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Bilateral Relations : French President François Hollande's three-day visit to India

The Indo-French relationship has improved dramatically - but still lacks a spark

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Extended haggling seems to have become the set pattern for all Indo-French business contracts.

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The day French President François Hollande began his three-day visit to India on Sunday, the Islamic State released a video paying tribute to the Paris suicide bombers, claiming that they had brought France to its knees. The Europol police agency announced on Monday that there is an impending threat of new large-scale IS attacks on Europe.

Much has changed for Hollande since his last state visit to India in 2013. After two terror attacks on France, he has martialised his political discourse and declared that France is at war. The atmosphere is both tense and gloomy as France battles both against terror threats and the economic gloom. Hollande's own Socialist Party put up a dismal performance last November in regional elections with far right ideas threatening to go mainstream in France.

That Hollande should watch the Republic Day parade as chief guest is not incongruous for two seemingly contradictory reasons : one, because it would be the French dream-come-true to see the Rafale fighter jets as part of this display and two, because Indo-French relations are often grounded in outmoded things.

An anachronism

Military parades on the avenues of capital cities are a somewhat-obsolete tradition that both France and India have in common. They are a practice that France has been following since 1880. The more recent Indian version with its decorated floats is a more toned-down, even heart-warming, version of the French Bastille Day "défilé", which is more hard-core in its military ethos.

The display of a country's military might should hardly be the way to celebrate its achievements. Most of the world's major threats today cannot be resolved by sheer muscle force - not even terrorism, to a great extent. In fact violent ideologies thrive on their adversaries' aggression.

But perhaps it's quite natural for the Indo-French bilateral visit to take place in this setting. France is among the five largest exporters of military equipment, along with US, Russia, China and Germany. Arms exports are therefore a major component of French foreign policy. And since France does not wield the economic power US or China do, it's hard to shift attention away from its somewhat unflattering arms-vendor image. The sale of its arms equipment is tied to France's domestic growth. Orders worth 15 billion euros in 2015, amount to 30,000 new jobs in this sector (according to French journal *JDD* [1]). On the other hand, India has earned the dubious distinction of being the world's largest importer of military equipment for the period of 2010-2014 (according to a report by Stockholm International Peace Research Institute [2]).

Lacking a spark

Despite the marked improvements in Indo-French bilateral ties in recent years, there's no spark of magic yet in the relationship. During this visit, 13 agreements have been signed between the two sides including an Intergovernmental Agreement on the Rafale. A joint statement on terrorism has generated some interest in India as France has backed India's call to Pakistan to bring to justice the perpetrators of the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks. French elite forces such as GIGN (Groupe d'intervention de la Gendarmerie Nationale) are likely to share their expertise with Indian forces under the joint exercise, Shakti. Space, transport and education are other areas where exchange will continue to take place. So what's missing ?

India does see France as its most important strategic partner in Europe and the French too, have gone to great lengths to woo India. Yet the perception is that it's mostly the sale of French products worth several thousands of crores that defines the bilateral relationship and dominates the media coverage on both sides. Extended haggling seems to have become the set pattern for all Indo-French contracts.

Until Hollande's last visit, civil nuclear reactors were an important focus. But the French nuclear manufacturer Areva has since been in grave trouble. After major restructuring, it is French energy giant EDF that will set the tone for the Indian contracts for six EPRs (Evolutionary Power Reactors). Whether India really needs these expensive and untested reactors or even nuclear energy (not always seen as clean energy) is another discussion. In any case, post the Paris Climate Conference (CoP21), the focus of Indo-French bilateral relations has clearly shifted to solar power and renewable energy.

India played a central role in bringing "climate justice" into focus at the CoP21 in Paris in November, insisting that industrialised nations must make a larger effort towards financing and sharing of technology. Instead of seeing India's massive renewable energy needs as an opportunity to make lucrative deals, France must also take an active lead in setting an example for developed nations to make genuine financial commitments and offer major concessions in sharing of technology rather than remain subservient to the US position (which is basically a policy of not accepting that the developed world has a historical responsibility).

Bound by money

Commercial interests have been at the centre of Indo-French ties. However, Hollande's team itself admitted on the eve of the visit, that there is a stubborn problem in the business community on both sides where French businesses still see India as a difficult place to do business in and Indians see France as a steadily weakening economy.

France will be helping India turn Chandigarh, Nagpur and Puducherry into “smart cities”. Obviously it’s not for the French to worry about whether these projects could deepen social exclusion or turn into rich ghettos as long as it’s good for their business. Besides, the French are hardly champions of urban planning for social cohesion. The housing projects they built for immigrant workers in the seventies stand today as archetypes of social exclusion. Maybe, they have learnt their lessons.

For these bilateral visits not to remain limited to PR exercises for corporate interests, more far reaching efforts should be made in north-south cooperation beyond commerce. Despite Modi promise of tackling large-scale tax evasion and France’s own efforts to step up the investigations during Hollande’s tenure, there has been little or no discussion of increased cooperation on this front. Modi’s declaration on Sunday that retrospective tax is a thing of the past almost sounded like an apology for India’s anti-black money measures to reassure big French businesses trying to enter India.

Missed opportunity

France handed over a list of accounts held by Indians at HSBC bank to India many years ago. This could have been a starting point for a long-term exchange but India didn’t ask France for more information. Barely a week ago, France found a list with 380,000 accounts and 12 billion worth of black money stashed away by rich French clients in UBS bank in Switzerland. If India and France were to join hands, it could help both sides, especially India, to make big leaps in the investigations. More important, it could open up the discussion on how laws around the world are failing to put an end to criminal tax evasion that results in draining of nations’ wealth. But black money is not on the table in Indo-French bilateral talks.

India and France both have a ruling elite that fails to see its own deep biases but entertains stereotypes about the other camp. France’s colonial hangover continues to dominate its global politics and even how it treats with its own citizens who have roots in its former colonies. India’s failure to address caste oppression, gender injustice and other social inequities make it seem brutal to the French. Islamophobia is peaking in both countries right now. The common threat that they see - terror - is being tackled with standard anti-terror measures : more co-operation in surveillance training of elite forces is all very well. But the securitarian approach in anti-terror measures has its limits unless combined with the will to address deeper problems.

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* « The Indo-French relationship has improved dramatically - but still lacks a spark ». Scroll.in · Jan 26, 2016 · 08:00 am :
<http://scroll.in/article/802487/the-indo-french-relationship-has-improved-dramatically-but-still-lacks-a-spark>

* We welcome your comments at letters scroll.in

Notes

[1] <http://www.lejdd.fr/International/Afrique/Le-Drian-sur-les-accusations-de-viols-en-Centrafrigue-Que-les-soldats-se-denoncent-730722>

[2] http://www.sipri.org/googlemaps/2015_of_at_top_20_imp_map.html