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INDO-FRENCH BILATERAL DEFENCE PARTNERSHIP AND QUESTION OF REGIONAL SECURITY IN SOUTH ASIA

ABSTRACT

The article aims to describe the regional security challenges and major threats for India in South Asia. Since 1947, India has been suffering from external security threats such as a form of proxy warfare and terrorism from neighbouring countries. To this purpose, the article also examines recurring issues where India has major border issues with China in the Himalayan terrain to the Eastern region. India has been facing bigger security threats from China and Pakistan in the South Asia region. This article looks at defence cooperation between India and France through the prism of India's serious security threats in the South Asian region. India's soft power policy is reflected in a neo-realist approach and expanded by its long-standing defence cooperation with France. Therefore, India has been receiving support from the French government whenever the country needs defence equipment and other assistance. The article uses case studies and discourse analysis methods to answer the questions and draw the main findings and conclusions of the study. Finally, as a result of the study, India's serious security threats in the South Asian region are pushing the country to purchase defence equipment from France. The relationship between India and France is strengthening bilateral cooperation at a broader level and shaping a strong strategic partnership by uniting in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific as well.

Keywords: Indo-French Partnerships, Defence Cooperation, Security Threats, South Asia, Regional Power

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1. INTRODUCTION

War has been deliberately imposed on India since 1947, when the British ended their colonial rule over the country. India was divided into parts and the new country, Pakistan, was born as an Islamic country and became an enemy of India from its birth. Pakistan had invaded India on 22nd October 1947 from the northern side of the country. China attacked India in 1962 without any cause and lost the land. Gradually, China and Pakistan became allies for each other and started problems for India. However, the Pakistan army has been getting all military equipment and assistance from China. This article critically examines the role of China that is important in unbalancing regional peace and security in South Asia. India feels that China is a major cause of instability in the South Asia region. India's key attention towards China's concerns military modernization and the increase of the land border and the extension of maritime activities in the Indian Ocean. The increase of China's military power and expansion of the economic corridor in neighbouring countries has created a security dilemma for India in this region. India is importing 70 per cent of military and defence assistance from Russia since the era of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). When Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power in 2014, Bhartiya Janata Party-led (BJP) government started the defence partnership with France immediately. The Indian government pioneered the purchase of Rafale fighter jet from France in flyaway condition. Later, in 2015, both governments signed the agreement as government-to-government deal of 36 Rafale fighter jets.

After the Chinese invasion of India, Pakistan itself started the war with India in 1965 and 1971, respectively. The regional balances broke up by Pakistan at every juncture in South Asia. During the 1971 war, Pakistan lost Eastern Pakistan which later became a newly independent country – Bangladesh. Sri Lanka has been suffering internal problems since the 1990s, the extreme group called Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) wanted to be separated from Sri Lanka. The Indian government decided to send their troops as peacekeepers to maintain law and order. India always believes in non-violence which is a part of Gandhian philosophy. In 1999, once again the Pakistani army invaded the Jammu & Kashmir region in Kargil and it is known as the Kargil war between India and Pakistan. Finally, the Indian army won the battleground and Pakistan lost the war. In 2008, the Pakistan sponsored terrorist attacked different places in Mumbai. Thus, India has been suffering severe security threats in the South Asia region by the surrounding neighbours.

Moreover, this study tries to find out which kind of security and threat perception India has been suffering in South Asia. To what extent India does make security balances in this region and how is the country responding to the neighbouring countries. The article also tries to answer the question: how can the French government meet Indian aspirations to modernize the armed forces and provide modern technological weapons for India? Further, the article discusses how India can manage the regional balance and security issues. The principal issues are that “the Indian government does not achieve the success to manage the regional security threats and the perception of the threats is the reality in South Asia.” This research uses the primary and secondary data to identify the core ideas and results.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Indo-French relationships are based on mutual respect and equality. The Indian government seems to make healthy and quality cooperation with the French government. Both governments have been shaping the relationship in a strong way and developed defence dialogue free from bitterness. The French government had to make a foreign policy doctrine for India, which will not build any kind of external pressure on the issues of nuclear proliferation and Kashmir (Racine, 2010). It is apparently in public discourse about the traditional and non-traditional security issues regarding India's concern in South Asia. The French defence policy uses the military-industrial factor as the main driver between the two countries in order to influence the regional security balance in South Asia. India needs modern technology-based military equipment from the French side. The Indian government want to import fifth-generation fighter jets and allow French aviation companies to invest in India (Karambelkar, 2021). India's strategic cooperation had started in the days of the era of the Cold War. The French defence supports changing different 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, the war between India and Pakistan in 1971 had the full support of India by the French government (Barma & Sinha, 2022).

India's defence needs have been fulfilled by France over a long period of time. The defence cooperation between France and India has emerged comprehensively since 1998 when both governments had agreed on common security issues. In the last decade, all three services had started mutual regular exercises. The French government has agreed with the Indian government to provide better training facilities for Indian fighter pilots. The defence and military agencies from France are providing skilled 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 entrants. The inclusion of Rafale fighter jets in the Indian air force wrote a new chapter in the relationship between India and France. The Rafale deal had deepened the defence ties between India and France. The Indian Navy gains access to French naval facilities on France's Reunion Island and appears to gain access to French facilities in Djibouti (Peri, 2019). France continues to support India in order to help the emerging strong nation counter any security threats. The French armed forces have been supporting the Indian armed forces and have launched joint training and exercises in France and the Indo-Pacific region. The Naval exercises are key cooperation between both sides (Roger, 2007).

Historically, India has been maintaining a deep engagement with France for defence cooperation. Thus, there have been robust defence ties between the two countries for a long period of time (Halder, 2022). The French government contours their defence cooperation and expedites many defence agreements, and both countries have agreed to further expansion of strategic cooperation. The four squadrons of Rafale aircraft have been successfully assimilated into the Indian air force during 2020–2022. The Indian government appears to extend the additional deal on fifth-generation fighter jet cooperation with the French government. The French administration seeks agreement on India's flagship project "Medium Multi-Role Combat Aircraft" (MMRCA) procurement.

France has changed the dynamics of the Indian strategic partnership to transfer the armaments for the Indian air force and Navy. Because India has been dependent on Russian de-

fence equipment, now it has changed the scenario that Russia is the ultimate strategic ally of India. At the moment, India has 36 modern 4.5 generation Rafale aircraft which had been supplied by the French aviation company Dassault to India. The Rafale jets have the upper hand on Russian fighter jets Sukhoi 30 MKI; India has more than 270 Sukhoi 30 MKI fighter jets. The Indian Navy uses six Scorpene-class submarines which are made by French companies in India with the transfer of technology (Das, 2019). In 2018, the French President Emmanuel Macron and the Indian PM Modi signed an agreement in the defence sector on the provision of reciprocal logistic support for both sides' Armed Forces. India and France also agreed to support each other in their armed forces through joint exercises and logistical support (Prime Minister's Office, 2018).

France initiated a cohesive political framework toward the Indo-Pacific region and supported India in South Asia. The increasing nexus of China in South Asia is a major threat to India. Through the Belt Road Initiative (BRI) China's policy in South Asia is to connect all surrounding countries of India. China-Pakistan economic corridor (CPEC) is passing through Kashmir occupied by Pakistan. The Indian administration critically opposed the Chinese project which has been crossing the occupied region, and France wants better strategic cooperation with India in the Indo-Pacific. This is an opportunity for India to expedite defence cooperation with France (Meijer, 2021).

Since 1998, when India successfully tested nuclear weapons in Pokhran, many countries have opposed India on this nuclear test. But India got support from France and critically opposed the US sanctions against India. Since then, France has gradually approached India as a European country. India's foreign policy was non-aligned since the era of the Cold War. However, Pakistan was getting Chinese support to run the nuclear plan behind the curtain. The Chinese government does not want India to be a regional power in South Asia. The emerging ties between China and Pakistan have been creating challenges for India. That is why India had stated an indigenous nuclear testing plan. It became reality in 1998, when the Indian Prime Minister announced that India is a nuclear power and became the 6th nation in the world to become a nuclear power. During this critical time, India got full support from the French government at the international level. Thus, the Indian defence staff moved forward towards France to deepen collaboration in the naval, space, and military equipment for the Indian army (Howorth, 2016).

In recent years, India's security dilemma has increased from the recurring standoff happening at the Himalayan frontier border. Since the 1962 war, borderline is not decided and it is called the Line of Actual Control (LAC). The latent power and number of Chinese soldiers has been causing anxiety on the Indian side. The incident happened between the Indian and the Chinese forces at Galvan Valley. Both sides' army personnel lost their lives during this standoff in 2020. The insecurity feeling because of border issues is one of the single causes but China's expansion through its maritime politics is creating a major security threat to India as well. Furthermore, the Chinese policy is continuously working against India and igniting neighbouring countries like Pakistan, Nepal, and Afghanistan (Joshi & Mukherjee, 2018).

China's economic strength creates anxiety among the Indian strategist, decision-makers, and military think tanks as well. This situation creates panic that China will modernize its forces. The Chinese administration is strengthening the army, navy, and air force according to hidden military doctrine and gaining advantage over India. There is an increasing gap between India and China in the context of political, economic, and military strength. The In-

dian side also joined hands with France, the USA, and the European Union to strengthen the strategic cooperation as well (Ibid). The Indian and French governments mutually accelerated the strategic cooperation and agreed to expedite their comprehensive, substantive and mutually beneficial security and defence relationship (Ministry of Defence, 2018).

The government invited foreign investors to set up the arms and weapon industry under Make in India initiative. Thus, the Indian government is focused on the Indianisation of defence-related production. The Defence Research & Development Organisation (DRDO) gets an order from the Indian Air Force (IAF) for the production of 83 Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) Tejas aircraft. 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 the indigenous production line in India. The French government is providing technical support to the Indian defence institutes. The Indian defence institutions have deeper agreements with many Russian companies to make several missile projects and fighter jets under the technology transfer in India (Rossiter & Cannon, 2019). On 4th May 2022, French President Emmanuel Macron hosted the Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi during his official tour to France. Both leaders agreed to strengthen the defence partnership and face new global challenges together after the post-COVID-19 in the Indo-Pacific and South Asia as well, respectively (Ministry of External Affairs, 2022).

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This research uses primary and secondary data to discuss Indo-French cooperation. The data collected from various websites of the ministries' think tanks, working papers of the public and private research institutions, online libraries of publishers, and newspapers' published resources as secondary resources used from the printed book, archival reports and journal articles' data to explain the questions of South Asian security and political scenarios in this region. This study implies the qualitative nature of the comparative celebration of Indo-French bilateral partnership. Further, the empirical method is used to investigate the research outcome of the Indo-French defence partnership.

South Asia is a strategically important part of Asia. The Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean surround the South Asia region and are relevant for maritime politics and are gaining the key attention for blue economics. India has been living under severe security threats for decades. The nature of threats is both conventional and nuclear in this region. Nowadays, India has suffered from sub-conventional threats such as the form of insurgency and terrorism. Apart from this, there are land frontiers with China and Pakistan that create a security threat to India. The thousands of kilometres of the land border were disputed with both Pakistan and China. The unmarked boundary with China is identified as the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and 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 an increasing 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 port of Gwadar for use in a broader concept, in which the Chinese navy can use the port against India to launch operational planning and cover military doctrine (Pant and Bommakanti, 2019).

The CPEC projects of China are creating a skeptical situation for India in South Asia. It has changed the dynamics of geopolitics in this region. India has observed the CPEC project which has passed from the occupied region of the Gilgit-Baltistan region. India has criticised this kind of act which has been envisaged by the China and Pakistan regional cooperation. The Indian government claimed that Gilgit-Baltistan is a disputed area of the Indian state of Jammu & Kashmir. India refused to take part in this project when Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited China in June 2015. The Indian think tanks and policymakers are drawing alternative projects to restrict the Chinese initiatives in South Asia. India has been starting the talks with Oceanic countries in recent years. The Indian Prime Minister had travelled to Mauritius, Seychelles, and other island countries to seek geoeconomics cooperation. Thus, India has triggered alternative geopolitics and wider connection with neighbouring countries. Furthermore, India understands that China's intention is different from the reality of the economic development of Pakistan. It is creating security issues in this region rather than the economic development of Pakistan (Ali, 2020).

Pakistan has been easily accessing Chinese support to promote the nuclear and missile programme. China supports Pakistan to build a high level of military equipment which would be used against India and terrorists can access the military weapons. The defence cooperation between China and Pakistan is troubling the Indian policymaker to initiate the major security cooperation in the world. That is why India decided to purchase military weapons from France and the USA. Since 1990, India has been suffering cross-border terrorism in Jammu & Kashmir. Thousands of people died from counter-terrorism and insurgency. India is joining the hand with France and USA in the areas of defence cooperation to balance the regional security in South Asia. In recent years, China and Pakistan are producing military equipment as joint ventures in Pakistan. China continuously supports Pakistan in constructing fighter aircraft and missiles (Garver, 2002).

According to Hans Morgenthau, states always tries to gain much power and want to become superior in the area of power. The global nations are eager to gain maximum strength and balance of power and seem to achieve maximum power among nations (Morgenthau, 1960). In the case of South Asia, India is geographically bigger than other neighbouring countries and wants to cooperate. However, Pakistan always wants to restrict the Indian approaches in this region. Furthermore, Pakistan has always been involved in helping Chinese activities in this region against the Indian approaches. The South Asian Association for Regional Development (SAARC) is not functioning in a proper way since Pulwama was attacked in Jammu & Kashmir. After Pulwama was attacked, the Indian Air Forces launched an operation inside Pakistan and destroyed the terror camps in 2019. The situation deteriorated when Pakistan Airforce entered the Indian territory.

The theory of power transition which assesses international politics has been divided into hierarchical systems. The various countries themselves understand the dominant nation, the great power state, the superpower state, and the small powers. There is a situation that occurred in global politics where between two states the possibility of war seems to be happening. The prospects of crisis can increase during the power balance among the nations and this political crisis can be converted into a full-fledged war between the two states. The challenging country can claim and is eager to assume that its decision is correct. And also shows that their role at the global level is legitimate and responds to long-standing grievances. Thus, the South Asian countries have been associated with India to cooperate in sev-

eral development areas but Pakistan interrupts every initiative of regional development. The Pakistani authorities always relied on China's indication and understood the Chinese conspiracy theory against India. That is why SAARC is becoming a failure as a regional organisation in the South Asia region. The Chinese policy worked to restrict the Indian influences and South Asia and Pakistan always second every movement of China which is taken against India. This implies that the Chinese policy is based on dominance in South Asia and makes a strong power position in 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).

There is a security dilemma in South Asia and also in the Indo-Pacific region. According to Organski, the collaboration of many countries creates balance of power and struggle for the establishment of peace in the world. There is a need to maintain equilibrium among the nations through the share of power but many countries unanimously declared the supreme leader. The rivalry between China and the US in the Indo-Pacific and the South China Sea is creating severe problems. In recent years, US policy towards the Asian continent has been changing; its political and economic strategic cooperation has been increasing with New Delhi and supporting India in the maritime domain (From the Pacific to Indian Oceans) (Hornat, 2016). The Chinese policy is incorporating the approach of the string of pearls which is a concerning strategy for India. The construction of a port in the Indian Ocean that China can use in the future against India for the deployment of the People's Liberation Army and Navy. The Sri Lankan port of Hambantota is also 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 Road Initiatives and island chains. In the future, China can accommodate the People's Liberation Army (PLA) at these ports (Lou, 2012).

Although the Sri Lankan government had invited India to build the Hambantota port, the Indian government refused Sri Lanka's proposal to rebuild the port. In later days, China intervened in this Sri Lankan project, and now the port of Hambantota is being fully operated by China. Now the Indian authority is anxious about the Chinese intervention in Sri Lanka. Through this port, China can operate various future projects and restrict the Indian possibilities (Mohan, 2010). Despite the Chinese project in Pakistan, China wants better collaboration with India. As India is the biggest export market, China tries to have better economic engagement with this country. After the Doklam standoff, India banned many Chinese apps and restrictions on many initiatives were applied. In the maritime business, India had started to cooperate with the US in the Indian Ocean. India is scared of the Chinese intervention in South Asia and always got support from Pakistan. That is why India is nurturing the geoeconomics ties up with France, Australia, Japan and the US in maritime politics (Jacob, 2018).

India is claiming at the international forum that the situation of terrorism is a threat to humanity worldwide. The Indian government argument is that China has to assure the Indian policymaker that Pakistan restricts terrorist activities against India. In contrast, China uses the veto power to declare some terrorists from Pakistan. This is creating the worst situation for India to develop better geoeconomics cooperation with China in South Asia and Indo-Pacific as well. India wants assurance from China to make pressure on Pakistan to cooperate with India and solve the border problem bilaterally. Non-state actors (NSAs) are facilitated by state-sponsored support in Pakistan, which caused the India-Pakistan relationship to dete-

riorate since 1990. The terrorist organisation gets support from the Pakistan military against India in Jammu & Kashmir, and Pakistan gets an international shield from China in United Nations (UN). There are several facts that Masood Azhar's links with the terrorist organisations. Despite this fact, China denied the ties between Al-Qaeda and Masood Azhar. This is a big threat to India at an international level that India has been providing all facts to the international communities and China continuously refused the Indian dossier against the terrorist organisations and some renowned terrorists (Verma, 2020).

In essence, the Chinese policy is approaching the physical presence across South Asia and the Indian Ocean. China's geo-economics engagements in the IOR depend on the terms of defensive security rather than a direct threat to India. The presence of the US military in the IOR is decreasing the expansion of China's possibilities. The construction and development of the Gwadar port will be helpful for China in the future to use against India. That is the main security challenge faced by the Indian authorities. China's geopolitical interest and connectivity towards the South Asia region is a priority for its diplomacy. Thus, China is spreading the BRI projects in South Asian nations to restrict the Indian position in this region. Pakistan is helping the Chinese engagement in building of the port to emerge as a regional strong holder in this region (Bharti, 2022b). The nexus of Pakistan and China is weakening the Indian position in South Asia to gain the power balance among the neighbouring states. The Chinese government has refused that our policy is aimed at encircling India in South Asian politics. There are suspicions in India that China extended the supply line of thousands of kilometres to the southern naval base on Hainan Island. In contrast, it is understood that China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is not the rival of the Indian navy in the IOR. The purpose of building the port on the ocean is to extend the business route which China attempts to establish for the commercial activities in the IOR (Garlick, 2018).

The Indian government is responding to China-Pakistan through the development of the Chahbahar port in Iran, which is only seventy kilometres away from the Gwadar port of Pakistan. Both governments agreed to the development of the Chahbahar port to access the business route toward Central Asia. Thus, India can reach Afghanistan and other Central Asian countries which will help the Indian investment in Central Asia. And India and Iran work together on the construction of a highway project to link the Chahbahar port. India is using the encirclement theory to expedite regional development. It is the betterment of the central Asian countries and India as well. India is eyeing central Asia for economic cooperation among the member states of Central Asia (Daniels, 2013). The Indian authorities are working to mitigate security threats from China and Pakistan in the South Asia region, because India is facing security threats from these countries in the form of conventional and non-conventional threats.

South Asia is a geoeconomically important region in Asia. China's increasing presence and domination are creating a challenge for India in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific region. China's growing power in South Asian countries lays the groundwork for India's balancing strategy towards Beijing (Pant, 2016). India's driving its own approach in South Asia, the Pacific and the Indian Ocean region with the assistance of France. Simultaneously, China has a vision for these regions as well and China wants to dominate other power groups through the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI), the Maritime Silk Road (MSRI) and the Digital Silk Road projects. The Chinese concept of "Strings of Pearls" is to encircle India in the South Asia region. The big challenge to India is how to tackle these issues (Barua, 2020).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Geopolitically, the Chinese seem to increase belligerence in South Asia and the Pacific region. China's expanding cooperation with the littoral states of the Indian Ocean region and South Asian countries as well. India is located in the heart of the Indian Ocean region. India shares a long land border with China, which is around 3490 km. This is presented for India as challenges and opportunities in this region that have been pivotal to the geopolitical importance in the region (Kamal & Sahni, 2022).

In the South Asia region, India is the biggest country in the sense of geography and population as well. However, the country has been facing severe security threats from Pakistan and China. India's security and defence policy are fully based on maintaining the regional security threats in South Asia. History forced India to adopt the modernisation of the Indian defence system. Both countries have indulged in creating problems for India internally and externally. That is why India has a strong defence cooperation with France. China provides all kinds of military support to Pakistan, and before 9/11, the US also supported Pakistan in the defence sector (Budania, 2003). The Indian defence policy has adopted the modernisation of services since 1990. There are several reasons why India has been forced to adopt the military doctrine and import military equipment from the French government. These are the key factors: (1) The aggression from China and Pakistan; (2) the incongruity between India and her neighbouring states; (3) Pakistan had tested nuclear weapon and acquired lethal military arms; (4) the weapons export and sales policy of China and the US. Thus, the Indian defence policy had decided to purchase modern fifth-generation fighter jets from France and both countries agreed to develop the submarine in India. The issue of Kashmir, the arms race, and the nuclear doctrine of China and Pakistan are emphasised by India. During the 1990s, the US and China played a vital role in the South Asia region where Pakistan has been easily getting the modern technological military weapons. India received support from the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and France. India has faced great security challenges from Pakistan because the United States and China have been very supportive of Pakistan. Today, India seems to be aware of the military cooperation between China and Pakistan.

India has the strength to tackle the Pakistani stance against the strategic balance. India also developed the nuclear deterrent as a presumption to counter the Chinese approach in South Asia. India's nuclear capability creates anxiety for the neighbouring countries. Right now, India has the ability to strike around five thousand kilometres from the Agni-5 missile. Further, India is developing a broad range attack nuclear missile. On the other hand, the Chinese policy has been supporting Pakistan's stance on the issue of Kashmir at the international forum. China's Kashmir policy has been changed many times since 1975. Now China has adopted the policy on the Kashmir issue as a bilateral issue between India and Pakistan. After the Doklam confrontation between India and China in 2020, India believes that China creates long-term security challenges for India in the South Asian region. According to Barry Buzan, India's military and defence transformation is related to its status as a great power and does not offset rivalry with China, and India can achieve the goal with the cooperation of neighbouring countries as well (Buzan, 2002).

Terrorism is a severe threat to human life and it is an anti-social element that has been destroying people's lives across the globe. The international community has taken action to restrict the terrorist acts after the emergence of international consensus on terrorism at the international level. It has brought positive news for India in the South Asia region where In-

dia has been suffering from terrorism. Since the issue of Kashmir, India has been facing several terrorist activities inside the country. Many cities have been bombarded by terrorists and the Indian Parliament was attacked in December 2001. In 1999, the Indian Airline passenger aircraft was hijacked from Kathmandu by the Taliban terrorist group. After 9/11, the world order tremendously changed and the international organisation unitedly opposed the terrorist activities. Moreover, many western countries made laws on the terrorist acts and seized the economic roots of these terrorist organisations, and India got international support against Pakistan, because Pakistan has been supporting and funding terrorist organisations against India and Indians in their country ever since they gained independence from the British in 1947. Since 1948, the Indian-administered region of Jammu and Kashmir has been suffering terrorism and insurgency.

The Indian government has established a higher defence body called Defence Staff of the Indian Armed Forces in 2020. This institution is directly associated with decisions relating to the procurement of military equipment, because India has lots of security issues which have emerged in recent years from China and Pakistan. These security threats are military and non-military. India has procured lots of military weapons from France in recent years but India's strategic balance in South Asia is unfavourable. In Afghanistan, the Taliban came back to the country and replaced the government last year, however, the Indian stance was not clear. The relationship between India and Nepal has not been maintained in a good manner since 2016. Despite the reality, the Modi government is not interested in the SAARC meeting that should be held for regional cooperation. Through the regional organisational policy, India can pressurise Pakistan to stop counter-terrorism against India. So far, India's policy has been running under the idea of bilateral cooperation and talk. India wants to solve the border issues with China and Pakistan through talks and bilateral agreements. Furthermore, Indian diplomacy always relies on the diplomatic ways and accelerating them to build a peace process and eradicate border and other issues.

The Indian National Security Advisor Ajit Doval-Bonne's meeting resulted in a significant security partnership with France. This meeting resulted in both countries' enhanced mutual cooperation on security and defence in the areas of expanding military drills, bolstering mutual capabilities, pursuing initiatives in maritime, information sharing, cyber domains, and space cooperation. India and France have 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, threats seem to concern cyber and space zones, threats in maritime, and challenges of terrorism. Most importantly, the French President Emmanuel Macron supports the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visions of self-dependence (*Atmanirbhar Bharat*) and defence modernisation. The French government expressed its commitment to India to incorporate joint technology development in India. Thus, the Indian policy is to modernise the defence industrialisation for self-dependence (Pradhan, 2021).

Beijing has been expanding its extensive presence across the Pacific and the Indian Ocean region. It is a common geostrategic and maritime challenge for Australia, Japan, India, and the US. Thus, India is beginning to face these challenges in the Pacific and South Asia. New Delhi has been strengthening the strategic partnership with Paris and it basically focuses on the defence sector to face the challenge of the Chinese aggression in this area. India accepts the challenge from China and supports the European Union's strategy in the Indo-Pacific, as

well as it boosts security areas with its Western partners (Barua, 2020). India is shaping the multipurpose strategic partnership with France including key trade routes on land and in 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 it is crucial that China is increasing assertiveness in this region (Pardo & Leveringhaus, 2022). India's two largest neighbours are China and Pakistan and they have been facing difficult relationships for a long time. Since its independence, India has had a top priority toward China and Pakistan for a rational relationship. India wants an extensive cooperation in either development and economic growth, or peaceful cooperation for regional development with Pakistan and China (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. France is emerging as a more reliable partner for India. Paris supports India in the area of defence. Thus, India has to build a military presence to cooperate at a global level through its closer partnership in the Indo-Pacific, which is 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 China's aggression in the Galwan Valley border clash and the Doklam standoff. India is opposing the Chinese domination and military aggression in its northern Himalayan border region (Bharti, 2022a).

India and China have had the world's largest disputed border since the Chinese Armies' aggression in India in 1962. The Indian and Chinese border is called the Line of Actual Control (LAC) because the border is yet to be decided between both countries. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the Indian Army have clashed many times in the disputed border areas. China has been constructing roads and new airports in frontier areas, and, vice versa, India has begun to build roads and other connections in border areas. These are the main causes of the tense border issue between both countries. China dominates over India because of its military power. In contrast, India is modernising Armies and purchasing modern military equipment from France. The French support for India creates a power balance in South Asia and India is gaining defensive power against the aggressor country (BBC, 2021).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The article has led to a conclusion: the relationship between India and France is getting stronger year by year. The successful inclusion of 36 Rafale fighter jets in the Indian Air Force created a history for India. India's security and defence cooperation has been achieving the new landmark. Thus, the Rafale aircraft, which is a 4.5 generation modern fighter aircraft, is strengthening the Indian Air Force. Naval support to India from French defence agencies is accelerating the creation of stronger ties. India is in a strong position to counter the opponent in the air. After the inclusion of the Rafale fighter jets, China and Pakistan fear the Indian Air Force. 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 to restrict Chinese aggression. France is transferring submarine technology to India and French companies are moving to India and building a modern Scorpene-class submarine for the Indian Navy. Now India seems to purchase more Rafale aircraft from the French Company Dassault.

Furthermore, despite the Chinese aggression and encircling India, this article finds out that India is in a commanding position in South Asia. The Indian government is not scared of the Chinese and Pakistani military nexus, and the Indian Army has shown it during the Doklam standoff, where the Chinese aggression was restricted by the Indian arms forces. The Indian Air Force launched an airstrike in Pakistan's Balakot with Mirage 2000 fighter jets, which are also French fighter aircraft. Pakistan has always been threatening India with a nuclear attack on the country whenever India would try to attack or launch military operations in Pakistan. After the air attack on Balakot in Pakistan by the Indian Air Force, Pakistan took no action against India, whereas China has been supporting Pakistan after this incident. The article concludes that despite the China and Pakistan nexus and trying to create imbalance in the regional security in South Asia, the Indian government and associated agencies are responding in a better manner for regional security threats to India. Finally, the Indian Army is capable of responding to any type of military threat to the country. The article further suggests that there is a scope of empirical work on the regional security threats and balance in South Asia and that the role of Western powers is relevant to restrict the expansion politics of China in the South Asia region.

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