



FRANCE, INDIA and 21st Century Challenges

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Special to India Strategic

PARIS. The arrival of the Indian Prime Minister has come at an interesting juncture in history. History is on the move with significant upheaval in the

geopolitical landscape, ranging from Putin's mapmaking, Chinese pushing out in Asia, the ISIS crisis, as well as the clear tie between terrorism at home and abroad in both France and India.

It is a good time to find new friends and to redefine your working relationships in your expanded neighbourhood. In effect, that is what President Francois Hollande and Prime Minister Narendra Modi have done. The French have clearly appreciated the serious nature of his visit, and his willingness to clear the deck on issues which have languished far too long. His leadership is clearly being recognised here in Paris.

Although various aspects of the visit got less press than the Rafale deal, pushing the nuclear agreement towards a conclusion probably headed the parade of demonstrated seriousness on the part of the Indian PM and his Government. The Jaitapur nuclear power plant deal was signed in late 2010 but has been languishing since then. Mr Modi has put a high priority on getting the deal concluded and

Prime Minister Narendra Modi at delegation level talks between India and France at Palais de L'Elysees in Paris



moving forward.

The Rafale deal also shows clear seriousness from the PM. Rather than engaging in a multiple-year negotiating delay, the PM recognises that the Indian Air Force (IAF) needs planes now to fill a critical gap when facing the threats in the neighbourhood. And Rafale has been carefully evaluated by the IAF and found to fit its needs.

A key problem facing any deal was that Dassault was not going to guarantee the quality of aircraft coming off of an Indian assembly line, unless they had very significant control. This meant that no deal would happen.

By buying 36 aircraft directly through a government-to-government agreement, the IAF will get combat-ready aircraft much more rapidly than via any other means and at a lower cost. Simply put, one can project the cost of an aircraft coming off of a mature production line; projecting the cost of aircraft not yet coming off of a new production line is alchemy. And

both the line and the plane have matured so that the IAF will get a good product to meet its pressing combat needs. Fifteen years have passed since the first Rafale entered in service in the French Navy.

"We started very small with a fleet of only ten aircraft up until 2004", recalls Marie-Astrid Vernier, currently director of military support at Dassault Aviation and who has worked on the Rafale since 1994. The current French Rafale fleet has been built with the delivery of four different "tranches" of aircraft which have been upgraded over the years into various standards, the latest one being the Standard F3R to be delivered in 2018.

Today's Rafale F3 has little to do with the very first F1: "Retrofitting the very first planes from a F1 standard to a F3 standard takes far more time than upgrading later-built planes", explains Capitaine de Vaisseau Sébastien Fabre, formerly in charge of the support of the Rafale fleet within the French MoD. As the thousandth modification was achieved a few months ago, the latter stressed in an interview that "60 per cent of these changes relate to standard and technical tracking, while the rest has to do with improving equipment and support tools".

Today's 2015 Rafale is a rather different bird from the 2000's Rafale, as new technologies allowed for new operational missions, which in turn drove new technical requirements. As Colonel Jérôme Bellanger, Commander of Saint Dizier FAF base, explains: "As standards evolved, the operational use of Rafale became rather different depending on the theatre of operations (...): in Afghanistan, missions were classic as we would operate from a forward base; as far as Libya is concerned, we

PM Modi with President Hollande





Mr Modi and Mr Hollande releasing the stamp commemorating 50 years of Indo-French Space Cooperation

took off from Saint Dizier in order to implement very quick-order missions (...); it was the same at the start of our intervention in Mali with an extra-challenge, i.e. demonstrate our ability to last. Mission accomplished, since we were able to conduct a 9 hours and 45 minutes mission starting from Saint-Dizier, treating 20 AASM targets, and taking off a few hours later for yet another mission."

Rafale experts speak of a fundamental break in technology, while the multi-role capacity of the fighter jet literally transformed the French Air Force (Armée de L'air) modus operandi not only in flight and operation, but also as far as maintenance has been concerned. "The plane was, to start with, well born. It brought to life many novelties", explains CV Favre. These novelties ranged from the M88-2 engine to modern sensors and forced a shift in the tools and processes necessary to properly support the

aircraft and its equipment.

Indeed support has not been left out from the overall transformation process with the genesis of an innovative integrated maintenance concept. This process of transformation affecting both tactics and support is the result of an on-going synergy between the constructors and the French military. It still goes on and will always go on, allowing the Rafale, its pilots and its maintainers to be all combat proven again and again, as they have been over the course of the past decade in very different threat environments.

In other words, the IAF is going to be part of the transformation which the French forces have seen with Rafale, it is not simply about buying 36 planes. The French will be engaged in the maintenance of the Indian Rafales which will possibly make the French forces part of the Indian landscape as well for deterrence, not a bad idea in today's uncertain world.

And as maintenance is stood up

in India for Rafale and Indian firms become involved, the foundation for building Rafale in India will also be built. It is really up to the Indian Government, the IAF and Indian industry to make this happen.

And both the joint commitment to fight terrorism, notably Islamic terrorism, as well as maritime security is part of the collaborative environment as well for France and India. The two countries are working on enhanced maritime domain awareness approaches in the Indian Ocean, for which India can contribute a great deal with its new Boeing P-8Is and the French with their small but present Indian Ocean fleet, and the participation of the Charles de Gaulle in coming naval exercise with India.

In other words, the 21st century is seeing not only new threats in neighbourhoods, but new relationships among some of the neighbours.

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