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Indo-French Defence Cooperation in the Light of Regional Security Balance in South Asia

Abstract: The article aims to describe the regional security challenges to India in South Asia. Since the partition of India in 1947, the country has continuously been under external threat as a form of proxy warfare and terrorism. For this purpose, the article highlighted the core hotspots where India has major border issues with China in the Himalayan terrain. India has been facing a bigger security challenge from China and Pakistan in the South Asia region. This article analyses the defence ties between India and France in the context of security. India's neorealist approaches expand its strategic partnership in global politics. Therefore, India has been getting strategic support from the French side whenever India seeks support in a critical situation. The article uses the methods of case study and discourse analysis to answer the question and find out the study's relevance. As a result of severe security threats, India had to negotiate the purchase of defence equipment from France. India had to buy Rafael fighter jet, submarine and other heavy military weapons. Indo-French relations are stronger than in the past and will develop as friendly relations in the future.

Keywords: *Indo-French, Security and Defence, South Asia, Strategic Relation, Regional Balance*

Introduction

India has a fast-growing economy in the South Asian region that simultaneously faces proxy warfare and terrorism from neighbouring countries. Indian foreign policy changed after 1991 to strengthen the Indian Defence sector. India has relied on the Russian defence system since Soviet times. But the scenario has changed after the boom of the Indian economy. In 1994, Alain Juppe was the External Affairs Minister of France who expressed his bilateral relation between India and France and pushed for political and economic cooperation (Racine, 2002, p. 161). It was the key instrument to pay the way of strong defence cooperation. The Indian government has started a defence collaboration with France. A historic defence

partnership was launched during the 1998 visit to India by French President Jacques Chirac. The French president had pioneered strong strategic cooperation, including the Defence and security agreement. Joint armed forces training exercises started between India and France in 1998 (Roger, 2007).

This article aims to examine the main objectives of the security cooperation between India and France since 1991. Its second objective is to discuss the relevance of French security cooperation to the security balances of South Asia. The article tries to find out the results of the following questions in this research. 1) To what extent has India's security dependency been satisfied by French cooperation? 2) How does the French government accomplish the Indian defence need?

Literature Review and Theoretical Background

The dilemma of security in the literature is defined as insecurity and instability, which the people feel in front of the adversary or enemy country. Stephen Walt's balance of theory describes the creation of alliances as necessary and when states determine the threat from other states. Walt stated that states are involved in making a balance of power to minimise threats from other allies. In this context, in the case of the South Asia region, India perceives threat perception from the nexus of China and Pakistan. Indo-French security and defence cooperation is long-lasting and strategic and has an old traditional link as an origin of alliances since the 1960s. When India suffered a dip crisis from China and Pakistan, it got the French government's defence assistance and support (Walt, 1987, p. 17). The intentions of the opposing countries are unambiguous. Whether opponent counterparts in the region have strong capabilities and minimum attack power as a known weak country. And indeed, an attack by enemy countries is possible, even if the opponent countries are interested in only minimum destruction (Snyder, 2007, p. 50). In the prism of this literature, India is under a severe security threat. This study identifies the recent Doklam standoff between the Indian and the Chinese armies. Pulwama was attacked in Jammu & Kashmir by the hired militant group. The security risk is high in this region, and India has continuously been fighting with militant groups. France commits to supply the military arms and weapons as a defence partner. Allies draw closer during the invasion of third countries. As far as a country has a stronger security alliance, it prevents any form of the incident as a deterrent (Morrow, 2000, p. 68).

As a form of alliance, the group of countries gain the mileage of powers in the military, defence, and security purposes. They could achieve the aggregation of capabilities as a strong alliance power. Aggression can be minimised if the country has security cooperation with other countries (Lake, 1996; Walt, 1987; Waltz, 2010; Marszałek-Kawa, 2019; Marszałek-Kawa & Zajączkowski, 2021). Associations among various countries can be formal or informal corporations to set a common agenda to achieve security objectives. Nowadays, countries are becoming members of the security alliance or seeking to join the power of countries'

groups for security purposes. India has been nurturing the security relationship with any country that provides military equipment to check and balance in South Asia. Since the partition of India in 1947, the country has suffered from terrorism and security threats from China. That is why India is making a defence partner with France as closer cooperation to fulfil the arms gap (Wilkins, 2019).

France seeks deeper cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region and transforming its security expansion (Pajon, 2018; Shetler-Jones, 2018). Kinne (2019) defines the Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) as a formal agreement to promote bilateral security relations between India and France¹. At this moment, both countries had agreed to develop an institutional setup in the defence sector. The Agreement's objective is to nurture the background of the military and defence fields, encourage the production of military equipment, research and development, and procurement of old military weapons (Kinne, 2019). This cooperation seeks to expedite and establish stronger cooperation between the two parties in the defence sector. India is a favourable country for France in the Asian countries and the Indo-Pacific region. India meets France's position in Asia. There is the lowest level of challenges and threats from the rise of China's power for European security. India has the second-largest population in the world, and it is a big consumer market in South Asia. India needs modern defence technological equipment from France to counter the China-Pakistan nexus. France seems to pay its way from India in South Asia to explore the maritime economic route in the Indian ocean. The French government cooperates with India and Australia in the Indo-Pacific as trilateral strategic partners. The French administration recognises that the Indian Ocean region is strategically important for maritime politics and the country's economic development to become a global power. Paris wants to become a regional giant and strengthen itself as a regional capacity building with cooperation with India. India can boost the French aspiration in the Pacific politics (Rehman, 2015). But China's rise in Asia creates security issues in the region. In recent years, Europe's geopolitics have changed tremendously towards Asia and the Indo-Pacific (Atanassova-Cornelis, 2019). France has established a network of Indo-Pacific cooperation among the like-minded democratic countries in the region. In the same line, France wants ever-closer cooperation with India to build stronger security ties (Pajon, 2018, p. 13).

In 1998 when India had successfully tested nuclear power in Pokhran, along with Russia, France opposed the US sanctions against India. Moreover, India has shaped the strongest security cooperation with France ever since. Indian armed forces have been utilising the French military equipment for a long time. The Indian Air Force used the Mirage-2000 and newly added Rafael fighter jets. Similarly, the Indian Navy has been utilising the French-made Scorpene submarines. We have the technology transfer agreement with the French government, and now the submarines are being built in India. There are many joint exercises

¹ Agreement between the Government of the French Republic and the Government of the Republic of India on Defence Cooperation, signed February 20, 2006, New Delhi.

held by both countries' armies, navies, and air forces (Grare, 2020, p. 162). The relationship between India and France agreed to a common understanding of the rule of law, belief in democratic norms, individual freedom, and strategic autonomy. Both countries have managed the relationship on these ideas and maintained regular meetings and visits at the highest level to continue solid cooperation in the future. French President Hollande visited India to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the security and defence relationship in July 2013. This close relationship between India and France started in 1998 as a strategic partnership (Saint-Mézard, 2015). The Medium Multi-Role Combat Aircraft (MMRCA) tender was bypassed in 2016, and the government of India decided to purchase thirty-six Rafale aircraft in fly-away conditions at government-to-government deals. Since Emmanuel Macron holds the Presidency of France, the relationship has been strong according to his predecessor with India. The Indian Prime Minister declared the alliance between India and France in 2019. Today, the relationship between both partners has been growing rapidly. Thus, the relationship spread into different fields, including civil nuclear, clean energy, space to climate change, and urbanisation. These key issues are part and parcel of the defence coordination, and the relationship is multifaceted between both countries (Rajagopalan, 2019).

India's foreign policy had turned in the late 1990s to adopt the strategic partnership with global players, and further, the Indian government changed the dynamics of its security policy with neo-realist approaches. With the recurring security issues from the neighbouring countries, India shifted the security policy as core agenda to make strong security cooperation with France. A buyer and seller syndromes are a key strategy between the Ind-French defence partnership in the 21st century (Gupta, 2009). The neo-realistic approach of India's security policy had found a new kind of attitude to promote the defence agenda at high risk. Because security threats have continuously emerged since the 1990s. The French government also seems to prioritise making strong relations with India. In the sense of geography, landmarks, a rising economy, and high-level purchasing power had emerged in India. That is why France is willing to closer ties with India. Many Indian regions are suffering from proxy war because of the opponent countries. India has bigger security issues and border disputes with China and Pakistan, respectively. There is a theory behind it why India adopted the neo-realistic approaches for the strategic partnership. Because India was unable to fulfil the military equipment and modern arms, it extended its dependency on France to purchase modern fighter jets, submarines, and military equipment through this policy.

Thus, given the insights from India's need for security cooperation, it was necessary to establish stronger defence collaboration. Many research analyses show that India's foreign policy had geared up to purchase modern pieces of equipment, which provide a broader concept of empirical and theoretical insights to understanding the foreign and security policy analysis (Hansel et al., 2017; Sumit & Pardesi, 2015). India moving towards Europe, particularly France, was a strategic step for security cooperation.

The balance of the external threat from the third countries causes the necessary security cooperation. In the South Asian region, despite the bigger geography, India is suffering

severe security threats. The logic of a security agreement with the third partner countries is justifiable or relevant. That is why countries like India focus on building a powerful defence in the South for the regional security balance (Cladi & Locatelli, 2013; Dyson, 2013; Gibler & Wolford, 2006; Grieco, 1995).

Methodology

The modernisation and strengthening of the Indian navy are the prime mottoes of the Indian government. India's internal security and defence balancing strategy against the Chinese threat is a prime concern in expanding military weapons. The Indian government started modernising and joint exercises with the French Navy in the Indian Ocean. Furthermore, the Indian Navy accesses the French naval facilities at Reunion Island and vice versa India has ordered easy access for the French facilities at Djibouti. The production of Scorpene-class diesel-electric submarines (SSKs) is the product of the collaboration of the Indo-French alliance (Karambelkar, 2021, p. 93). The White Shipping Agreement was signed between India and France in January 2017. This agreement agreed to share maritime exchange information and collaboration at sea. Both the governments also agreed to exchange maritime information on commercial shipping and strengthen maritime security in the Indian ocean. We share information and exchange for naval intelligence, including maritime belt road initiatives for future cooperation in the Indian ocean (Mohan C R & Baruah, 2018). In recent years, the Indo-Pacific has been gaining the attraction of global powers. The Chinese aggression in maritime is a key issue for India. These kinds of emerging issues in terms of maritime security pave the way for Indo-French maritime cooperation. Under the P-75 Scorpene Project, the French Naval Group assisted this project of the Indian Navy. There are also six SSKs which are being built with the involvement of the French Naval Group. The project will complete the task at the end of 2022 (Raghuvanshi, 2020).

The Indo-French civil nuclear agreement had signed an agreement in September 2008. According to bilateral cooperation between both countries, India has established six nuclear power plants. The Nuclear Power Corporation of India LTD (NPCIL) and the French Electricite de France (EDF) companies agreed to build the nuclear power reactor unit in India. Once a nuclear plant is already installed in Jaitapur, it will be the largest nuclear plant in the world, comparatively this kind of unit (Sarangi, 2019). The Indo-French civil nuclear agreement is paving the vigorous alliance for the regional security balance in South Asia. The civil nuclear accords are based on the peaceful uses of nuclear energy for mutual technical cooperation and economic support. France has been India's most reliable defence ally for a long time.

"India-France Strategic Partnership is more relevant today than ever. I had an excellent meeting with my French counterpart", the Indian defence minister said during the Indo-French annual defence dialogue in New Delhi. In this dialogue, India highlighted the points regarding new opportunities for the French companies, which can collaborate and

incorporate with Indian companies to set the manufacturing unit in India under the Make in India initiative. The Indian government focuses on paving the way for defence industrial cooperation in this annual meeting. Furthermore, there were discussions between both countries' defence ministers about the situation in Afghanistan, Pakistan's stance, and China's position on the regional balance in South Asia (Bhalla & Negi, 2021).

In space relations, India and France have had wealthy historical cooperation since 1960. The French cooperation established the construction of the Sriharikota launch pad. The joint vision for space cooperation was issued during the visit of French President Emmanuel Macron to the arena of civilian space in March 2018. The satellite launch was initiated by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and the French Space Agency, the National Centre for Space Studies (CNES). Both the governments agreed to exchange the high-level research and development on various key causes. For example, the principal areas are Maritime awareness, Earth observation, solar system exploration, global navigation satellite system, human spaceflight and space transport system. In December 2018, GSAT-11 had launched from Kourou, French Guyana, according to the bilateral agreement between Arianespace and ISRO. Furthermore, GSAT-30 was launched, which was scheduled on January 16, 2020. The Indian space programme is getting supplies from France as a form of equipment and components (Ministry of External Affairs, 2021).

From 1998 to date, the French and Indian security and defence partnership has been growing continuously. The bilateral defence cooperation spread across nuclear, cyber security, space, and intelligence output to share, and counter-terrorism initiatives were included in later years. According to India's government's data, Indo-French bilateral trade increased to USD 11.89 billion between the fiscal year April 2018 to March 2019. The bilateral trade had increased at +4.15% in comparison to last financial year. India's export to France amounted to USD 5.23 billion, and meanwhile, India's import from France is around 6.78%. It had increased by 2.17% during the same financial year, and it reached USD 6.66 billion. The defence deal has increased by huge numbers. The Rafale fighter jet deal cost around Euro 7.87 billion. The building of six Scorpene submarines costs Euro 3 billion under project 75 (Sawhney, 2020). The defence and security ties have been on an upswing in recent past years. The bilateral trade between both countries amounted to around USD 10.75 billion in the last decade (Roche, 2021).

Discussion and Results

The research finds that political synergies and successful strategic cooperation pave the way for cooperation in the defence sector. The joint research and development accelerated between both the countries. The made in India plan provides an opportunity for the Indian and French companies to produce defence equipment in India. This research finds the significance of defence cooperation with France to maintain peace and security in the South Asia region. Security and defence cooperation have gained momentum since Prime

Minister Narendra Modi came into power in 2016. From the French side, the French President is also keen on healthier relations with India and cooperation in the Indian ocean (Baacha, 2019).

As a result of this research, France is backing India in the South Asia region. The French policy continues to steadfastly support India on the issues of Kashmir. Moreover, the South Asian regional balance is dependent on India's stronghold in this region. In recent times, the French support for India vested the regional balance. In this area, China's initiatives in Pakistan (from China to Gwadar Port) through China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) surround India. It is also a big security issue for India. France fills the gap in South Asia through the defence partnership with India.

On January 7, 2021, Macron's political advisor Bonne expressed: "Whether it be on Kashmir, we've been supportive of India in the security concern. We haven't let the Chinese play any kind of procedural games. When it comes to the Himalayas, check our statements, they are perfectly clear. What we say publicly, we say it to the Chinese privately" (Rej, 2021). The close defence ties between India and France have opened the door for France to cooperate in maritime. The Indo-Pacific is the most important for business purposes and security as well. The French government shapes the relation in the maritime business routes. For many years, the French government has sought a trustworthy strategic partner in the Indo-Pacific region. The Indian government understood France's aspirations. In return for India, the French government agreed to provide defence equipment and modern technology to India. The Indo-French partnership behaves as a natural ally, and cooperation between both sides develops realistically. The French government understands the regional issues in South Asia. The presence of France in India and as well as in the Indo-Pacific region can restrict the Chinese expansionism policy in this region as the name of Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI).

French commercial activity remained limited to a few companies in the three port cities of Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata and their nearby French enclaves such as Pondicherry and Chandernagar. When India became independent, only two French companies were operating in India. In post-independence India, business between France and India remained limited to a narrow range of traditional items in trade with negligible investment from either side. Instead, attention has focused on French aircraft and defence equipment sales, organised government-to-government and business-to-government, brokered by official and private agencies. Like in the case with other developing countries, India had limited outward FDI, and France was never a high-priority destination for Indian companies in the same way as the US, UK or Germany.

The Indian and the Pacific Oceans are the prime concern of France. Because it is strategically located for international trade and commerce routes. For the French government, the Indo-Pacific region is a geographical reality for economic reasons. France's presence in the Pacific region through its overseas territories. Moreover, 93% of France's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is in the Pacific Ocean. Furthermore, 1.5 million French people live

in the region. And more than 8,000 French soldiers are stationed in the Pacific region. India is supporting the French stance in Pacific politics. The Chinese presence strongly circles the Indian position in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. That is why India needs strong strategic support from France. The Indo-Pacific has become a reality for sea business routes and is gaining importance in geopolitics and geoeconomics in recent years. The importance of maritime trade routes connecting Europe and the Persian Gulf to the Pacific Ocean has been growing in recent years. It is also adding to the Indian Ocean and South-East Asia and has great importance for the blue economy. It is growing economic and business routes in the cutting edge of global trade and investment in the era of globalisation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021).

The changing nature of geopolitics has changed the dynamics of the Euro-Atlantic in Asia-Pacific. India is geographically spreading around the Indo-Pacific and strategically significant in the South Asia region. The French government boosted bilateral cooperation with India to explore the Maritime economic routes together. On the Kashmir issues, France supported the Indian stance at the international level that it is a bilateral issue between India and Pakistan. It does not merit a discussion in the United Nations (UN) (Sood, 2020). The Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar stated that France is a natural partner, and the strategic cooperation is visible and matured. Now is the time to accelerate the strategic partnership to the next level for better cooperation in several areas (Chaudhury, 2022). During the state visit to India in 2018, the French President stated that India is a natural ally of France. He also talked about the Indo-Pacific strategy that India is the heart of France in Maritime geoeconomics routes in the Indian Ocean. Both countries pay the way of numerous corporations for future courses of action (French Embassy in New Delhi, n.d.).

There is no direct rivalry between China and France in the Indian Ocean. But the US and China have been confronting each other in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean for a long time. Because China's BRI projects and Maritime Sea Route Initiative (MSRI) are threatening the other global power in the Indian Ocean. That is why India is coming close to the West for a stronger challenge to China. The European Union (EU) collaborates with India in Oceanic politics to strengthen trade and commerce. The EU is one of India's biggest trade and investment partners in South Asia. China is seriously circling India in the South Asia region through its BRI projects and reaching Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Maldives, Pakistan, Seychelles, and Mauritius. The United Kingdom (UK) and Germany cooperate with India in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific. Thus, these steps can help restrict Chinese influence in South Asia and beyond (Phalnikar, 2022). India and France's relationship negligibly affected the Sino-French partnership. China's BRI and 17+1 initiatives successfully collaborated with the Central and Eastern European countries (CEE), which are a member of the EU as well. Thus, China has also economic engagement with the UK, France, and Germany. The relationship between France and China is also stronger, and the French have a 1.5% market share with China. China is one of the seventh-biggest customers of France and the second-largest exporter. There is a trade deficit and imbalance between

the two countries of around Euro 29.3 billion in 2018–2019. There is crystal clear that the EU countries are in a dilemma regarding economic cooperation with China. The rivalry between the US and China at the international level limited the BRI projects in Western Europe, as well as in the Balkan region and the CEE countries (Bharti, 2022, p. 103). US President Joe Biden has stated that a multidimensional partnership with China is necessary to accelerate economic growth. Thus, the US wants a relationship with China where there is scope for cooperation. The EU also seems to be collaborating with China in trade and commerce (Morcos, 2022).

Conclusion

The Indo-French relation's conclusion is envisaged as a successful bilateral relationship between both countries from 1998 to till date. The French government has started successful cooperation in various fields. Moreover, the strategic cooperation between both countries is a success story. This research finds that the French relied on India as a tested friend in South Asia region. Democracy, the rule of law, people's freedom, and democratic rights are for all kinds of people that the European Union (EU) is advocating. France is a key member of the EU and promotes the democratic norms across Europe and India since freedom advocates human rights for all. That is why India is in closer association with France as a strategic partnership. The Indian arms forces are using French equipment. The Rafale fighter jet agreement had vested stronger security and defence partner after Russia. The research indicates that after the inclusion of Rafale fighter jets in the Indian Airforce squadron. Meantime, the Doklam standoff pays the people's attention from across the country. The Indian air force squadron got four Rafale jets amidst the crisis. The Indian people's consensus developed positively for France.

The research indicates the role of France in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific region in creating security balances. At last, both countries also agreed to fight against new security threats in South Asia by enhancing intelligence and information sharing, bolstering cooperation, maritime initiatives, and cyber security. The cooperation will help India balance the severe security threats in the region. Thus, Indo-French security and defence cooperation create a new chapter in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific region. The French government has a stronger and broader geographical area to cooperate outside of Europe. The French's close ties with India in the South Asia region create valuable opportunities for France in Indo-Pacific maritime initiatives. The security and defence partnership opens the door to maritime politics, and France, India, Japan, and Australia together work on these initiatives. Because China is the major country in maritime politics and creating problems for US and India. Now, India, Japan, Australia, and France are creating bigger economic zone. And India is supporting the position of France in Maritime initiatives.

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