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INDO–FRENCH DEFENSE PARTNERSHIP AND REGIONAL BALANCE IN SOUTH ASIA

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ABSTRACT

The article aims to describe the regional security challenges and major threats for India that originate in South Asia. Since 1947, India has been suffering from external security threats, such as different forms of proxy warfare and terrorism coming from the neighboring countries, particularly from China and Pakistan. The article also examines recurring incidents when India had major border issues with China in the Himalayas. Furthermore, this text looks at the defense cooperation between India and France in the context of serious threats to India's security in the South Asian region. India's soft power policy is a reflection of a neo-realist approach, and the country has been expanding its long-standing defense cooperation with France. Serious threats to India's security in the South

Asian region have pushed the country to purchase defense equipment from France. Therefore, India has been receiving support from the French government whenever defense equipment and other assistance was needed. The relationship between India and France is strengthening bilateral cooperation at a broader level and shaping a strong strategic partnership by uniting other countries of South Asia and the Indo-Pacific as well.

Key words

Indo-French Partnerships, Defense Cooperation, Security Threats, South Asia, Regional Power

Introduction

War has been deliberately imposed on India since 1947. When the British ended their colonial rule, India was divided into parts; the new state, Pakistan, was born as an Islamic country and became an enemy of India from the start as it invaded India from the north on 22 October 1947. In 1962 China attacked India without provocation and lost ground. Gradually, China and Pakistan became allies, acting against India. The Pakistani army has been receiving all its military equipment and assistance from China. This article critically examines the significant role of China in unbalancing regional peace and security in South Asia. India considers China as a major cause of instability in the South Asia region, particularly with regard to the modernization of Chinese military forces as well as the increase of tensions at the India-China land border and the expansion of maritime activities in the Indian Ocean. The increase of China's military power and expansion of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in the disputed, Pakistan-administered region of Jammu and Kashmir has created a security dilemma for India in this region. Since the era of the USSR, India has been importing 70 percent of military and defense-related equipment from Russia. When Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power in 2014, the Bhartiya Janata Party-led (BJP) government immediately established the defense partnership with France. The Indian government pioneered the purchase of Rafale fighter jets in flyaway condition, and in 2015 both countries signed the agreement as a government-to-government deal for 36 Rafale fighter jets.

After the Sino-Indian War of 1962, Pakistan started wars with India in 1965 and 1971. During the 1971 war, Pakistan lost eastern Pakistan, which later became a newly independent country of Bangladesh. Meanwhile, Sri Lanka has

been suffering increased internal problems since the 1990s, when an extremist group called Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) wanted their homeland to be separated from Sri Lanka. The Indian government decided to send their troops as peacekeepers to maintain law and order in the spirit of Gandhian non-violence. In 1999, the Pakistani army once again invaded the Jammu and Kashmir region in Kargil, an event that is known as the Kargil War between India and Pakistan. Ultimately, the Indian army was victorious in the field and Pakistan lost the war. In 2008, a Pakistan-sponsored terrorist group attacked different places in Mumbai. Thus India has been suffering severe security threats in the South Asia region caused by the surrounding countries.

This study attempts to find out what is India's perception of threats to its national security in South Asia, to what extent India influences the security balance in this region, and how is the country responding to the threats coming from the neighboring countries. The article also tries to answer how the French government can assist Indian aspirations to modernize its armed forces and provide modern high-tech weapons for India. Furthermore, the article discusses how India can manage the regional balance and security issues. The principal issues are that the Indian government is not successful in managing the regional security threats, and that the perceived threats are the reality in South Asia "Pakistan challenged India's conventional superiority by initiating the war in 1965, and then in 1971. When this failed, it resorted to low intensity conflict and nuclear threat. It is bent upon undermining India from wherever it can" (Singh, 2014). This research uses the analysis of primary and secondary data to identify the core ideas and results.

Literature Review

Indo-French relationships are based on mutual respect and equality. The Indian government seems to have a healthy cooperation with the French government. Both governments have been shaping the relationship to become a strong partnership and developed a defense dialogue free from recriminations. The French government had to create a foreign policy doctrine regarding India which would avoid putting any kind of external pressure on the issues of nuclear proliferation and Kashmir (Racine, 2010, p. 183). This is apparent in the public discourse about the traditional and non-traditional security issues regarding India's concern in South Asia. The French defense policy uses the military-industrial factor as the main driver of cooperation between the two countries in order to influence the regional security balance in South Asia, while India needs technologically

advanced military equipment from the French side. The Indian government wants to import fifth-generation fighter jets and allow French aviation companies to invest in India (Karambelkar, 2021, p. 92). India's strategic cooperation with France started in the era of the Cold War. The French defense policy supports the change in the dynamics of India's excessive dependence on Russia. In the South Asian region, India is the only tested and trusted strategic partner of France. For example, during the war with Pakistan in 1971, India had the full support of the French government (Barma & Sinha, 2022).

India's defense needs have been met by France for a long time. The defense cooperation between France and India has emerged comprehensively since 1998, when both governments agreed on common security issues. In the last decade, all three armed services of both countries have started regular joint exercises. The French government concluded an agreement with the Indian government to provide better training facilities for Indian fighter pilots, and the defense and military agencies from France have been providing advanced base training to the Indian fighter jet pilots in France for a long time. The Indian air force uses French fighter jets, which are the Mirage 2000, the Jaguar and the new Rafale aircraft. The inclusion of Rafale fighter jets in the Indian air force wrote a new chapter in the relationship between India and France, deepening the defense ties between India and France. The Indian Navy has access to French naval facilities on French Reunion Island and has appealed for access to the French military facilities in Djibouti (Peri, 2019). France continues to support India, helping it emerge as a nation strong enough to counter any security threat. The French armed forces have been supporting their Indian counterpart and have launched joint training and exercises in France and the Indo-Pacific region. The naval exercises are a key element of the cooperation between both sides (Roger, 2007).

As India has been deeply involved in maintaining defense cooperation with France, there have been robust defense ties between the two countries for a long time (Halдар, 2022, p. 1). Through a strategic partnership with India, the French government proactively shapes their defense cooperation and expedites many defense agreements. Both countries have agreed to the further expansion of strategic cooperation. The four purchased squadrons of Rafale aircraft have been successfully assimilated into the Indian air force during 2020-22. The Indian government has appealed to extend the additional deal on fifth-generation fighter jet cooperation with the French government. The French administration seeks agreement on the procurement of India's flagship project "Medium Multi-Role Combat Aircraft" (MMRCA).

France has changed the dynamics of Indian strategic partnerships aimed at the transfer of armaments for the Indian air and navy force. While India had previously been dependent on Russian defense equipment, now the most important strategic ally of India has changed. At the moment, India has 36 modern 4.5 generation Rafale aircraft supplied by the French aviation company Dassault. The Rafale jets have the advantage over Russian fighter jets Sukhoi 30 MKI, of which India has more than 270. The Indian Navy uses six Scorpene-class submarines which were built by French companies in India as part of technology transfer (Das, 2019, p. 58). In 2018, the French President Emmanuel Macron and the Indian PM Modi signed an agreement in the defense sector on the provision of reciprocal logistic support for both sides' Armed Forces (Prime Minister's Office, 2018).

France initiated a cohesive political framework toward the Indo-Pacific region and has been supporting India in South Asia. The growing nexus built by China in South Asia is a major threat to India. Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's policy in South Asia aims to establish connections to all of India's neighbors. China-Pakistan economic corridor (CPEC) passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, and the Indian administration has strongly criticized the project. Meanwhile, France desires better strategic cooperation with India in the Indo-Pacific which is an opportunity for India to counterbalance the growth of Chinese power by expediting this collaboration. India wants to have a stronger security presence in the maritime domain, using France's help to secure the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). France's islands in the IOR, Reunion and Mayotte, ensure strategic superiority over other countries. India and France are resident players in the region and both countries' policies include collaboration in the Indo-Pacific region (Meijer, 2021, p. 1).

India's foreign policy has been oriented as non-aligned since the Cold War era. Meanwhile, Pakistan received Chinese support to covertly run its own nuclear plan. The Chinese government does not want India as a regional power in South Asia, and the emerging ties between China and Pakistan have been creating challenges for India. That is why India had initiated an indigenous nuclear testing plan, which became a reality in 1998, when after the successful test of India's nuclear weapons in Pokhran, the Indian Prime Minister announced that India was the sixth nation in the world to become a nuclear power. This met with international protests. During that critical time, India received full support from the French government at the international level in the face of US sanctions. Since then, France has been the foremost European country to approach India. Thus, the Indian defense staff turned toward France to deepen the collaboration

in making and purchasing the naval, space, and military equipment for the Indian army (Howorth, 2016, pp. 392–393).

In recent years India's security problems have increased due to recurring clashes occurring at the Himalayan border. Since the 1962 war, the Indian-Chinese border area east of Bhutan has been called the Line of Actual Control (LAC). The power and number of Chinese forces stationed there has been causing anxiety on the Indian side. The most recent incident took place between the Indian and the Chinese forces stationed at Galvan Valley, claiming soldiers' lives on both sides of this standoff. The border issues are but one of the factors contributing to India's perceived lack of security; China's expansion through its maritime politics is another major security threat. Furthermore, the Chinese policy aims to continuously undermine India and foster unrest in neighboring countries such as Pakistan, Nepal, and Afghanistan (Joshi and Mukherjee, 2018, p. 4).

China's economic strength also gives rise to anxiety among the Indian strategists, decision-makers, and military think tanks. The Chinese administration keeps strengthening its army, navy and air force according to a secret military doctrine, gaining in this way advantage over India. There is an increasing gap between India and China in terms of political, economic, and military strength – a situation that creates panic in India. Hence the Indian side also joined efforts with France, the US, and the EU to strengthen strategic cooperation (Joshi and Mukherjee, 2018, p. 5). The Indian and French governments have mutually accelerated the strategic cooperation and agreed to expedite their comprehensive, substantive and mutually beneficial security and defense relationship (Ministry of Defence, 2018).

Focused on the Indianization of defense-related production, the Indian government invited foreign investors to set up the arms and weapon industry under the "Make in India" policy. Also, the Defence Research & Development Organisation (DRDO) has received an order from the Indian Air Force (IAF) for the production of 83 Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Tejas. It is a fully indigenous fighter jet that has been developed by the DRDO. The government aims to achieve self-dependency through the transformation of indigenous production lines in India. The French government is providing technical support to Indian defense institutes. The Indian defense institutions also have long-standing agreements with many Russian companies to make several missile projects and fighter jets in India as a form of technology transfer (Rossiter & Cannon, 2019, p. 353). On 4 May 2022, French President Emmanuel Macron hosted the Prime Minister of India Shri Narendra Modi during the latter's official tour to France.

Both leaders agreed to strengthen the defense partnership and face new global challenges together in the post-COVID-19 reality in the Indo-Pacific and South Asia (Ministry of External Affairs, 2022).

Data and Methodology

South Asia is a strategically important part of the continent. The Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean that surround the region are relevant for maritime politics and are the center of attention due to the interest in blue economics. Given that India has a coastline that is over 7,000 km long, maritime security is a crucial component of overall national security. The sea lines of communication (SLOCs) are under threat of both conventional and non-conventional kind. Countries such as Somalia, Yemen and Iran impact maritime security in IOR. Piracy, trafficking, and other issues are burning concerns which remain unresolved. Meanwhile, China's growing navy and its military base in Djibouti, the port in Hambantota, the "covert" base in Gwadar, 24 access facilities in Malaysia and MSRI – all of them are issues of concern for India (Agnihotri, 2022). For decades, India has been living under severe security threats of various nature, including the potential for both conventional and nuclear attacks from several states in the region. Nowadays India suffers also from sub-conventional threats such as insurgency and terrorism. The most painful case of the latter occurred on 26th November 2008, also known as 26/11. Apart from this, the thousands of kilometers of disputed land borders with China and Pakistan create another security threat. The demarcation line with China is identified as the Line of Actual Control (LAC), while the de facto boundary with Pakistan is called the Line of Control (LoC). Furthermore, over the last two decades, China-Pakistan strategic cooperation has been increasing the security challenge to New Delhi. The two countries have agreed on several areas such as the port of Gwadar where China is establishing strategic shipping routes in the Indian Ocean and expanding to the Arabian Sea. The Chinese agency is developing the deep-water port of Gwadar for broader use – the Chinese navy will be able to include it in their operational planning and covert military doctrine directed against India (Pant & Bommakanti, 2019, p. 837).

The CPEC projects of China are creating a difficult situation for India in South Asia. First, India sees China's BRI project as an issue of Indian sovereignty and integrity of the country. Second, China and Pakistan have formed a nexus, and both these countries are involved in a border dispute with India. In the context of BRI, China's encircling policy is hurting the Indian interest in the South Asia

region. All these developments have changed the dynamics of geopolitics in this region. India has been wary of the CPEC project, which passes across the occupied region of Gilgit-Baltistan. India has criticized this outcome of the regional cooperation between China and Pakistan. The Indian government claims that Gilgit-Baltistan is a disputed area of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. India refused to participate in this project when Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited China in June 2015. The Indian think tanks and policy-makers are developing alternative projects to restrict Chinese initiatives in South Asia. In recent years India has been initiating talks with Oceanic states. The Indian Prime Minister has traveled to Mauritius, Seychelles, and other island countries to establish geoeconomic cooperation. Thus, India has triggered alternative geopolitics and broader connection with neighboring countries. As India understands, China's actual intention is to create security issues in this region rather than contribute to the economic development of Pakistan (Ali, 2020, p. 108).

Pakistan has been given easy access to Chinese support in Pakistani nuclear and missile programs. China supports Pakistan's upgrade of military equipment which could be used against India; simultaneously, terrorists can have access to military weapons as well. Since 1990, India has been suffering cross-border terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir. Thousands of people died due to terrorist attacks and insurgency. The defense cooperation between China and Pakistan has been sufficiently troubling for Indian policy-makers to initiate major security cooperation on a global scale. Hence India decided to purchase military weapons from France and the US. India is joining efforts with France and the US in the area of defense to balance the regional security in South Asia, particularly as in recent years China and Pakistan have been producing military equipment as joint ventures in Pakistan. China continuously supports Pakistan in building fighter aircraft and missiles (Garver, 2002, p. 118).

According to Hans Morgenthau, states always try to gain more power and strive to become superior in their area. The global actors are eager to gain maximum strength to balance or surpass the power of other states (Morgenthau, 1960, p. 240). In the case of South Asia, India is geographically larger than other neighboring countries and wants to cooperate with them, while Pakistan continuously attempts to restrict the Indian approaches in this region. Furthermore, Pakistan has always supported Chinese activities in this area. The South Asian Association for Regional Development (SAARC) is not functioning properly, as witnessed by the attack on the Pulwama district in Jammu and Kashmir. After Pulwama was attacked, the Indian Air Forces launched an operation inside

Pakistan and destroyed the terrorist camps in 2019. The situation deteriorated further when Pakistani Air Force entered the Indian territory.

In the theory of power transition, international politics has been divided into hierarchical systems. Countries themselves recognize which of them is the dominant nation, the superpower, or a regional/local power. Situations occur in global politics when a war between two specific states seems likely. The chances of a crisis can increase if there is power imbalance between nations, and such a political crisis can turn into a full-scale war. The challenging country can claim – and is eager to assume – that its decision is correct, that it is a response to long-standing grievances, and shows also that their position in the global hierarchy is legitimate. Thus, South Asian countries have joined forces with India to cooperate in several development areas, but Pakistan attempts to disrupt every initiative of regional development. The Pakistani authorities follow China's guidelines and subscribe to the Chinese conspiracy theory aimed against India. That is why SAARC is becoming a failed regional organization. The Chinese policy has managed to restrict the Indian influences in South Asia, while Pakistan seconds every movement of China directed against India. This implies that the Chinese policy is focused on dominance in South Asia and strives for a strong power position in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) as well. Through the CPEC and Gwadar port, the Chinese initiative is creating a challenge for India on the western side of the Arabian sea (Tammen, 2008, p. 326).

There is a security dilemma in South Asia as well as in the Indo-Pacific region. According to Organski (1968), collaboration of many countries creates a balance of power when they work towards establishing global peace. There is a need to maintain equilibrium among the nations through shared power, but many countries unanimously declare one of them as the supreme leader. The rivalry between China and the US in the Indo-Pacific region and the South China Sea is creating severe problems. The US and India jointly work in the maritime domain and support each other's policy regarding the initiatives in the Indo-Pacific (Hornat, 2016, p. 393). The Chinese policy is incorporating the approach dubbed by American researchers as "the string of pearls", a strategy that India finds concerning. The strategy involves construction or acquisition of ports and bases at the strategic points of the Indian Ocean that China can use in the future against India for the deployment of the People's Liberation Army and Navy, such as the mentioned port of Gwadar. The Sri Lankan port of Hambantota has also been taken over by China on a lease basis. Thus, the Chinese policy is based on restricting India in the South Asia region through the Belt and Road Initiative

and establishing bridgeheads on a chain of Indian Ocean islands (Lou, 2012, p. 631).

Although the Sri Lankan government had invited India to participate in the construction of the Hambantota port, the Indian government refused. Later China joined in this Sri Lankan project, and currently the port of Hambantota is fully operated by China. Now the Indian authorities are anxious about the Chinese intervention in Sri Lanka. Through this port, China can run various future projects and restrict India's possibilities of operating in the Indian Ocean (Mohan, 2010, p. 9). Yet despite the Chinese project in Pakistan, China wants better economic collaboration with India because India is the largest export market. After the 2017 Doklam military standoff, India banned many Chinese digital applications, and restrictions were put on many Chinese economic activities in India. "On the telecommunications front, the Indian government is reportedly mulling barring Chinese companies such as Huawei and ZTE from providing equipment to state-run telcos in their 5G upgrade, an action that could eventually include private players too" (Shahi, 2020). In the maritime business, India has started to cooperate with the US in the Indian Ocean. India is afraid of a Chinese intervention in South Asia as China would always get support from Pakistan's Gwadar port, which has become maritime connection with China's mainland through the CPEC. That is why India is nurturing the geoeconomics ties with France, Australia, Japan and the US in maritime politics (Jacob, 2018, p. 117).

India is complaining on the international forum about the problems with terrorism. In this context, the Indian policy is double-layered: China has to assure Indian policy-makers that Pakistan will restrict terrorist activities against India. India wanted China's support in banning Pakistan-based terrorist organizations, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LET), Jaish-e-Mohammed (JEM), Hizbul Mujahideen, Harkat-ul-Mujahideen and others. However, China used instead its veto power to stop blacklisting several militants from Pakistan as global terrorists. This significantly deteriorated the prospects for India to establish a better geoeconomics cooperation with China in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific. India wants assurance from China that it will pressure Pakistan to cooperate with India and solve the border problem bilaterally. Non-state actors (NSAs) are facilitated by state-sponsored support in Pakistan, which led to the deterioration of the India-Pakistan relationship since 1990. The terrorist organizations in Jammu and Kashmir receive support against India from the Pakistani military, and Pakistan is internationally shielded by China at the United Nations (UN). For example, despite several confirmations of the connection between Masood

Azhar and the terrorist organizations, China refused to acknowledge the ties between Al-Qaeda and Masood Azhar (Verma, 2020, p. 3).

In essence, the Chinese policy is to establish its physical presence across South Asia and the Indian Ocean. China's geo-economic engagements in the IOR is not a direct threat to India, but raises the security concerns as the Maritime Silk Road Initiative expands Chinese influence in the states of the region. The presence of the US military in the IOR is decreasing the expansion of China's possibilities. The main security challenge faced by the Indian authorities is the construction and development of the Gwadar port that in the future may be used by China against India. The geo-positioning balance in the South Asia region is affected by the Chinese engagement in the construction of the port to help Pakistan emerge as a regional stronghold (Bharti, 2022). The nexus formed by Pakistan and China is weakening the Indian position in South Asia by shifting the power balance among the neighboring states. The Chinese government has denied the accusations that their policy is aimed at encircling India in South Asian politics. There are suspicions in India that China has extended the supply line of thousands of kilometers to the southern naval base on Hainan Island. However, it is understood that China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is currently not a rival for the Indian navy in the IOR. The purpose of constructing the port in the Indian Ocean is to extend the business route through which China aims to attempt to establish the commercial activities in the IOR (Garlick, 2018, p. 523).

The Indian government has responded to that China-Pakistan joint venture by developing the Iranian port of Chahbahar, which is only 170 kilometers away from the Pakistani port of Gwadar. The governments of India and Iran agreed to the development of the Chahbahar port to access the business route toward Central Asia. In this way India can reach Afghanistan and other Central Asian countries, which will help the Indian investment in central Asia. India and Iran also work together on the construction of a highway project to link the Chahbahar port. India is applying the encirclement theory as well in order to expedite regional development for the betterment of India and central Asian countries. India is eyeing Central Asia for potential economic cooperation among the states of the region (Daniels, 2013, p. 96). The Indian authorities are working to mitigate conventional and non-conventional security threats in the South Asia region created by China and Pakistan.

China's increasing presence and domination are creating a challenge for India in the geoeconomically important regions of South Asia and the Indo-Pacific. China's growing power in South Asian countries lays the groundwork for India's balancing strategy towards Beijing (Pant, 2016). India is pursuing its

own policy in South Asia, the Pacific and the Indian Ocean region with the assistance of France, while China has its own vision for these regions and attempts to dominate other power groups through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Maritime Silk Road (MSRI) and the Digital Silk Road projects. The Chinese concept is the “String of Pearls” encircling India in the South Asia region. This big challenge for India is how to tackle these issues (Barua, 2020).

Results and Discussion

Geopolitically, the Chinese seem to have become increasingly belligerent in South Asia and the Pacific region. China is expanding cooperation with the littoral states of the Indian Ocean region and with South Asian countries. Meanwhile, in addition to sharing a 3490-kilometer-long land border with China, India is located in the heart of the Indian Ocean region. The situation in this region poses for India numerous challenges and opportunities due to the geopolitical importance of the sea lines of communication that can be used to accelerate trade and economic activities in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. It is beneficial for all the global countries which are running economic activities in the entire region (Kamal & Sahni, 2022).

In the South Asia region, India is the largest country in terms of geography and population, but it has been facing severe security threats from Pakistan and China. India’s security and defense policy are fully focused on managing the regional security threats in South Asia. History has forced India to adaptively modernize its defense system against internal and external problems created by these two neighbors. To this aim, India has developed a strong defense cooperation with France. Meanwhile, China provides all kinds of military support to Pakistan, and before 9/11, the US also supported Pakistan in the defense sector (Budania, 2003, p. 88). The Indian defense policy launched the modernization of its services in 1990. There are several reasons India has been forced to adopt the military doctrine and import military equipment from the French government. The key factors are (1) the aggression from China and Pakistan (2) the loosening ties between India and its neighboring states (3) Pakistani successful test of nuclear weapons and acquisition of other dangerous armaments (4) the weapons export and sales policy of China and the US. Thus, the Indian defense policy had decided to purchase modern fifth-generation fighter jets from France, and both countries agreed to develop a submarine in India. The issue of Jammu and Kashmir, the arms race, and the nuclear doctrine of China and Pakistan are key issues in India’s security concerns in South Asia. During the 1990s, the US and

China played a vital role in the South Asia region while Pakistan easily obtained technologically advanced military weapons. Meanwhile, India was receiving support from the former USSR and France. At that time, India faced great security challenges from Pakistan because the US and China were very supportive of Pakistan. Today, India is aware of the ongoing military cooperation between China and Pakistan.

Today, India has the strength to tackle the Pakistani stance endangering the strategic balance in the region. India has also developed the nuclear deterrent as a precaution to counter the Chinese encroachment in South Asia although India's nuclear capability may be worrisome for the neighboring countries. At present, with the Agni-5 missile, India has the capability to strike a target within five thousand kilometers, and is developing a broad-range attack nuclear missile. On the other hand, the general Chinese policy has been to support Pakistan's stance on the issue of Kashmir on the international forum. However, China's policy regarding Kashmir has changed a number of times since 1975. At present China has adopted the stance that the Kashmir issue is to be solved between India and Pakistan. After the Doklam confrontation between India and China in 2020, India believes that China is creating long-term security challenges for India in the South Asian region. According to Buzan (2002), India's military and defense transformation is related to its status as a great power and does not offset rivalry with China, and India can achieve this goal with the cooperation of neighboring countries as well.

Terrorism is a severe threat to human life and is an anti-social element that has been destroying people's lives across the globe. The international community has been organizing itself to curb terrorism. The emergence of international consensus on terrorism has brought positive news for India. Since the issue of Kashmir emerged, India has been experiencing the activities of several terrorist groups within its borders. Many cities and objects have been bombed by terrorists, including the Indian Parliament (2001). In 1999, an Indian Airline passenger aircraft was hijacked from Kathmandu by the Taliban terrorist group. After 9/11, the world order has changed to a great degree and international organizations have united to oppose terrorist activities. Moreover, many Western countries passed laws on terrorism and seized the assets of entities bankrolling terrorist organizations. India received international support against Pakistan as the latter is involved in supporting non-state actors striking against India and supporting the terrorism in Kashmir.

The Indian government has established a higher defense body called Defence Staff of the Indian Armed Forces in 2020. This institution is directly responsible

for the procurement of military equipment, necessary to deal with the multiple security issues of military and non-military character that have emerged in recent years from China and Pakistan. However, the strategic balance in South Asia is unfavorable for India although the country has procured large amounts of arms and armaments from France in recent years. In Afghanistan, last year the Taliban returned and replaced the government, but the Indian stance on this was not clear. The relationship between India and Nepal has been deteriorating since 2016. Despite the reality, the Modi government is not interested in organizing a SAARC meeting that should be held to promote regional cooperation. Through the regional organizational policy, India can pressure Pakistan to stop supporting terrorism against India. So far, India's policy regarding the border issues with China and Pakistan has been based on the concept of bilateral cooperation, talks and agreements. Furthermore, Indian foreign policy relies on diplomacy used extensively to build a peace process and solve the border issues and other problems.

On 7th November 2021 in Paris, the Indian National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval and his French counterpart Emmanuel Bonne's meeting resulted in a significant development in the security partnership with France (Haidar, 2021), enhancing mutual cooperation on security and defense in the areas of expanding military drills, bolstering mutual capabilities, pursuing initiatives in maritime areas, information sharing, cyber domains, and space cooperation. India and France have a common agenda on the changing dynamics of global security, and both countries are aware of the enormous challenges in the Indo-Pacific, Africa, Southeast Asia, Afghanistan and West Asia. Similarly, the main challenges posed by terrorism to both countries seem to involve cyber and space threats, as well as maritime threats. Most importantly, the French President Emmanuel Macron is supporting the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi vision of self-dependence (known as *Atmanirbhar Bharat*) and defense modernization. The French government expressed its commitment to incorporating joint technology development in India (Pradhan, 2021).

Beijing keeps expanding its already extensive presence across the Pacific and the Indian Ocean region. It is a common geostrategic and maritime challenge not only for India but also for Australia, Japan, and the US. Therefore India is attempting to face these challenges in the Indo-Pacific and South Asia. New Delhi has been strengthening the strategic partnership with Paris and basically focuses on the defense sector to deal with the challenge of Chinese aggression in this area. India is accepting the challenge from China, supporting the EU's strategy in the Indo-Pacific, and boosting securities areas with Western partners

(Barua, 2020). India is shaping the multipurpose strategic partnership with France including key trade routes on land and water. There are links between East Asian economies and the natural resources of Africa and West Asia; new security challenges are emerging and India's importance is growing, and what remains a key factor is China's increasing assertiveness in this region (Pardo & Leveringhaus, 2022). Since regaining independence, India's top priority with regard to China and Pakistan was to achieve a rational relationship. India wants extensive cooperation with China and Pakistan either in development and economic growth, or for expanding bilateral cooperation with both these countries (Kamal & Sahni, 2022).

The trusted and long-standing strategic partnership between France and India is shaping geopolitical trends in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific region. The emerging closer relationship with France makes it a more reliable partner for India. With Paris' support in the area of defense, India works towards building a military presence that would help it to cooperate at the global level through establishing closer partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, the key geographical region for trade and business (Rajagopalan, 2022). Beyond diplomatic relations, France heartily wants to stop the Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific, and India has encountered and opposed China's aggression in its northern Himalayan border region during the Galwan Valley border clash and the Doklam standoff.

Since China's attack on India in 1962, India and China have shared the world's longest disputed border, called the Line of Actual Control because the border between both countries is yet to be delineated. The PLA and the Indian Army have clashed many times in disputed border areas. China has been constructing roads and new airports close to India's borders, and India has begun to build roads and other communication facilities in border areas as well. These are the main causes of the tense border relations between both countries. While China dominates in terms of military power, India has been modernizing its forces and purchasing modern military equipment from France. The French support for India is positively influencing the power balance in South Asia, and India is increasing its defense capabilities against the aggressor country (BBC, 2021).

Conclusion

The relationship between India and France has been getting stronger year by year. The successful inclusion of 36 Rafale 4.5 generation fighter jets in the Indian Air Force was a landmark in the history of India's cooperation with France on security and defense. Naval support to India from French defense agencies

is also accelerating the strengthening of the ties. India is in a strong position to counter its opponents in the air. After the inclusion of the Rafale fighter jets, the Indian Air Force became one for China and Pakistan to fear. In the South Asian region, India now has a dominant role in achieving regional security balance. India is also receiving a huge amount of support in the Indo-Pacific in order to restrict Chinese encroachment. France is transferring submarine technology to India, and French military shipbuilding companies have moved to India to build a modern Scorpene-class submarine for the Indian Navy. India is likely to purchase more Rafale aircraft from Dassault.

Furthermore, despite the Chinese aggression and encirclement of India, this study has found out that India is in a commanding position in South Asia. The Indian government is not scared by the Chinese and Pakistani military nexus. The Indian Army showed its merit during the Doklam standoff, where the Chinese aggression was stopped by Indian armed forces. The Indian Air Force launched an airstrike inside Pakistan at Balakot with Mirage 2000 fighter jets (which are also French fighter aircraft). Since achieving nuclear capability, Pakistan keeps threatening India with a nuclear attack in retaliation for any attack or military operation India might launch. However, following the Indian Air Force's strike on Balakot, Pakistan took no action against India despite China expressing its support for Pakistan after that incident. The article concludes that despite the emergence of Chinese-Pakistani nexus and its attempts to imbalance regional security in South Asia, the Indian government and associated agencies are responding in an improved manner to regional security threats to India. Finally, the Indian Army is capable of responding to any type of military threat to India. The article further suggests that there is a scope of empirical work on regional security threats and balance in South Asia, and the role of Western powers is relevant to restrict the expansion of China in the South Asia region.

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