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India-France Special Global Strategic Partnership — Rafale-M, Nuclear, H-125

18 February 2026

SUBJECTS COVERED**IR****SECURITY & DEFENCE****ECONOMY****CURATED & WRITTEN BY****Bharat Choudhary**

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India-France Special Global Strategic Partnership — Rafale-M, Nuclear, H-125

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WHY IN NEWS

French President Emmanuel Macron's state visit to India in February 2026 saw the bilateral relationship upgraded to "Special Global Strategic Partnership," anchored by the finalisation of 26 Rafale-Marine jets for the Indian Navy, a 100 GW nuclear target for 2047, and India's first private-sector helicopter manufacturing facility.

INDIA-FRANCE: FROM STRATEGIC TO "SPECIAL GLOBAL STRATEGIC"

The India-France **Strategic Partnership** was established in **1998** under PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee and President Jacques Chirac. Over 28 years, it was deepened through:

- Rafale fighter jet deal (signed 2016, delivered 2021–23)
- Civil nuclear agreement (2008)
- Space cooperation (CNES-ISRO)
- Annual ministerial exchanges (Foreign Office Consultations)

The **2026 upgrade to "Special Global Strategic Partnership"** places France at the same tier as the United States and Russia in India's diplomatic hierarchy — recognising France as an indispensable partner in technology, defence, energy, and multilateral institutions.

KEY AGREEMENTS — FEBRUARY 2026

1. Rafale-Marine — 26 Jets for Indian Navy

The Indian government finalised the procurement of **26 Rafale-Marine (Rafale-M)** fighter jets for the **Indian Navy** to operate from **INS Vikrant** (India's first indigenously built aircraft carrier, commissioned September 2, 2022).

Feature	Rafale-Marine
Type	Carrier-based multi-role fighter
Manufacturer	Dassault Aviation, France
Role	Air superiority, ground attack, anti-ship, nuclear deterrence
Indian context	Replaces MiG-29K (troubled service record) on INS Vikrant
Deal value	Approx. ₹50,000+ crore (government-to-government)

Background: India had earlier purchased **36 Rafale (Air Force variant)** under the MMRCA deal (signed 2016, delivered 2021–2023), based at **Ambala (Punjab)** and **Hasimara (West Bengal)**. The naval variant differs with a reinforced undercarriage, folding wingtips, and arrestor hook for carrier landings.

2. H-125 Helicopter Assembly Line — Karnataka

India's **first private-sector helicopter manufacturing facility** was launched in Karnataka under a joint initiative between **Airbus Helicopters** and **Tata Group** — part of the broader Aatmanirbhar Bharat push in defence manufacturing.

Helicopter model: **Airbus H-125** (formerly Eurocopter AS350 Écureuil — “squirrel”)

Annual capacity: **10 helicopters**

Applications: Civil aviation, police, HADR, high-altitude operations (capable of operating at 8,000m)

The H-125 holds several high-altitude world records including first helicopter landing on Mount Everest (2005)

Context: India currently imports **most helicopters** — HAL produces the **Dhruv (Advanced Light Helicopter)** and the indigenously developed **LCH Prachand**. The Airbus-Tata partnership adds a private-sector production stream.

3. Nuclear Cooperation — 100 GW Target

India and France reaffirmed cooperation toward India's **100 GW nuclear power target by 2047**. India currently has **23 nuclear reactors** (operational capacity: ~7,500 MW). The target implies a 13x expansion requiring ~20 new large reactors.

Technology: **EPR (European Pressurised Reactor)** — 1,650 MW per unit; developed by EDF (France) + Siemens

Proposed site: **Jaitapur, Maharashtra** — 6 EPR units (9,900 MW; world's largest planned nuclear park)

Status: Environmental clearance obtained 2010; land acquisition contentious; MoU signed; construction pending regulatory approvals

India's nuclear programme: Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) — under PM directly; NPCIL (Nuclear Power Corporation of India Limited) operates all reactors; AERB (Atomic Energy Regulatory Board) supervises safety.

India's nuclear waiver: NSG (Nuclear Suppliers Group) waiver granted **September 6, 2008** — allowed India (a non-NPT signatory) to engage in civilian nuclear commerce. Key enabler: 123 Agreement (India-US, 2008).

FRANCE'S ROLE IN INDIA'S NEIGHBOURHOOD AND MULTILATERAL DIPLOMACY

G7 and Africa

PM Modi invited to **G7 Summit 2026** (Italy/Canada/host TBD) and **Africa Forward Summit** (Nairobi, May 2026)

India and France both active in **AU + G20 Africa engagement** (India hosted G20, 2023; brought AU as permanent G20 member)

Pacific Territories

France maintains significant presence in the Indo-Pacific through overseas territories: **New Caledonia, French Polynesia, Réunion, Mayotte**. France and India share strategic interests in **IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association)** and non-proliferation.

UN Security Council

France: P5 permanent member

India: Seeking permanent UNSC seat (P6); France backs India's bid

ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS

Bilateral trade: **€12.67 billion** (2024-25)

French FDI in India (April 2000–March 2025): **€9.79 billion** — ranked 11th largest FDI source

French companies in India: **1,100+** (Airbus, Total Energies, Michelin, Thales, BNP Paribas, Schneider Electric)

India as France's 5th largest extra-EU export destination

INDIA-FRANCE EDUCATION: 30,000 STUDENTS BY 2030

India and France target **30,000 Indian students in France by 2030** (currently ~10,000). France introduced **5-year multi-entry Schengen visa** for Indian students and professionals. France's key universities: Sciences Po, HEC Paris, École Polytechnique, Sorbonne.

UPSC RELEVANCE

India-France Strategic Partnership (1998), Rafale-Marine, INS Vikrant, Jaitapur Nuclear Park, EPR reactor, NSG waiver (2008), H-125 helicopter. Mains GS-2: India-France bilateral; P5 UNSC membership; India's permanent UNSC bid; France's Indo-Pacific strategy; India's nuclear diplomacy. GS-3: Defence indigenisation; Aatmanirbhar Bharat in defence; nuclear energy targets; NPCIL; AERB.

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INDIA-FRANCE KEY DATA:

Partnership est.: **1998** | Upgraded 2026: **“Special Global Strategic Partnership”**

Bilateral trade: **€12.67 billion** (2024-25)

French FDI in India: **€9.79 billion** (April 2000–March 2025); ranked **11th** largest investor

France's arms supply rank: **2nd** (after Russia) | EU trade rank: **3rd** largest EU partner

RAFALE-MARINE — 26 JETS:

Carrier-based variant; replaces MiG-29K on **INS Vikrant**

Manufacturer: **Dassault Aviation, France**

Air Force Rafales (earlier deal, 2016): **36 jets**; Ambala + Hasimara bases

H-125 HELICOPTER:

Former name: Eurocopter AS350 Écureuil (“squirrel”)

Location: **Karnataka** (Airbus + Tata joint venture)

Annual capacity: **10 helicopters** — India's first private-sector helicopter manufacturing

High-altitude capability: operates at **8,000m**; landed on Everest (2005)

NUCLEAR COOPERATION:

India's nuclear target: **100 GW by 2047** | Current capacity: **~7,500 MW** (23 reactors)

Jaitapur (Maharashtra): **6 EPR units × 1,650 MW = 9,900 MW** (world's largest planned park)

EPR: European Pressurised Reactor; developer: EDF (France) + Siemens

NSG waiver: **September 6, 2008** | 123 Agreement (India-US): **2008**

Nuclear Programme: DAE (under PM), NPCIL (operator), AERB (regulator)

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

INS Vikrant: Commissioned **September 2, 2022**; built by **Cochin Shipyard Limited**; India's first indigenous aircraft carrier

France's Indo-Pacific territories: New Caledonia, French Polynesia, Réunion, Mayotte

IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association): 23 member states; India and France both members

India's UNSC permanent membership bid: Backed by France, UK, Russia, USA (among P5)

Sources: Drishti IAS, PIB, The Hindu

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