

Modi, Macron and the Art of Strategic Autonomy

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Summary

During his visit to Paris this month, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi joined hands with French President Emmanuel Macron to unveil an ambitious new vision for bilateral cooperation in the next quarter of a century. Propelling the partnership forward is the new salience of France in India's geopolitics. If Russia was the guarantor of India's strategic autonomy in the past, France is now set to occupy that critical position in India's changing great power relations.

During his visit to Paris in mid-July 2023, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi was showered with special personal warmth by French President Emmanuel Macron and very impressive protocol as the honoured guest at the Bastille Day celebrations on 14 July 2023. Like Washington a few weeks earlier, where United States (US) President Joe Biden hosted him for a rare state visit, Paris was eager to please the Indian prime minister. Like [Modi's visit to the US](#), his French sojourn was about an ambitious expansion of strategic cooperation with India.

Modi and Macron used the occasion to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the strategic partnership as well as [outline a bold vision](#) for the next quarter of a century. The vision for 2047, which also marks 100 years of Indian independence, the centenary of establishing diplomatic relations, and the 50th anniversary of the strategic partnership, rests on three pillars. These are defending security and sovereignty; deepening cooperation on global issues; and developing stronger engagement between the two peoples.

The first involves significant plans to co-develop and co-produce advanced weapons systems, including submarines and fighter jet engines, deeper engagement in space and other advanced technologies, and regional security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. The second saw the expansion of Franco-Indian collaboration in countering climate change and developing green technologies. The third saw the decision to raise the number of Indian students in France to 30,000 by the end of this decade and give them attractive post-study work visas. France will also partner with India in building a new national museum in Delhi.

Holding up this impressive bilateral agenda is a consequential shift in India's great power relations – that Paris has replaced Moscow as India's most trusted partner over the last 25 years. Whether it was the [refusal to punish Delhi](#) in the wake of the 1998 nuclear tests or [blocking China](#) from pushing the Kashmir question onto the United Nations Security Council agenda after India changed the province's territorial status quo in August 2019, Paris proved to be the most valuable and steadfast ally of India.

Although Delhi continues to enjoy a productive relationship with Moscow, two factors cast shadows over their ties. One is Russia's difficult internal and external situation after its

invasion of Ukraine, and the other is its tighter embrace of China. This new situation has certainly created fresh openings in India for Washington that it has seized with both hands.

In recent years, Delhi's economic and security ties with Washington have become deep and wide. Modi's Washington visit last month highlighted expansive [new strategic possibilities](#) in the days ahead. Yet, the Indian establishment remains a little wary about potential volatility in the engagement with the US, marked by Washington's temptation to meddle in India's domestic politics.

Delhi's comfort level with Paris is much higher, which lends a unique significance to India's relations with France. The mutual trust and confidence between Delhi and Paris are rooted in the deep and shared sense of strategic autonomy. A [recent analysis](#) argues that Modi and Macron, like their predecessors, "have fostered strong links with major powers without becoming overly dependent on any one of them, maintaining distance from Cold War-style bloc competition." It also notes that "Modi's India remains formally opposed to joining a military alliance, while Macron's is regularly critical of NATO, in a very Gaullist manner." However, the [expansive plans for defence cooperation](#) announced by Modi and Macron, underline an important new dimension of their bilateral relationship – that France is replacing Russia as the anchor of India's 'strategic autonomy'.

During the Cold War, India turned to the Soviet Union to balance against the Western alliances in its neighbourhood with Pakistan and China. After the Cold War, Delhi's engagement with the West grew rapidly; yet Delhi clung to Moscow as a hedge against potential difficulties with Washington. Over the last decade, China's rise and assertion and Beijing's alliance with Moscow have nudged India and the US closer than ever. As it builds a strong partnership with the US to cope with the Chinese challenge, India is placing a special bet on the French connection to maintain its room for manoeuvre in the unfolding turbulence in great power relations.

Modi's back-to-back visits to Washington and Paris also highlight a competitive dynamic between the US and France in cornering a major share of the Indian defence market. The pressure on India since the Ukraine war to reduce its dependence on Russian weapons has been matched by the eagerness of the Western countries to facilitate it. This, in turn, has allowed Delhi to push for the best possible terms for defence technology transfer from its Western partners.

There has been speculation that France has [offered better terms](#) to India on the transfer of fighter engine technology after Modi secured a major agreement in June 2023 from Washington on producing GE 414 engines in India. This lends a new meaning to India's strategic autonomy. India long relied on Russia to sustain strategic autonomy against Western pressures. As India draws closer to the West and a declining Russia aligns with China, Modi's strategic autonomy is increasingly about bargaining between Western powers to enhance its strategic autonomy.

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