

View from India: a retrospective of Emmanuel Macron's visit to Narendra Modi in late January 2024

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Emmanuel Macron visited India on 25 and 26 January. The interview below was prepared for this occasion. However, for reasons largely beyond our control, its finalisation was postponed until now. Better late than never?

Pierre Rousset - Can we look back at the visit of French President Emmanuel Macron to India on 25 and 26 January? On the 26th, he attended the Republic Day military parade. Six months earlier, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had attended the military parade on the Champs-Élysées as a “guest of honour” on the occasion of Bastille Day in France.

Emmanuel Macron was not Narendra Modi's “first choice”. It was the President of the United States who was supposed to be the guest of honour at this ceremony, but Joe Biden didn't turn up. Macron doesn't seem to have minded. For several years now, he has been cultivating his proximity to Modi, whom he has received with great pomp in France and whom he has elevated to the rank of Grand Cross of the Legion of Honour. The bilateral relationship between France and India seems lopsided, with Paris being more of a “buyer” as compared to New Delhi...

What emerged from this visit (cooperation agreements, arms sales, etc.)?

Sushovan Dhar : [\[1\]](#) President Macron was accompanied on his Republic Day visit to India by a large high-level French entourage that included CEOs, business executives, and the ministers of the armed forces, culture, Europe, and foreign affairs. Three French Air and Space Force aircraft flew alongside Indian Air Force aircraft over the Kartavya Path to reciprocate for the fighter aircraft and Indian Tri-Service contingent that participated in the Bastille Day celebrations on July 14 in Paris. The Republic Day parade included a detachment of French military personnel as well. Despite the fact that Macron arrived in a hurry to replace US President Joe Biden, all of these indicate that Macron and Modi planned to create hype around the event.

The French President congratulated India for proposing to organise COP 33 in 2028. He also reiterated France's support for India's bid to join the International Energy Agency (IEA), which currently has 31 members from OECD countries exclusively. India is considered an exception, since it is supposed to assert the leadership of the so-called emerging economies of the South and geopolitical non-alignment without being a member of the OECD. As the country is “*set to play an increasingly central role in efforts to safeguard energy security, drive inclusive energy transitions, and combat climate change,*” India is being pushed to become a member of the IEA.

At a deeper glance, Macron's visit is much more about ritual and symbolism than it is about content, notwithstanding the mild and insignificant statements. In fact, India and France had already signed an array of agreements when they commemorated 25 years of their strategic alliance in 2023—a year that saw multiple interactions between President Macron and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The two countries had earlier released a very ambitious “Horizon 2047” partnership road map, which included plans to jointly manufacture military equipment, transfer cutting-edge technologies, and sign new procurement contracts for French aeroplanes, submarines, and engines. Diplomats faced a challenging task due to the short lead time before the Republic Day visit and the numerous agreements that were already made public.

Therefore, it's comprehensible that a lot of the agreements that were made public during the Modi-Macron meeting in Jaipur and their appearance at the Republic Day Parade were fundamentally based on the previous road map. These include the “Defence Industry” roadmap, which aims to develop projects for the co-design, co-development and co-production of military hardware in the air, on land and at sea, as well as a space-defence partnership. The two sides also signed memoranda of understanding on agriculture, digital health and scientific and technological cooperation. The mass production of civil helicopters (Airbus-Tata) was a first, but it was a private B2B contract (“Business to Business” contracts between companies). The two parties also issued a joint statement on regional and international developments. India was unable to find common ground with other partners, notably the United States and Russia, on these issues, but was able to adopt common positions with France on the condemnation of “*terrorist attacks on Israel*”, the need for humanitarian aid in Gaza and Ukraine, and concerns over attacks in the Red Sea.

The expectations for big-ticket defence hardware deals, nuclear supplies for the long-delayed power project in Jaitapur, and small modular reactors were betrayed.

However, while Russia remains India's largest arms supplier, in recent years military imports have increased significantly from France and the US. France's share of India's arms imports was just 0.09% for the period 2009-2013, but for the period 2019-23 its share has risen to 33%, making it the second largest supplier.

In short, the two leaders took advantage of Republic Day to bolster each other's profile and legitimacy on the international stage. It was more a question of raising public awareness than of any political content. It came at a time when Indian republican values are being undermined by the current regime.

Emmanuel Macron visited India for Republic Day at a time when Narendra Modi is destroying all “republican” traditions in India. This time he is killing off what may be left of India's secular tradition (with the Head of State presiding over this religious ceremony in person) and further fuelling Hindu supremacism. Macron doesn't care, but symbolically he is ostensibly sipping the cup of realpolitik to the lees...

Historically speaking, religious extremism and hatred are deeply rooted in India's socio-cultural body politic. The roots of religious intolerance are to be found in the collective subconsciousness of a large number of Indians, a product of hundreds of years of evolution. During the colonial period, the existing differences between the two communities were exacerbated by the imperialists for political ends. British policy widened the gap between Hindus and Muslims and eventually led to the partition of India in 1947, followed by violent communal riots on both sides of the border that claimed the lives of thousands of Hindus and Muslims.

Relationships with Hindus remained tense despite the fact that many Muslims still lived in India. Violent communal violence on the minorities have dotted India's independent history, most notably

in Gujarat (2001) and Muzaffarnagar (2013).

Earlier in the 1980s, the country's secular fabric was severely strained due to the Congress Party's overt pandering to various religious communities. The then prime minister, Indira Gandhi, capitalised on religious differences to strengthen her hold on the country. Let's not forget the inauguration of the Bharat Mata Mandir, a temple constructed in 1983 with the support of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) [2], the encouragement to militant Sikhs to weaken the Akali Dal [3] in Punjab, etc. Rajiv Gandhi, who became prime minister after Indira's death, invoked sharia as the Muslim communal law template to mollify Indian Muslims. This strategy allowed Hindu nationalists to claim the Congress Party was indulging in pseudo-secularism, allowing Hindu nationalism to gain more political salience.

Hindu nationalism has given way to Hindu extremism (Hindutva), particularly with regard to cow vigilantism [against those involved in the commercial slaughter of cows and the processing of their meat or hide] and love jihad, a repressive moral diktats against inter-religious marriages. Extremism in the Hindu community is a relatively new development.

To reduce the excitement over the inauguration of the Ram Mandir on January 22 to an election stunt would be to misconstrue a disastrous situation. Fundamentally, it is obvious that the purpose of organising the people (Hindus only) for the dedication of the Ram temple is to arouse popular opinion on the need for a Hindu Rashtra (nation). The widespread excitement surrounding the official opening of the Rama temple in Ayodhya, which was facilitated by the Modi administration, is a clear indication of the victory of religious fundamentalism over secularism, Hindutva over Hinduism, religiosity over religion, exclusion over inclusion, and hatred over brotherhood. The Prime Minister, the high priest of Hindutva, oversaw the great consecration on 22 January, which was supposed to be the greatest politico-religious event of our time. But the Ram Mandir, built on the remains of a mosque vandalised by religious extremists and currently in the hands of the latter and their mentors, is more the symbol of the victory of a majority nationalism than the apogee of a great faith.

Unfortunately, the murmurs in the Western media about the attacks on the foundational aspects of Indian secularism did not see any resonance from the western political elites, of which Macron is no exception.

Elections are being held in India next spring and Modi will be able to use his international stature in the election campaign... with the willing help of Emmanuel Macron.

The BJP was a bit worried about its electoral fortunes after its defeat in the Karnataka assembly elections in May 2023. Not only did it show that Modi's charisma is not invincible, but it also encouraged the opposition parties to come together and form a united front against the BJP in the coming parliamentary elections. The BJP got wind in its sails after winning the elections for the three states in December 2023. Not only did it have domestic implications, but the international media went gung-ho about the BJP's victory, hailing it as '*an expansion of PM Modi's dominance*' and adding that the outcomes are '*vital*' ahead of the Lok Sabha elections in 2024.

Macron's visit is certainly going to lend credibility to Modi's *Vishwaguru* (global teacher), a perception that Modi has been successful in setting the economic agenda aimed at shaping global growth at various international forums. The marketing and rebranding exercise of this self-proclaimed *Vishwaguru* is bound to get stronger, and the BJP aims to exploit it for the upcoming elections.

In India, the climate of repression against political opponents and minorities, the

restriction of civil liberties and press censorship seems to be worsening.

No country is a better example of the global retreat of democracy than India. India's democracy is threatened by increasing polarisation, censorship, media suppression, compromised electoral integrity and shrinking space for dissent. The BJP-led government, which came to power in 2014 and 2019, has been criticised for its poor performance on democratic indices.

Freedom House maintains India's "partly free" status, but experts say the country has become an increasingly illiberal democracy rooted in ideology. The ruling BJP, an extension of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a powerful far-right organisation promoting Hindutva, has encouraged radical Hindu nationalists, leading to increased attacks on religious minorities and discrimination against Muslims and Christians.

India has been classified as an "electoral autocracy" by the *Varieties of Democracy Project* (V-Dem) and as an "imperfect democracy" by the *Economist Intelligence Unit*, underlining the country's democratic decline. This has led to 1.4 billion people being classed as autocracies and the percentage of people living in free countries being halved. The Indian government's anti-democratic tendencies have intensified, with Rahul Gandhi expelled from parliament following a libel conviction over a joke about the Prime Minister. The government has also taken control of one of the few remaining independent television channels, leading to a significant drop in India's ranking in the *World Press Freedom Index* 2023. India is ranked 161st out of 180 countries.

Worryingly, despite the criticism, Modi's popularity with the people remains strong, with approval ratings regularly in excess of 70%.

New Delhi is accused of having ordered the assassination (successfully or unsuccessfully) of opponents in Canada and the United States, and of promoting Hindutva, Hindu supremacism, on an international scale. What are the diplomatic implications and what is the impact on the large Indian expatriate communities?

The murder of Nijjar, a Sikh from the Canadian province of British Columbia, attributed to Indian intelligence agents, caught the attention of the international community when Justin Trudeau, the Canadian Prime Minister, rose in parliament and made an explosive statement blaming India. The ramifications were immediate. Canada expelled a senior Indian diplomat who was allegedly involved in the intelligence. India quickly hit back, calling the accusations "absurd" and politically motivated, and expelled a Canadian diplomat in return. Trade negotiations between the two countries were interrupted.

At the end of December, Joe Biden made an exception and spoke to the *Financial Times*, which had first reported how the US government had foiled an alleged plot by an Indian agent to kill a Sikh "separatist" on US soil.

Rumour in international diplomatic circles revolves around the fact that Joe Biden refused an invitation to India's Republic Day parade after the US Secret Service issued an alert about a possible link between India and an assassination plot on US soil.

Although no official reason has been made public, Joe Biden's refusal to visit New Delhi also forced India to postpone a meeting of the Quadrilateral - which also includes Australia and Japan - that it had hoped to organise during the American leader's visit.

Footnotes

[1] Sushovan Darh is an Indian political activist and trade unionist.

[2] The Vishva Hindu Parishad, World Council of Hindus, is an extreme right-wing Hindu nationalist organisation whose ideology is based on Hindutva (a supremacist conception of « Hinduism »).

[3] The Akali Dal is an Indian Sikh political party based mainly in Punjab.