

India, France join hands for Indian Ocean security

Fresh logistical agreement to allow closer defence cooperation India and France on Saturday joined hands in ensuring freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific region. Both sides also announced a new phase of cooperation in space security focussed on the maritime domain and a fresh logistics agreement that will allow their defence forces to closely cooperate on mutually agreed operations.

“Whether it is the environment, or maritime security, or marine resources, or the freedom of navigation and over flight, we are committed to strengthening our cooperation in all these areas. And therefore, today, we are releasing a Joint Strategic Vision for our cooperation in the Indian Ocean area,” said Prime Minister Narendra Modi, announcing the initiative that will open up vast French maritime domain in the Indian Ocean region to India.

Common concerns

‘The Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region’ stated that India and France share common concerns on freedom of navigation in the region and will tackle challenges to over-flight and threat of weapons of mass destruction. The agreement has a vast scope stretching from “countering maritime terrorism and piracy” to “building maritime domain awareness” said a joint statement issued at the end of the official talks. The statement also said it would support “greater coordination in regional/international fora in the region.”

This is the second major maritime arrangement that India has taken up in the last six months following the Quadrilateral discussion with Australia, Japan and the US in October 2017.

Presenting the French perspective on maritime and military

cooperation, President Emmanuel Macron said, "The Pacific and the Indian Oceans cannot become zones for hegemonic power and we are, therefore, building a strategic partnership. The same is true for our defence cooperation signed a while ago."

The logistics support agreement is likely to "extend" both Indian and French ability to respond to common challenges. The agreement "seeks to extend logistical support on reciprocal access to respective facilities for Indian and French armed forces," said the statement.

Sources indicate that while reviewing the ongoing military contracts and discussing the commissioning of INS Kalvari, the first Scorpene submarine made in India, Mr. Macron suggested extending the bilateral contract for the supply of more of these conventional submarines.

The two sides also agreed on the need for early conclusion of the ongoing discussions between DRDO and French firm Safran for combat engines for the indigenous Tejas fighters. They presently fly on GE manufactured American engines. "If the M88 engines of Safran are to be produced in India with full ToT (transfer of technology) that might solve a lot of our concerns regarding the Tejas programme," the military scientist pointed out.

Both sides also announced a vision document on cooperation on a number of space-research related issues, including space security. The space agreement is designed to support joint maritime operations as it will help in maritime surveillance for the Indian Ocean region. The visiting French leader also presided over the signing of an important agreement that will allow mutual recognition of academic qualifications.

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Exchange of information

Pointing out the political acceptability of France across Indian political spectrum and the historic role it has played in providing sensitive technologies for both space and military programmes, a senior military scientist said, "these agreements will bring back the momentum." The two sides also signed a new protocol for the exchange of classified information between the two sides.

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