



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



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ABOUT US

Founded in 1994, the Delhi Policy Group (DPG) is among India's oldest think tanks with its primary focus on strategic and international issues of critical national interest. DPG is a non-partisan institution and is independently funded by a non-profit Trust. Over past decades, DPG has established itself in both domestic and international circles and is widely recognised today among the top security think tanks of India and of Asia's major powers.

Since 2016, in keeping with India's increasing global profile, DPG has expanded its focus areas to include India's regional and global role and its policies in the Indo-Pacific. In a realist environment, DPG remains mindful of the need to align India's ambitions with matching strategies and capabilities, from diplomatic initiatives to security policy and military modernisation.

At a time of disruptive change in the global order, DPG aims to deliver research based, relevant, reliable and realist policy perspectives to an actively engaged public, both at home and abroad. DPG is deeply committed to the growth of India's national power and purpose, the security and prosperity of the people of India and India's contributions to the global public good. We remain firmly anchored within these foundational principles which have defined DPG since its inception.

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Cover Images:

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his counterpart, French President Emmanuel Macron, during their comprehensive bilateral discussion in Mumbai on February 17, 2026. Source: [X/@narendramodi](#)

AI-generated photo of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Emmanuel Macron, shared by the latter on February 18, 2026. Source: [X/@EmmanuelMacron](#)

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Focus Europe:

Macron's India Visit: Substance Over Symbolism

Contents

Executive Summary.....	1
Defence: From Buyer-Seller to Industrial Partnership	1
Innovation, Technology and People.....	3
Convergence on Global Issues.....	3
Signals and Strategic Context	4
Conclusion	5

Macron's India Visit: Substance Over Symbolism

by

Ambassador Ruchira Kamboj

Executive Summary

President Emmanuel Macron's visit to India from 17-19 February was his fourth in eight years¹, a sign of continuity in a relationship that has steadily deepened. That continuity was reflected in the scale and breadth of participation: a Business France-led delegation of more than 110 French companies joined engagements across Mumbai, Bengaluru and Delhi, alongside industry, cultural and digital leaders.² The scale itself conveyed intent.

During the visit, the relationship was elevated to a Special Global Strategic Partnership. While both countries maintain strategic partnerships elsewhere, this formulation signals unusual depth and trust. The partnership now spans defence, space, civil nuclear cooperation, the Indo-Pacific and multilateral reform. As Macron put it, 'In diplomacy, that means a great deal.'³

Prime Minister Modi's welcome message set the tone: India looked forward to advancing ties 'to new heights' and strengthening cooperation across sectors.⁴ Macron reciprocated: 'Three days from Mumbai to New Delhi to take our strategic partnership even further.' And pointedly, 'We want to be with you and we are not leaving you.' The messaging was clear: this was a deliberate strategic choice, not a transactional engagement.

Defence: From Buyer-Seller to Industrial Partnership

Defence was the centrepiece.

¹ Prime Minister's Office. "India - France Joint Statement." Press Information Bureau (PIB), the Government of India, 2026. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2229412@=3&lang=2>.

² ANI. "A Landmark Week for France Highlighted by the India AI Impact Summit & Expo 2026." ANI News, February 26, 2026. <https://www.aninews.in/news/business/a-landmark-week-for-france-highlighted-by-the-india-ai-impact-summit-amp-expo-202620260226100430/>.

³ Emmanuel Macron (@EmmanuelMacron), India and France elevated their relationship to Special Global Strategic Partnership, February 17, 2026, 7:30 PM, available at: <https://x.com/EmmanuelMacron/status/2023756925284860300>

⁴ Narendra Modi (@narendramodi), 'Modi's Welcome speech for visiting French President. February 17, 2026, 9:08 AM, available at <https://x.com/narendramodi/status/2023602806096359895>

Just days before the visit, India's Defence Acquisition Council cleared the proposed purchase of 114 Rafale aircraft.⁵ The timing was deliberate. If concluded, this would be among India's largest defence acquisitions and would anchor France as a central pillar of India's air power.

More important than the numbers is the structure. In public remarks during the visit, Macron signaled that the proposed deal would involve co-production under the Make in India framework⁶, shifting the relationship beyond straightforward procurement. It points towards industrial collaboration, supply chain integration and a sustained manufacturing presence in India, subject to the final contours of the agreement. The framework also allows operational space for India-specific integrations and classified modifications. Technical details remain to be negotiated, but the direction is clear: deeper industrial integration, not just imports.

Two additional defence outcomes reinforced this shift.

An MoU was signed for joint production of AASM Hammer missiles through a Bharat Electronics Limited-Safran partnership⁷. This creates local production capacity for a key precision munition and strengthens supply security.

In parallel, Modi and Macron virtually inaugurated the final assembly line for the Airbus H125 in Karnataka⁸, a private-sector helicopter manufacturing facility combining Tata Advanced Systems and Airbus. As the India-France joint statement noted, it is 'a historic Make in India milestone' that will serve domestic demand and export markets.⁹

These steps mark a steady move away from a buyer-seller dynamic towards co-production and ecosystem building.

⁵ Trivedi, Saurabh. "DAC Clears Record ₹3.60 Lakh Crore Defence Procurements, 114 Rafale Jets and Six P-8I Aircraft among Major Approvals." The Hindu, February 12, 2026.

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/defence-acquisition-council-rafale-jets-acquisition-proposal/article70623645.ece>.

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ ET Online. "HAMMER Bombs: Here's All about How the Guided Bomb System That Will Enhance Indian Rafale's Strike Capabil." The Economic Times. Economic Times, February 17, 2026.

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/hammer-bombs-heres-all-about-how-the-guided-bomb-system-that-will-enhance-indian-rafales-strike-capability/articleshow/128452940.cms?from=mdr>.

⁸ Bureau, The Hindu. "India's First Private Sector Helicopter Final Assembly Line Inaugurated near Kolar in Karnataka." The Hindu, February 17, 2026. <https://www.thehindu.com/business/Industry/indias-first-private-sector-helicopter-final-assembly-line-inaugurated-near-kolar-in-karnataka/article70643474.ece>.

⁹ Media Center. "India - France Joint Statement (February 17, 2026)." Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2026. https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/40783/India_France_Joint_Statement_February_17_2026.

The visit also advanced operational cooperation. The two sides agreed on reciprocal deployment of officers in their respective armies from 2026. As the joint statement noted, this will strengthen ‘mutual knowledge between our armed forces’ and increase operational engagements. This is practical interoperability, not symbolism.

Separately, the defence partnership was renewed for another ten years, extending cooperation to 2036. With sustained aerospace collaboration and expanding industrial linkages, France now occupies a central place in India’s defence architecture.

Innovation, Technology and People

Innovation was the second pillar.

‘When friends connect, innovation follows,’ Macron tweeted.¹⁰ The leaders launched the India-France Year of Innovation 2026 and the Indo-French Innovation Network, a digital platform linking startups, companies, universities and investors.¹¹ The goal is to convert political intent into sustained collaboration beyond 2026.

New initiatives include:

- An Indo-French Centre for Digital Science and Technology
- An Indo-French Centre for AI in Health at AIIMS, New Delhi
- A National Centre of Excellence for Skilling in Aeronautics

France also committed to hosting 30,000 Indian students by 2030, reinforcing mobility and people-to-people ties.¹² As Prime Minister Modi put it, ‘We are transforming our partnership into a partnership of the people.’¹³

Convergence on Global Issues

The visit addressed key strategic themes.

France reaffirmed support for India’s permanent membership in a reformed UN Security Council. The two sides reiterated commitment to a free, open and rules-based Indo-Pacific, building on their 2018 Joint Strategic Vision and 2023 Indo-Pacific

¹⁰ Emmanuel Macron (@EmmanuelMacron), French President Emmanuel Macron to attend AI Impact Summit, February 18, 2026, 7:33 PM, available at: <https://x.com/EmmanuelMacron/status/2024122658221080903>

¹¹ *Supra Note 9*

¹² *Ibid*

¹³ Narendra Modi (@narendramodi), ‘Launched the India–France Year of Innovation February 17, 2026, 11:11 AM, available at <https://x.com/narendramodi/status/2023815018354274547>

Roadmap. They looked to expand engagement under the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative and in the Indian Ocean Rim Association.

On counter-terrorism, Macron stated that France stands with India: 'In the face of terrorism, unity and determination. 'His wreath-laying at the 26/11 memorial in Mumbai carried symbolic weight.

Macron's participation in the AI Impact Summit in the Delhi leg of the visit added a technology governance dimension. He praised India's digital public infrastructure model and signalled shared concern about responsible tech governance. His presence underlined France's role as a bridge between India and Europe in emerging technology debates.

Signals and Strategic Context

Three broader signals stand out.

First, France is doubling down on India. It was India's first strategic partner in 1998. The upgrade to a Special Global Strategic Partnership signals long-term political commitment.

Second, defence ties are now structural. India has been the largest destination for French arms exports in recent years. This is not episodic cooperation; it is sustained strategic interdependence.

Third, the Horizon 2047: India France Roadmap, aligned with India's centenary of independence, frames the relationship as generational. It is built on three pillars: security, climate and people.

Unlike many state visits that produce general statements, this one delivered concrete outcomes: defence co-production initiatives, missile manufacturing in India, helicopter assembly in Karnataka, innovation, expanded student mobility, and a long-term roadmap.

The geopolitical context matters. Both leaders positioned the partnership as a stabilising force amid fragmentation and uncertainty, foregrounding trust as its central pillar. Prime Minister Modi noted that 'The India-France partnership is a force for global stability.¹⁴ In a period of hedging and shifting alignments, the two countries signalled sustained commitment.

¹⁴ Pandit, Vinaya Deshpande. "PM Modi and France President Macron Hold Talks in Mumbai." The Hindu, February 17, 2026. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/pm-modi-france-macron-mumbai-bilateral-talks-february-17-2026/article70642859.ece>.

The Mumbai leg produced bilateral industrial deliverables; the Delhi leg projected the partnership onto the multilateral stage. Strategic depth and global influence were balanced.

Conclusion

The visit succeeded because political alignment and practical outcomes converged. Personal chemistry helped, but the foundation runs deeper. France's doctrine of strategic autonomy, shaped most clearly under Charles de Gaulle, has long emphasized sovereign decision making and freedom of manoeuvre. India's own comfort with multipolarity reflects a similar instinct. This convergence is structural, not episodic.

This visit follows other recent high-level European engagements with India. The pattern is clear: Europe and India are investing more seriously in each other.

The real test will be implementation. Converting agreements into durable institutional frameworks will determine the long-term impact. But structurally, the alignment makes sense: two powers that resist dependence and favour diversified partnerships.

The trajectory of India-France relations appears steady and upward: strategically deep, industrially expanding and globally relevant.



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