



## **In Paris, a new affair unfolds**

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On September 2, French President Jacques Chirac was taken to Val de Grace military hospital for what doctors described as a "small vascular accident" that disrupted his vision. The 72-year-old President was to spend a full week in hospital for a medical check-up. Though presidential aides admitted that Mr Chirac's vision was still slightly troubled, he left the hospital on September 10.

Two days later, and against his doctors' advice, Mr Chirac found the time to meet Prime Minister Manmohan Singh during the latter's stop-over in Paris. A joint statement followed. The gesture points towards the maturity and the depth of Indo-French relations. India and France could have been "natural partners" long ago, but unfortunately it was not to be so. In July 1954, the day the Geneva Conference on Indo-China reached an agreement, French Premier Pierre Mendes-France decided it was time for France to gracefully leave Pondicherry and the other tiny French establishments in India. The de facto transfer occurred on November 1 of the same year.

Unfortunately, France got embroiled in a protracted conflict in Algeria and it took nearly eight years for the Treaty of Cession to be ratified by the French Parliament. One would have thought that with New Delhi keen to remain non-aligned, Charles de Gaulle's Government would have been its obvious natural partner in the Western world. The General was indeed fiercely independent from the US and open to a working collaboration with the Soviet Union.

In September 1962, during a meeting in Paris between de Gaulle and Jawaharlal Nehru, the French President told his interlocutor that France "has no natural hostility with the people of Russia. However, France is against a Russian

domination... which supports a Communist domination". The General added that if Communism disappeared or evolved, if it ceased to be tyrannical, economic, political and cultural arrangements with the Soviet Union could be envisaged. Nehru fully agreed.

A month later, India experienced the most traumatic experience since independence. On October 20, the People's Liberation Army invaded Indian soil in NEFA and in Ladakh (the Chinese Consul-General in Mumbai seems unaware of this historical fact). De Gaulle took a strong stand in favour of India. He wrote to Nehru: "We cannot accept that border claims should be solved by a military action, in any case [the attack] is quite disproportionate to the proclaimed objective. You can, therefore, be assured of the sympathy of the Government and the people of France towards a friendly country [India] whose motivation and will has always been turned towards peace and economic and social progress."

Even though there was no formal defence treaty between India and France, the French President offered some weapons to India to defend itself.

A few days after the unilateral ceasefire, Ali Javar Jung, India's Ambassador to France, met de Gaulle. When the Indian Ambassador pointed out that China was fast becoming an international problem, the General fully agreed with him. But de Gaulle was soon going to change his mind on China. Not that the French President did not know that China was the aggressor in the Sino-Indian conflict, but because he believed that the world would be safer if Beijing was recognised by the great powers.

In August 1963, he called for his collaborator Edgar Faure, a former Prime Minister who had visited China in 1957 and had been advocating the recognition of Communist China. Faure advised the General: "One cannot scotomise 600 million Chinese." De Gaulle, who was a master of French, admitted that he did not know the meaning of this word which meant having "a psychological blind spot", but he decided to send Faure as his emissary to China.

Despite US protests, France officially recognised Communist China in January 1964. Faure had forewarned de Gaulle: "You have already shown so many signs of independence vis-à-vis the US that one more

will not change much."

From that time, China became a sort of myth, an El Dorado for French foreign policy-makers. Although a senior politician like André Malraux showed his strong sympathy for New Delhi during Bangladesh's liberation war, India has always played second fiddle to Paris. It did not have China's aura of mystery and power; probably many still remembered Napoleon's prophecy: "When China wakes up, the whole world will be shaken."

Whatever it may be, Delhi and Paris have since then kept a distance. India was the land of castes, of untouchability and of misery propagated by the Dominique Lapierras. The "experts" and the "academicians" were only too happy to follow suit and restrict their views to clichés on India. Furthermore, French diplomacy could only equate India and Pakistan: "One has to be fair to both!"

I remember when I returned to France for the first time in the early-1980s, I went to a hairdresser who asked me where I lived. When I told him India, he immediately retorted: "Oh, lucky you, you must be seeing elephants every day!" That was the level of knowledge about India 25 years ago.

Things have changed since then and the IT boom has been one of main factors responsible for India's new image across the world. Today, even "experts" admit that India is shining.

From India's side, Delhi has always been obsessed with the United States and has lived in a love-hate relationship with this country. Though the US has never sided with India (whether on Jammu & Kashmir or during the wars with Pakistan), Delhi has persisted with fulfilling its desire to be loved and respected by the most powerful nation of the world.

Take Pokhran II when India dared to conduct a series of nuclear tests

in the deserts of Rajasthan. The world condemned Mr Atal Bihari Vajpayee's NDA Government. The US was the first to clamp heavy sanctions on India, but Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh chose to heavily tilt towards the Americans. On the other hand, France was one of the few countries that acknowledged India's security concerns and did not retaliate yet it was ignored.

More recently, while the French Government offered its unstinted support to India for a seat in the UN Security Council, Indian diplomats were busy seeking Washington's support but President George Bush firmly refused to help New Delhi.

Seen in this context, Mr Singh's visit to France is significant for more than one reason

-not only did both nations commit themselves to further strengthening and deepening their strategic partnership, but also because France believes in the emergence of India as a great power "in the context of a reconfiguration of the global balance of power".

Both nations expressed their will to "work together on issues such as the fight against terrorism, prevention of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, promoting development which is economically, socially and environmentally sustainable, the effective management of globalisation, and the fight against pandemics."

Strategic partnership in the field of defence was strengthened by the Government's confirmation of its decision to purchase six Scorpene submarines. A few days earlier, Mr Singh had announced that Indian Airlines had ordered 43 Airbus aircraft. India and France also decided to collaborate in scientific, technical and educational domains and President Chirac conveyed Paris' willingness to welcome more Indian students in French universities and in the 'Grandes Ecoles'.

All this is good news and a positive prelude to Mr Chirac's visit to India

in February 2006. The long-delayed natural partnership between India and France seems to be finally taking shape. One hopes that India will continue to contribute to the emergence of a multi-polar world in which the genius of each nation will be able to flourish.