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Hollande in Delhi: The Hidden Dynamic of Indo-French Bonhomie

The visit of the French President Mr François Hollande to India as the Chief Guest at the Republic Day celebrations provides an important window to observe the unfolding of Indo-French relations and to assess their significance for India's larger diplomatic goals. The visit also shows the value of 'parade diplomacy' as an instrument of soft power in the age of instant communication at the global level.

Subrata Kumar Mitra¹

The state visit of President Hollande as the Guest of Honour for India's 67th Republic Day celebrations marks a double first for the French Republic. This was a record fifth time that India has extended this honour to any country. And, with the French 35th Infantry Regiment marching side by side Indian troops, it was the first time for foreign troops marching on Indian soil at India's invitation. India has honoured France through the participation of a French military contingent as a "symbol of friendship and trust between the two countries".² Rather

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² "The visit", following the joint communiqué, took place "nine months after Prime Minister Modi's successful visit to France in April 2015. It builds on the close interactions between the two leaders at the G20 meeting in

than being a one-off, the visit of the French President is part of a chain of events that help understand the unfolding of Franco-Indian relations. To understand the hidden dynamic that drives the bilateral relationship of the two countries and assess its sustainability one needs to consider the background to this particular visit and analyse the communiqué that lists its outcomes at the level of policies and shared commitments.

Prime ministerial initiative as the catalyst of foreign policy initiatives has been quintessential of the Narendra Modi government. The invitation to the French President is said to have been mooted by Prime Minister Modi on 13 November 2015, the very day when terrorists struck Paris as an act of solidarity with France and to indicate a resolve to fight the common war against terrorism. That said, while prime ministerial leadership might be necessary to set the agenda, it is not sufficient to make policy. For an insight into the policy implications of the Hollande visit, we need to turn to the minutiae of diplomatic manoeuvres, hard negotiations couched under heady rhetoric and wistful thinking. To identify the significance and implications of this latest twist to Indo-French relations we discuss four main areas excerpted below from the Indo-French communiqué³ which can help assess the larger implications of the visit, and evaluate the sustainability of the policy decisions emerging from it.

Security and Strategic Partnership

France has been a long supporter of India with regard to nuclear energy, at the level of the United Nations and in the European Union. In keeping with this policy, France and India resolved to upgrade the partnership agreement of 1998 to a strategic partnership so that the two countries can continue to consult each other closely on strategic and security matters of mutual interest. India and France reiterated the need for urgent reform of the United Nations, including its Security Council, through an expansion in both categories of membership, to make it more

November 2014 in Brisbane, the UN General Assembly in September 2015 and at the COP 21 in November 2015 in Paris and underscores their shared commitment to intensifying and strengthening the close and longstanding strategic partnership between India and France.” Indo-French joint communiqué, http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/26297/IndiaFrance_Joint_Statement_on_the_occasion_of_the_State_Visit_of_President_Francois_Hollande_of_the_French_Republic_to_India_January_25_2016, New Delhi, January 25, 2016.

³ India-France Joint Statement on the occasion of the State Visit of President Francois Hollande of the French Republic to India (January 25, 2016).

representative of the contemporary world. France reaffirmed its support for India's candidature for a permanent membership of the UN Security Council. The two countries welcomed the forward movement on the issue of United Nations reforms. In the same vein, in order to strengthen global non-proliferation and export control regimes, France and India committed to continue to work jointly towards India's accession to the multilateral export control regimes, namely, the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), the Australia Group, and the Wassenaar Arrangement.

Indian expression of solidarity with France during the recent terrorist attack in Paris and the unconditional support that France has extended to the Indian demand to stop cross-border terrorism originating from Pakistan are two important aspects of the recent Indo-French interaction. In line with this salient aspect of their relationship, India and France reiterated their commitment to counter terrorism and welcomed the separate joint statement on Counter-terrorism cooperation issued by the two sides and to intensify cooperation between the Indian and French security forces in the fields of homeland security, cyber security, Special Forces and intelligence-sharing to fight against criminal networks and tackle the common threat of terrorism. They looked forward to early conclusion of an Agreement on Prevention of Consumption of Illicit Drugs & Psychotropic Substances between the two countries and expressed hope that cooperation in this field will also lead to the disruption of terrorist financing structures.

The leaders stressed the importance of joint military exercises. They welcomed the successful air exercise Garuda in June 2014 and naval exercise Varuna in April 2015, in which the French carrier strike group participated. They welcomed the latest round of the Shakti exercise held in India in January 2016 which brought out useful operational lessons for the two armies, especially in countering terrorism. The leaders welcomed the port call at Toulon by the Indian Naval Ship Trikanth in September 2015, and the conduct of a joint exercise to enhance interoperability between the two navies. The French multi-mission frigate Provence is scheduled to participate in the International Fleet Review at Visakhapatnam in February 2016.

Both countries reaffirmed their commitment to responsible and sustainable development of civil nuclear energy with highest consideration to safety, security, non-proliferation and environmental protection. France reaffirmed its strong and long standing support for India's candidacy to the international export control regimes and in particular to the NSG. In pursuance

of the 2008 Agreement on the Development of Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energy between India and France, the two leaders encouraged their industrial companies to conclude techno-commercial negotiations by the end of 2016 for the construction of six nuclear power reactor units at Jaitapur, with due consideration to cost viability of the project, appropriate financing from the French side, collaboration on transfer of technology and cost-effective manufacturing in India for large and critical components to dovetail with Government of India's "Make in India" initiative.

France welcomed the decision by the Government of India to ratify the Convention on Supplementary Compensation for Nuclear Damage. The two leaders welcomed the regular engagement between their atomic energy organizations and their growing collaboration in mutually beneficial scientific and R&D sectors related to peaceful uses of nuclear energy. They also appreciated the long-standing relations between their nuclear regulatory authorities – India's AERB and France's ASN – which has facilitated sharing of valuable experiences, best practices and developments related to nuclear safety and regulatory issues.

Sustainable Development:

Coping with Climate Change, Solar and Renewable Energy

During the recent climate change conference in Paris, India became a leading voice for non-western concerns. Prime Minister Modi congratulated the French President for France's valuable leadership and sustained diplomatic efforts that paved the way for the successful conclusion of COP21 (Conference of the Parties 21st session in France) to in Paris in December 2015 and adoption of the Paris agreement, based on the principles of climate justice, and fostering climate resilience and low greenhouse gas emissions development. The two leaders welcomed the French commitment to support the solar projects launched by the member countries of ISA. To that effect, the AFD Group will provide funding amounting to 300 million Euros. This pledge is in line with the financing of 2 billion Euros for the development of renewable energies, announced by France during COP21.

Noting the important role of energy storage to promote renewable energies, the two leaders welcomed the signature of two MoUs between CEA (French Alternative Energies and Atomic

Energy Commission), Crompton Greaves and Green Ventures. These MoUs will serve as templates for further practical collaboration in the field of renewable energy, including transfer of technology and know-how. Hollande and Modi reaffirmed their commitment to cooperate towards clean and sustainable development and reaffirmed their valuable partnership in India's ambitious plans to develop Smart Cities. In this spirit, the two leaders welcomed a number of new initiatives such as extending technical assistance for the development of the 3 cities of Chandigarh, Nagpur and Puducherry respectively, as Smart Cities in India.

The two Leaders stressed the importance of clean transport and recalled the Protocol of Cooperation signed between the Indian Ministry of Railways and French National Railways SNCF (Société Nationale des Chemins de fer Français), French National Railways) the French public in April 2015 in the field of Semi high speed rail and station development. The two leaders welcomed the follow-up Agreement signed in December 2015 between the SNCF and Ministry of Railways to support a semi high-speed project for up-gradation of Delhi-Chandigarh line to 200 KMPH. The two leaders also welcomed the signing of the agreement between SNCF and Ministry of Railways on cooperation in the station renovation projects for Ambala and Ludhiana railway stations. The leaders also welcomed the Joint Venture agreement signed between the Indian Railways and Alstom for the supply of 800 high horse power locomotives manufactured in India and the shareholding agreement signed between them during the visit to finalize the investment in the electric locomotives factory in Madhepura, Bihar.

Research on space has been a shared interest of France and India. Recalling the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of Indo-French space cooperation in 2015, the leaders welcomed the signing of two Implementing Arrangements between their Space Agencies for cooperation in definition studies on a future joint Thermal Infrared Earth Observation mission and hosting of the French instrument for data collection on India's Oceansat-3 satellite. The leaders expressed confidence that these missions would contribute significantly to the monitoring of the environment, weather, water resources and coastal zones and further strengthen the partnership between the two countries. They also welcomed the announcement of collaboration through the participation of the Centre National d'études spatiales (CNES) in future space and planetary exploration missions of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO).

France and India underlined the importance of the dialogue on trade issues through the India-France Joint Commission, as well as their strong commitment to the European Union-India Broad Based Trade and Investment Agreement. France and India emphasized their commitment to bring about a resumption of the negotiations as soon as possible. Recognizing the shared commitment of India and France to cooperate in preventing off-shore tax evasion and the steps taken by both countries to strengthen the exchange of information in recent years, the two leaders agreed to explore further avenues for joint co-operation, especially in capacity building and sharing of best practices, in line with G20 commitments. Recognizing the important role of cooperation between States and Provinces of the two countries in fostering deeper bilateral economic engagement, the two leaders welcomed the conclusion of a MoU on Cooperation in urban development between Telangana and the Bordeaux Metropole in September 2015 and the Investment Roadshow held by Government of Karnataka in Paris and Toulouse in December 2015 and encouraged more such initiatives.

Skill Development

One of the key limitations of India's development strategy concerns the weakness of manufacturing, which, in turn, is linked to India's skills-deficit. As such, the promotion of education, skill development, science & technology formed an important part of the Indo-French agreement. The Leaders lauded the robust people-to-people and tourism contacts between India and France, as well as the wide-ranging cultural, educational and scientific exchanges between the two countries, underpinned by the presence of a vibrant Indian diaspora in France. Recognizing the commitments made in the Indo-French statements issued in February 2013 and in April 2015 concerning the negotiations of a bilateral partnership agreement on migration and mobility, the leaders affirmed their commitment to pursue their discussions on this agreement with a view to conclude them as soon as possible

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In the field of higher education in which hundreds of agreements between French and Indian institutions have already been signed, the two leaders welcomed the agreement signed between the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research Pune and the Ecole Normale Supérieure de Lyon, the agreement signed between the Indian Institute of Technology in Mumbai and French CNRS/Telecom Bretagne/Université de Bretagne occidentale/Université de Bretagne

Sud/ENSTA Bretagne/ENI Bretagne, the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for sponsored Ph.D. Fellowships signed between Thales and Indian Institute of Technology Mumbai. Recognizing that skills development was a key priority, both leaders welcomed the important role played by French companies in India in training and skilling the Indian workforce and encouraged them to engage even more actively in the sector. They also welcomed partnership between the French CNCP and the National Skills Development Authority of India focusing on Qualifications Register under the framework of the MOU on cooperation signed between India and France

Heritage, Culture, Sport

Culture has been a quintessential aspect of the high politics of France, and increasingly, that of India. Prime Minister Modi and President Hollande expressed satisfaction on the progress of a number of initiatives undertaken by Indian and French institutes to promote and preserve cultural heritage and enhance cultural cooperation between the two countries since Prime Minister Modi's State visit to France in April 2015. In particular, they welcomed the conclusion of the Cultural Exchange Programme between India and France for the period 2016-2018 and welcomed the Administrative Arrangement concluded between the Ministry of Culture and Communication of the French Republic, the Chairman of the National Library of France and the Ministry of Culture of India.

The two leaders lauded the joint efforts of Indian and French archaeologists that led to the remarkable archaeological discovery of human existence that could date back to 2.6 million years near Chandigarh in India. They also welcomed the launch of the book "Shadows of Gods" by Institut Français de Pondichéry extensively cataloguing Indian Objets d' Arts and cultural heritage and its important contribution to the preservation and recovery of stolen Indian art.

The leaders warmly welcomed the "Namaste France" cultural festival to be hosted by India in France from 15 September to 30 November 2016 showcasing a variety of Indian cultural performances, exhibitions, fairs and workshops to highlight Indian cultural heritage and a reciprocal "Bonjour India" cultural festival of France in India in 2017. Noting the important role played by Alliance Françaises in India, the Embassy of France/Institut Français in India

and the Indian Embassy in France in promoting French and Indian cultural activities in both countries, Prime Minister Modi announced the inauguration of a new Indian Cultural Centre in Paris no later than in 2017. President Hollande welcomed this significant initiative towards further deepening Indo-French cultural ties and announced the opening of new centres of Alliance Française in Varanasi and Lucknow in 2016-2017. Both leaders also welcomed the hosting of the Regional Hindi Conference in Paris in 2016. President Hollande welcomed the announcement of 5 scholarships for French citizens to learn Sanskrit language.

In the field of sports, the leaders welcomed the enhanced cooperation between both nations, and in this context, welcomed the cooperation agreement signed between the Federation Française de Hockey and Hockey India. In the context of the recent agreement between Fédération Française de Football and All India Football Federation, the two leaders welcomed the strong interest expressed by the Paris Saint-Germain Football Club to help develop grassroots football in India by reinforcing the presence of its Academy established in 2014 in Delhi and Bangalore, as well as considering a possible exhibition match in the future.

The Difficult Hiatus Between Heady Diplomacy and Cautious Bureaucracy

Underneath the diplomatic froth that normally characterises the joint statements, issued for the benefit of the media and public consumption, one can discern the hiatus of heady rhetoric and the reality of painstaking, complex process of implementation. To illustrate this point, one needs to look carefully at the on-again, off-again progress of the Rafale deal. The two leaders welcomed the conclusion of the Inter-governmental Agreement (IGA) on the acquisition of 36 Rafale fighter aircraft in flyaway condition, except for some financial issues relating to the IGA which they agreed must be resolved as soon as possible. The financial issues concerned are not trivial. India expects a reduction of up to 20% on the asking price, and the customization of the planes to Indian specifications without extending the date of delivery – conditions that the French side might find difficult to meet, despite their assurance to solve these issues to mutual satisfaction without further delay. We learn from a report in the media that Dassault Aviation, the manufacturer of Rafale express confidence that the deal for the sale of 36 fighter jets would

be concluded within 4-6 weeks. The price is the issue. “They have come down from the original price but we expect more”, says an Indian official source.⁴

This calls for a critical assessment. Should one, in the light of the small print on the Rafale negotiations, dismiss the most recent turn to Indo-French relations as yet another example of *plus ça change...* - the more it changes, the more it remains the same? There are some compelling reasons to think that there are signs of sustainability that make this visit a turning point, at least for the remainder of the mandate of Hollande and Modi. For this, one should take into account four points.

First and foremost, one should note the solicitude in the language that both sides have used to show the resolve to continue the negotiations in the earnest. The second argument comes from the incentives that both Modi and Hollande have to lock-in, for reasons of domestic politics where the difficult co-existence of state-secularism and rising fundamentalist movements at the societal level pose a problem for both. They need to set a new idiom of a joint East-West front against terrorism that lifts it from the local and regional political exigencies that compromise its effectiveness as policy. The third argument is structural. France has ploughed a lonely furrow in terms of international diplomacy from the days of General de Gaulle, as indeed India has, from the time of Jawaharlal Nehru. The Modi doctrine of ‘friendship with all, and alliance with none’ dovetails nicely with the French solicitude to manoeuvre an independent course among competing powers. India thus sends a signal to both the US and China about the viability of the third way, Indian style. India emerges from this as an emerging power which is both independent and non-threatening, a significant presence in a world where the US and China appear to be leading towards the kind of bi-polarity that had once marked the state of affairs at the height of the Cold War.

The fourth point has to do with domestic politics. Seen from the French side, acceptance of the invitation and the high power team that the President brought along, consisting of such leading elements of the French Socialist party as Segolène Royale and Laurent Fabius, provide an insight into the strategic goals and ambitions of the Hollande presidency. The war against terrorism has given a much-needed room to manoeuvre to move towards domestic security which was conventionally identified with the political Right, and to appeal for national

⁴ Dinakar Peri, “Rafale pricing issue likely to be resolved in 4-6 weeks”, the Hindu, Jan 28, 2016

solidarity under the leadership of the President. It should be remembered that France and India have a similar issue with the clash between values espoused by the state – *les valeurs républicaines* – Republican values like liberty, equality and fraternity, in France, and secularism, as these are known in India - and those espoused by a section of radical Islamists. The symmetry of the two situations leads to the convergence of the two leaders from, despite one being, formally a socialist, and the other, a representative of the cultural Right.

I have argued in this essay that there is an incentive for France and India to stay the course, make the necessary adjustments and short-term sacrifices to promote their shared, long-term interests in terms of domestic security and international influence. Raja Mohan makes this point eloquently.⁵ While highlighting the significance of the Indo-French partnership of the long term goals of Indian diplomacy and the need to relativize the salience of the United States, Russia and China as pivotal points, Raja Mohan also warns about the possible loss of momentum as one seeks to transform the diplomatic harvest into concrete policy and implementation.⁶ Much goodwill can dissipate as the initiatives meander through the entrails of Indian bureaucracy. That said, India must also take into account the fact that while French support is of great value at the level of the EU, and in Africa and Indo-Pacific, the international ambitions of France are not always in sync with the state capacities of France. This may call for a difficult balancing act when it comes to India's need for support from the United States vis-à-vis Pakistan, and the sometimes difficult relationship of France and the United States.

⁵ Raja Mohan interprets this as “the end of India’s prolonged military isolationism” and “the emergence of France as India’s most trusted international partner”. Raja Mohan, “Raja-Mandala: A most exceptional friendship”, in the *Indian Express*, Jan 26, 2016. He adds: “France became an early and valuable partner for India in building its nuclear and space programmes. ... Continuing that tradition, President François Hollande is eager to consolidate the strategic partnership with India and implement the many key agreements that remain in limbo”. Raja Mohan, op. cit.

⁶ “India’s relations with America, Britain and China will always retain different degrees of difficulty given their dalliance with the Pakistan army. ... France is a more credible partner for India in constructing a more equitable world order through a new concert of major powers. Modi gets the big idea on France. His problem is in getting Delhi to translate it into action.” Raja Mohan, op. cit.

Conclusion

The honour that India has accorded to the French President is not simply a matter of symbolic affirmation of the continuity of Indo-French relations: it is also a decision of great strategic significance. The Republic Day parades which showcase Indian achievements in many areas of national life is the country's biggest display of national glory, and the invitation to be the Chief Guest is an honour that the Indian government uses for purposes that are a significant indicator of the larger goals of Indian diplomacy and foreign relations. As such, the visit of President Hollande offers a window to the larger framework of India's foreign policy.

Seen from Singapore, what might be the implication of this new twist for South and South-East Asia? There are two significant points. First, as important naval powers present in the Indo-Pacific, France and India have welcomed the first-ever bilateral dialogue on Maritime Security in the Indian Ocean Region held on 14-15 January 2016 in Paris which paved the way for enhanced cooperation in maintaining the safety of sea-lanes for trade and communications, countering the threat of piracy and maritime terrorism, maritime domain awareness and fostering trade and economic links in the Indian Ocean Region. This is great significance to Singapore. Secondly, as we have already seen above, France is eager to connect with India in the area of skills export – a domain – where Singapore is a leading point of contact for India. Might there be enough room for both in this skills market, or is there a need to re-think the skills-export-import policy of India and Singapore? Might there be, in view of the fact that India has a strategic partnership with France as well as Singapore, the scope for a triangular-dynamic of the three countries which could generate synergy? Singapore could take up this 'triangular diplomacy', and follow this up with direct Singapore-France initiatives, drawing on India as a common strategic partner.

Finally, in the age of globalization, and mass consumption of technologies of instant communication that beam distant images of all that smiling and hugging to restive home audiences, ceremonies like national day parades are more than mere ritual. The traction that the Hollande visit has generated both for the leaders concerned and the two countries in a whole spectrum of issues and policies show the incentive that others have to get into the game of diplomacy in the guise of grandstanding at national events. Singapore is no stranger to the potential of this policy. The visit of Singapore's Prime Minister Mr Goh Chok Tong to be the

Chief Guest at the Republic Day parade of India in 1994 as the guest of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao had set in train a paradigm shift in the relationship of the two countries.⁷ In the age of soft power, countries aspiring to play a global role, or for that matter, to enhance their security and economic prospects, can ignore such opportunities only at their peril.

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⁷ “Looking back over how the Singapore-India partnership has blossomed over the past decade, I take some satisfaction in having excited Singaporeans about India. ...Just as India has looked east, Singapore has looked west towards India.” Speech by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong... 9 July 2004, <http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches> visited on 27.1.2016