

October 29, 2020

Dear friends, colleagues at IFRI, Dr. Gomart, esteemed guests

Je voudrais commencer par exprimer la solidarité du peuple indien avec la France dans cette lutte contre le terrorisme et la radicalisme.

Our Prime Minister has also condemned today's terrorist attack in Nice in the strongest words.

It gives me great pleasure to return to Paris – a city where I started my career as a diplomat more than three decades ago. Returning to this city reminds me of the timeless charm and grace of Paris. But, it also tells me how much the world has changed since the early 1980s, or frankly even since the beginning of this year. I am thankful to IFRI for organizing this exchange; especially given the constraints on account of the pandemic. I am also happy to note that IFRI counts among the top think-tanks not only in France and Europe but globally. The subject of my address today is "India's Foreign Policy in a Post Covid World". In few world capitals would this theme resonate better than in Paris. When I speak here, I know I speak among very special friends.

We are meeting even as the Covid-19 pandemic continues to remain the dominant context. We are saddened and concerned by the increase in the number of cases in France and other parts of Europe. I convey my solidarity with the people of France as you combat the pandemic.

Like France, India too has suffered enormous consequences of the pandemic. Being almost 20 times your population, our challenges were particularly daunting. India's response to the pandemic has been driven by the wisdom and evidence of science. The world has been learning and re-learning how to deal with the pandemic and so have we. We have drawn lessons at every stage and we have not hesitated to accept the advice of our doctors and scientists or to adopt global best practices. An early lockdown, when numbers were low, gave us time to ramp up capacities, and to prepare ourselves for a long-drawn spell of pandemic protocols. As a consequence of such messaging, often coming from Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself, there has been public awareness about the importance of wearing masks and respecting social distancing norms. This has allowed India to tackle the pandemic and keep the burden on our health infrastructure within manageable limits. The economic impact of the pandemic has been the biggest challenge. During the first phase of the crisis, we announced a massive 266 billion dollar stimulus and support package, amounting to almost 10% of our GDP, directed at helping low-income groups, migrants and those in the informal economy who were affected by the lockdown, marginal farmers, and small businesses. We deferred tax payments, injected liquidity into the economy and lowered interest rates. We inaugurated a food transfer programme that ensured extra rations to 800 million people. This programme, the world's largest and covering a population larger than that of the continent of Europe, is still under operation.

We are cautiously optimistic that India may have crossed the point of inflection in the pandemic. This has been a whole-of-society effort. Our doctor, nurses and public health workers have persevered with admirable dedication. More than 17,000 dedicated Covid facilities were set up with 1.6 million isolation beds. Over a million people are being tested daily. Our daily case loads have reduced from a peak of over 90,000 per day a few weeks ago, to less than 50,000 per day now – fingers crossed. Some nine of every 10 infected persons have recovered. Our fatality rate has remained low at 1.5%. Digital tools are being used for extensive contact tracing. The crisis has tested India, but it has also resulted in a high-order national response marked by cohesion, purpose and resilience. We will carry these lessons into the post-coronavirus period.

In the space of only six months, we have added enormous production capacity in PPEs, testing kits, medicines, etc. that we are also sharing with others. At the beginning of the pandemic we did not

have a single PPE manufacturer. Today we have more than 100. N-95 masks were being made by two companies; today we are making enough masks to be able to send them to other countries and add to global supplies. Similarly, all ventilators were being imported; now we have, at last count, 48 ventilator manufacturers. The crisis has stimulated innovation and enterprise in India and we are now able to manufacture cost-effective but high-quality critical health items for India and for the world.

For the global system, the pandemic has been the most catastrophic event since World War II. An already complicated world has become even more so with several geopolitical issues erupting simultaneously along with the pandemic. This has accelerated a fundamental rebalancing in the international system. A sobering reality of these developments is that today more than ever, multipolarity is relevant to the outcome. It is incumbent upon countries like India and France, as a leading player in the EU to play a role in mitigating the impact wherever possible.

The pandemic has laid bare the economic consequences of geopolitics and the risks associated with attempts at concentration of power, along with the importance of ensuring supply chain diversification and resilience. The world needs more trusted and capable players now and India fulfils both attributes. India has always been guided by its ancient philosophy of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam or the world is one family. In today's context, as a pluralistic and open society we are in sync with democratic sentiments and cognizant of our responsibilities on the world stage. Even during the pandemic, India ramped up its pharmaceutical production – especially of hydroxychloroquine and paracetamol – to respond to growing global demands. We supplied medicines to 150 countries, more than half on a non-commercial basis. Our medical teams were deployed in four of our neighbours who were in distress. The message from that is of an India with greater capabilities, not just in helping itself but being a force for good in international relations. And that is why Prime Minister Modi's call of an Atmanirbhar Bharat or self-reliant India is important for the world. This is not about building walls; it is about building greater strengths at home to play a more effective role abroad. Atmanirbhar Bharat is a dependable Bharat, an India that the world can depend on.

Despite the pandemic, we have dealt with the worst crisis in decades on our border with China and we have done so with firmness and maturity. At the same time, we have continued to ward off terrorism from across our western border.

Our immediate challenges have not distracted us from broader strategic goals, especially in the Indo Pacific Region, where we are moving purposefully at multiple levels to create an open, inclusive architecture. India is emerging at the centre of a network of initiatives. We are fulfilling our role as a net provider of security in the IOR and as a first responder in extending humanitarian assistance in times of natural disasters and maritime environmental incidents. We have a cooperative, inclusive outlook, as enunciated by Prime Minister Modi in his SAGAR vision, i.e. Security And Growth for All in the Region. In Southeast Asia, too, we have steadily enhanced our diplomatic and security engagement. With Australia, Japan and the U.S., there is tangible progress in realizing our shared vision. We are not seeking to target or exclude any country, but create an environment that induces all countries to operate with respect for the sovereignty of others and in a manner consistent with international norms in global commons.

The pandemic has accelerated global transition and will increase geopolitical competition and tension. The pandemic period has witnessed geopolitical repositioning primarily by China and the United States. The EU has also formulated its position which has striking similarities with India particularly with regard to maintaining strategic autonomy and our commitment to effective and reformed multilateralism. After a long time in the post Cold War era we are witnessing a convergence of geopolitics with geo-economics. Geopolitics is also affecting economic and

technology flows. Besides security, it will hamper efforts to address global challenges like climate change, terrorism and pandemics, as also serious emerging threats in the space and cyber domains. The pandemic will also test the times for realising the Sustainable Development Goals.

What does all this mean for contemporary geopolitics? To start with, it will shape the nature and terms of India's engagement with major economies like the US, China, EU, Japan, ASEAN, etc.

Two, the practices that India perfects at home will inevitably become exportable abroad. They too will play out, obviously differently in different geographies.

Three, the need for greater global conversations on resilient supply chains. Some of these are ongoing G2G exercises; others would be discussions with business.

Finally, India's own thinking about deeper global economic engagement with the world will be influenced by both geopolitical divides and pandemic pressures. There was already a reassessment of FTA experiences, keeping in mind the unsettling impact they have had on India's manufacturing. The attention could now well shift to becoming part of global value chains, complemented by focused trading arrangements. This would be so especially as efforts towards making India an easier location for doing business gain traction. We are conscious of the need not just to improve on our own record but to become more competitive.

The events of this year have demonstrated how imperative it is for like-minded countries to coordinate responses to various challenges that the pandemic has brought to the fore. As we collectively navigate these uncharted waters, we seek to emerge from the pandemic more resilient than ever before. We cannot afford to let multilateralism be held hostage by great power competition. A multipolar world without an international order based on rule of law and collaboration will lead to uncertainty and turbulence. In this context, India attaches great importance to Europe and France, as independent poles in the emerging multipolar order.

As India assumes membership of the UN Security Council next year we look forward to seeking collective solutions to global challenges, including global recovery from the pandemic and reform of multilateral institutions. The pandemic has reaffirmed the centrality of multilateralism in our interconnected world for not only matters of international security but also international governance. Sadly, the pandemic revealed the shortcomings of some of the multilateral institutions which, for instance, could not even agree on the messaging for fighting the virus. The clarion call for reformed multilateralism has been sounded. The solution to the weakness of multilateral institutions does not lie in bypassing or debilitating them, but in reforming them. In this we are together with France in the initiative of 'Alliance for Multilateralism'. We look forward to coordinating with France in the Security Council, both on immediate challenges and in setting strategic directions for the UN system.

We are working with France in building a series of multilateral responses to global challenges. The International Solar Alliance which India and France jointly set up is an extraordinarily good example. Similar is the Coalition for Disaster-Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), where again France is a partner, and which aims for a climate-friendly and disaster-resilient future for all. And I must mention here that India has stayed the course and, on some parameters, exceeded the commitments it had made in this city at COP21. In India's push against climate change and its striving for a greener economy, driven more and more by renewable energy, the Paris Agreement of 2015 remains an article of faith and a call to action.

It is in this context that I come back to the importance India attaches to its relationships with Europe and France. For India, European unity and solidarity is a priority. We appreciate the French position

with regard to European 'sovereignty' and a common and independent defence and security posture. There is a keen desire to avoid extreme choices being put forward by the current geopolitical situation.

The India-France strategic partnership and India-EU strategic partnership have become more important to achieve our economic sovereignty objectives, strengthen our strategic autonomy, advance security and equilibrium in the Indo-Pacific Region and reform and restore multilateralism. To put it more simply, when we look at our objectives of transforming India to make it more green, more digital and more technology-driven, Europe stands out as a partner of choice. Today, technology is the source of power and so digital sovereignty and competitiveness have acquired added significance.

As independent poles in the emerging multipolar order, both France and Europe have thus acquired a new salience in India's worldview and its foreign policy. As you may notice, after several months of halt in diplomatic travel, my first trip outside India's immediate neighbourhood is to Europe. This is not an accident. And one of the most important diplomatic engagements that India had during the pandemic was the virtual 15th India-EU summit in July, where we charted out a very ambitious agenda for cooperation.

India's relationship with France has gone from strength to strength in the past two decades. Our two countries became strategic partners in 1998 and this traditional relationship is enduring, trustworthy, like-minded, and all-encompassing. Our strategic embrace is tighter than ever, underpinned by the mutual understanding at the level of our political leadership and consolidated by the ever-expanding linkages between our two societies and economies. Both leaders, Prime Minister Modi and President Macron, attach top priority to the strategic partnership between the two countries. When I look at the agenda of our bilateral ties, there is virtually no field of human endeavour that is not covered by it and there are many compelling pulls in the relationship. Allow me to briefly dwell on these.

India and France are strong partners in the Indo-Pacific. We are united in our vision of the importance of maintaining a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific. We remain committed to upholding the rules-based international order, underpinned by the rule of law, transparency, freedom of navigation in the international seas, respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, and peaceful resolution of disputes. Our objective remains advancing the security and the economic interests of all countries having legitimate and vital interests in the region. Our Indo-Pacific concept has gained increasingly wider acceptance. In this context, the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative that we tabled at the East Asia Summit last year holds considerable promise.

It gives me great satisfaction that France and India are taking forward our shared approach on the Indo-Pacific through several cooperation mechanisms that exist between our two countries, including between the Foreign Offices, our Ministries of Defence, and our military and civilian entities. A testament to this is the recently held India-France-Australia trilateral dialogue which witnessed convergence among the three countries on issues such as protecting global marine commons and HADR and maritime security in the Indo-Pacific.

India and France face similar non-traditional security threats in the form of radicalism and terrorism, and increasingly cyber-security challenges. In some respects these are linked – not least because online radicalisation has emerged as a pressing concern. Both India and France have suffered. The fight today is not against specific communities or individuals but against a radical politico-religious ideology that attempts to negate the progress made by secular democracies, particularly when it involves the equality of all citizens, regardless of religion or ethnicity, and the rights of women. This radical ideology espouses violence and separatism, very often fanned and

supported by foreign influence. Such forces seek to destabilize pluralist societies. It was horrifying to hear about the two recent terrorist incidents in France, one of which, as is very often the case, had its origins in our western neighbourhood – Pakistan. For the past three decades, we have experienced what unbridled radicalism can wreak – and what malevolent violent forces it can unleash. The civilised world needs to act together and act with firmness to address this threat to our cherished democratic value systems.

Friends

Crises reveal true friends and reliable partners. Through this year, striving and surviving in the face of the pandemic, India and the EU have strengthened their bond. France has been central to this process. We await the 16th India-EU leaders Summit in Portugal in 2021 with great optimism.. This re-energised India-EU relationship adds another layer to our partnership with France.

While we look for ways to reinforce each other's economic recovery and progress in the medium term, we have arrived at a point in our relationship where we need to move beyond what we do for each other and look at what can we do together for others and for our shared planet. The post-Covid world will be shaped by business and commerce, technology and sustainability. It will also be nurtured by norms and values, by old-fashioned notions of trust, reliability and stability. Whether in France or in India, these are attributes at the heart of our republican ideals. These are attributes that define our countries at home and motivate us abroad. To borrow the words of Victor Hugo, the India-France global partnership is an idea whose time has come.

With this I conclude my remarks and invite your questions.

Je vous remercie de votre attention et patience.