France have managed (thus far at least) to maintain their balance as they ascend this slope. The two nations have collaborated on several major naval defence industrial projects, ranging from the *Kalvari*-class diesel-electric attack submarines (SSKs), based on Naval Group's *Scorpene* design,³⁶ to Dassault Aviation's *Rafale-M* (the letter "M" stands for "Marine") 4.5 Generation fighter jets for Indian naval carrier-borne operations.

In fact, the India-France defence-industrial cooperation in the maritime domain may be said to have begun in earnest with the 2005 signing of a contract by the GoI with France's Naval Group (formerly DCNS) and India's Mazagon Docks Limited (MDL), wherein MDL would build six submarines using Naval Group's *Scorpene* Class design.³⁷ This decision, implemented under "Project 75" (P-75), led, *inter alia*, to the procurement of a whole slew of shipyard equipment, and the creation of an entire defence industrial ecosystem, followed by the construction in India of six SSK submarines that became known as the *Kalvari* Class. It is noteworthy that although Malaysia and Chile also operate the *Scorpene* Class SSKs, India's case is the only example in Naval Group of such a complex submarine being built in a "customer country" under a constructive and qualified Transfer of Technology (ToT).³⁸ INS *Vaghsheer*, the sixth and last *Scorpene*-Class submarine, was commissioned in January 2025. This was expected to conclude the P-75 *Scorpene* collaboration with Naval Group.³⁹ However, delays in the follow-on SSK project (Project 75-India) have led to the GoI seriously examining a proposal to build an additional three submarines of the *Scorpene* design, although these would be somewhat larger than the original six and would, therefore, in all probability, constitute a new but as yet unnamed Class. Media reports indicate that this deal has already been approved in principle and that the formal signing was expected within the current year.⁴⁰

The other mega deal concluded between India and France that straddles the strategic-operational-tactical divide in the *maritime* domain is that concerning the *Rafale-M* 4.5 Generation fighter jets from France's Dassault Aviation. This latest example of India-France cooperation in the Indian Navy's Fleet Air Arm has a long and respected lineage beginning with the early 1960s. The *Alizé*, which was a foldable-wing anti-submarine aircraft from France's Bréguet Aviation, constituted Indian Naval Air Squadron (INAS) 310, which carried the sobriquet "Cobras". The squadron operated from the deck of the Indian Navy's first aircraft carrier, the *Vikrant* from 1961 onwards, as well as from ashore, rendering yeoman

service until the aircraft was finally phased out, some thirty years later⁴¹ having earned battle honours for their sterling role in the liberation of Goa in 1961, the India-Pakistan conflict of 1971, the 1988 IPKF Operations in Sri Lanka, as also the 1988 suppression of a coup in Maldives (Op CACTUS).⁴² Likewise, the well-known *Chetak* light helicopter, Alouette Mk III from the helicopter stable of France's Sud Aviation, was first license-produced by Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) in 1969.⁴³ It was even modified for anti-submarine warfare as the "Multi-role Anti-Submarine Torpedo-Carrying Helicopter" (MATCH) role and still continues in naval service. Returning to the present juncture, the *Rafale-M* deal was the successor to two earlier ones — albeit for the Indian Air Force, which too, has, over the years, successfully exploited several manifestations of the India-France defence relationship. In the 1980s, for instance, India procured the *Mirage* 2000 fighter aircraft from France to strengthen its air-combat prowess, and these aircraft proved their worth in the Kargil conflict (1999) and the Balakot surgical air-strike of 26 February 2019.⁴⁴ Continuing this well-established relationship, the GoI and the Republic of France signed an inter-governmental agreement in September 2016 for the procurement of 36 *Rafale* aircraft for the Indian Air Force (IAF).⁴⁵ The deal included the aircraft's weapons, simulators, and other associated equipment, as well as long-term (10 years) maintenance-support. Spanning the period from 2019 to 2022, the delivery of these *Rafale* fighter jets to India was influenced by several factors such as the production capacity and scheduling, customisation and integration of India-specific enhancements,⁴⁶ and the development of training infrastructure.⁴⁷

Following the Indian Air Force procure of the French fighter jets, and an international bid by Indian authorities to enhance the Indian Navy's air capabilities, the GoI announced the selection of the Dassault Aviation's *Rafale-M* (Marine)— (Figure 5 refers)— as the latest-generation fighter to equip the Indian Navy's indigenous aircraft carrier, INS *Vikrant*.⁴⁸ While India continues to develop the Twin Engine Deck Based Fighter (TEDBEF)⁴⁹ to meet future naval aviation requirements, on 28 April 2025, "India and France formally concluded an Inter-Governmental Agreement (IGA), valued at nearly ₹64,000 crore, to procure 26 *Rafale-M* fighter jets for the Indian Navy. Deliveries are set to begin from mid-2028 and likely to be completed by 2030".⁵⁰ The strategic nature of this deal may be gauged from the fact that "in line with the Government's thrust on Aatmanirbhar Bharat, the agreement includes Transfer of Technology for integration of indigenous weapons in India. It also includes setting up of production facility for *Rafale* Fuselage as well as Maintenance, Repair and Overhaul facilities for aircraft engine, sensors and

*weapons in India. The deal is expected to generate thousands of jobs and revenue for a large number of MSMEs in setting up, production and running of these facilities.*⁵¹

Figure 5. Rafale-M during naval exercise VARUNA 2025 between the Indian Navy and the French Navy.



Source: PTI

This notwithstanding, challenges remain. For one thing, there are reflexively anti-West segments within the GoI's unformed and civilian bureaucracies, and their arguments are fuelled by the fact that the Western (specifically French) defence equipment is far more expensive when compared to alternatives from other defence suppliers such as Russia.⁵² These arguments, if allowed to take root, can deter deeper collaboration, especially because cost is always an important, if not paramount, consideration.

Another question is whether the costs involved in essential defence imports from France can be offset by Indian defence exports to France. Of course, it is not necessary for this to be a dyadic flow, and imports from one source are already being attempted to be offset by exports to some other destination. Nevertheless, it is intriguing to explore this option in a subsequent iteration of this project. However, that may eventually pan out, it is a given that a roadmap on defence industrial cooperation between India and France would enhance technology transfer, joint production and cost-efficiency in India-France defence ties. It would help streamline procurement processes, thereby ensuring faster deliveries and reducing

bureaucratic delays. By fostering joint research and development into the joint development and integration of next-generation systems and disruptive defence applications, it could lower costs and boost India's defence exports. Additionally, such a roadmap would help align strategic priorities, institutionalise multilateral and perhaps, trilateral frameworks, and enhance coordination in the Indo-Pacific, benefitting both nations as well as the region as a whole.

FROM EXERCISES TO OPERATIONS

Given the extant intensity of their bilateral defence relationship, it is clearly time that India and France moved their maritime (especially '*naval*') cooperation from common and compatible platforms and combined *exercises* to combined *operations*. And yet, there is no gainsaying the degree of difficulty in facing up to the several challenges inherent in the adoption of such a vision. For one thing, differences in the French and Indian naval doctrines, operational procedures, and information-sharing protocols are very likely to hinder the planning and execution of combined security operations. Since complex military thinking in India is largely conducted in English, while that in France is in French, a lack of felicity in language will be an important challenge, although not an insurmountable one. Since maritime or naval operations will always have maritime situational awareness (MSA) as an inescapable prerequisite for success and since the transition from MSA to maritime *domain* awareness (MDA) necessitates the sharing of information relevant to the maritime domain, the business of information-sharing assumes great centrality. Both nations have committed to mutual support in the maritime security engagements, as reflected in the Joint Declaration on the 7th India-France Maritime Cooperation Dialogue. India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and France's Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs have accordingly agreed to further strengthen existing cooperative mechanisms. These include the implementation of a mutually agreed framework for information exchange through enhancing information exchange between the IFC-IOR and its French counterparts, such as the Regional Coordination Operations Centre (RCoC) in Seychelles, and the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre, (RMIFC) Madagascar.⁵³ However, the incessant promotion of the EU's IORIS (Indo-Pacific Information Sharing) platform has created an environment of caution within the Indian maritime-security establishment.⁵⁴ Perhaps India's NISHAR-MITRA platform could be used instead of IORIS in future Maritime Partnership Exercises, successive editions of maritime exercises of the VARUNA series, and even Exercise LA PEROUSE.

Indeed, in terms of aligning the respective operational frameworks, there is much here that can and must be done by Track 1.5 / Track 2 mechanisms.⁵⁵

CONCLUSION

India and France share a growing maritime and defence partnership, strengthened by several shared interests in the Indian Ocean. Their cooperation spans advanced naval exercises (VARUNA, LA PEROUSE), defence procurement (*Rafale-M* jets, *Scorpene* submarines) and information-sharing agreements. At the same time, there are residual challenges that could hinder deeper cooperation and collaboration. These include dissonance in strategic priorities, limitations in the willingness and ability to transfer technology, high procurement costs, and lack of coordination in multilateral and trilateral frameworks (India-France-UAE and India-France-Australia). A detailed roadmap on Defence Industrial Cooperation is needed to address these challenges and ensure the streamlining of processes and structures, and closer collaboration in underwater and aerospace projects. Such a roadmap should be able to privilege India's "Make In India" initiative, while facilitating greater indigenous defence production and exports. Strengthening institutional mechanisms for faster procurement, joint R&D, and multilateral coordination is critical. Unlike its EU counterparts, the decision of France to halt arms sales to Pakistan has done much to reassure India of France's commitment and reliability as a defence partner, reinforcing trust in their long-term security cooperation.

Looking ahead, France needs to more adroitly balance its NATO and EU commitments with its effort at deepening bilateral ties with India and recognising New Delhi's growing role in regional security. India and France must enhance strategic alignment in the Indo-Pacific and must move their combined exercises in the direction of combined operations. Both nations need to jointly leverage trilateral structures and explore new ideas vigorously by exploiting Track One-Point-Five and Track Two mechanisms. Towards these ends, sustained and proactive engagement at all levels is essential.

ENDNOTES

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