



## THE RAFALE FORUM: OPERATIONALIZING THE INDIA-FRANCE-UAE TRILATERAL

by  
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India, France, and the United Arab Emirates (IFU) formalized a trilateral cooperation partnership in February 2023. The three countries share a host of commonalities and strategic interests, of which, defense cooperation is a significant one. Under the aegis of the IFU trilateral, the three sides are committed to [furthering](#) their defense cooperation by promoting ‘compatibility, and joint development and co-production, whilst seeking out avenues for further collaboration and training between the three countries’ defense forces’.

In their bilateral ties as well, security and defense cooperation is a priority area, and this becomes particularly evident from the purchase of the French Rafale fighter jets by India and the UAE. Establishing a ‘Rafale Forum’ seems like the natural step in operationalizing the trilateral wherein India intends to assume a pivotal role.

### India-France: A Strategic Partnership of Middle Powers

India is today, France’s strategic partner in South Asia and the larger [Indo-Pacific](#) expanse. The Indo-French bilateral relationship grew even stronger when the two sides embarked on a strategic journey in 1998, the year India conducted Operation Shakti—a series of five nuclear tests. It is pertinent to note that France was one of the few countries that supported India in the advancement of its nuclear program, calling the country’s exclusion from the global nuclear club as an “[anomaly](#)”. The partnership primarily reposed on three verticals—defense, space, and civil nuclear cooperation—but expanded with time to include cooperation regarding issues related to technology, clean energy, counter terrorism, training, and education amongst others. It is worth emphasizing that defense cooperation, to date, remains the cornerstone of the strategic relationship between the two countries.

On June 5, 2025 Dassault Aviation, France and Tata Advanced Systems Limited, India, announced a partnership to manufacture Rafale fighter jet fuselage in a facility to be set up in Hyderabad, India. This development marks an important milestone in the consolidation of India’s aerospace manufacturing capacities and its place in global supply chains. It would be the first Rafale manufacturing facility outside France and would contribute significantly to India’s *Atmanirbhar* (Make in India) initiative. Additionally, there are plans in the pipeline to set up a Maintenance Repair Overhaul (MRO) facility in Noida to maintain and support India’s fleet of 36 Rafale jets and Mirage 2000 fighter jets.

These developments come in on the heels of the acquisition of 36 Rafale jets by the Indian Air Force in 2016, and more recently another 26 jets for the Indian Navy which will operate from the two Indian aircraft carriers, INS Vikrant and INS Vikramaditya. While India has made big defense purchases like the Mirage 2000 jets and the Scorpène-class submarines, the Rafale deal stands out for other reasons as well. It provides India an opportunity to become a crucial hub for high-class aerospace manufacturing and maintenance and overhaul center for Rafale jets in the Indo-Pacific region.

### UAE-France: A Strategic Partnership Anchored in Defense and Economic Cooperation

As its strategic partner in West Asia, France has nurtured a robust bilateral relationship with the UAE for over five decades which includes a very strong and diversified [defense and security cooperation pillar](#). France sees the UAE as a reliable partner to ensure stability and peace in a region which has long witnessed turbulent political upheavals and great power struggles. With a view to ensure the security of important Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs), in 2009, France established its first base in the UAE and the Gulf region on the banks of the Strait of Hormuz. The [Camp de la Paix](#) includes naval and air force bases as well as an army training camp. This significant development paved the way for deepened defense ties between the two sides. In 2021, the UAE inked a [\\$19 billion deal for 80 Rafale fighter jets](#), making it the most significant French defense

export. The waning American influence in the region has motivated countries like the UAE to diversify their arms imports and seek relevant partners to provide sophisticated and critical defense technology. As a result, France has gained the reputation as a viable competitor in the region to provide high class weapons systems.

### India-UAE: Deepening Geopolitical and Geo-economic Ties

India's relationship with the UAE gained momentum when Prime Minister Modi took over the reins of the Indian government in 2014. The two countries elevated bilateral ties to a [Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2022](#) with a special emphasis on space, energy and defense cooperation. It is important to note that the two sides agreed on closer ties regarding co-development and co-production of defense-related projects and close collaboration of the defense industries.

### Rafale Forum: Defense Arm of the IFU Trilateral

The three IFU partners are Indian Ocean countries; this oceanic expanse is part of the larger Indo-Pacific construct which is today at the heart of great power contestations and countries of this region are under pressure to [choose sides](#). The IFU partners are committed to maintaining strategic autonomy through development of their defense industries, diversifying partnerships that go beyond the traditional ones and last but not least, maintaining a balanced relationship with the great powers.

It is in this context that the 'Rafale Forum' becomes important and serves as a key component of the IFU trilateral arrangement.

In January 2024, the three sides came together in Exercise Desert Knight conducted jointly by the Indian Air Force, the UAE Air Force and the French Air and Space Force. A striking feature of this exercise was the participation of French Rafale jets, India's Su-30MKI and Jaguar jets and the UAE's F-16 aircraft. This exercise which was aimed at boosting trilateral defense cooperation and improving interoperability among the forces of the three partners signaled a strong Indian Ocean regional partnership.

The other important aspect that falls within

the premise of the 'Rafale Forum' is critical, high-tech defense production. As mentioned earlier, the three sides have bilaterally committed to joint defense production and the establishment of the partnership agreement signed between Dassault Aviation and Tata Advanced Systems Limited in June is a case in point.

### Going Forward

India is strategically poised to play a key role in the 'Rafale Forum'. By stepping up the manufacturing, maintenance and repair facilities, the country could serve as a very important Rafale hub in the larger Indo-Pacific expanse. It is interesting to note that in 2022, Indonesia purchased [42 Rafale jets](#) worth \$8.1 billion which are slated to be delivered in early 2026. After a visit by President Emmanuel Macron to the Indonesian capital last month, a letter of intent was inked by the two sides for 18 additional Rafale jets.

Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto was India's Republic Day chief guest earlier this year. The visit commemorated the historic ties between the two countries and also resulted in the signing of key agreements. Prime Minister Modi underscored the importance of the comprehensive strategic partnership that was signed in 2018 between the two sides and also acknowledged the agreement [“to increase defense sector collaboration,” wherein the two sides will “work together in defense manufacturing and supply”](#). Against this backdrop, the UAE and Indonesia could well be seen as the two bookends with India strategically positioned in the middle. This geopolitical constellation and converging defense and security interests could serve the 'Rafale Forum' well and also further deepen Indo-French ties.

Needless to say that the 'Rafale Forum' is a strong arm of the India-France-UAE trilateral which serves as a strategic platform to support the evolving contours of the Indo-Pacific regional security architecture.

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