

'The EPR has improved safety systems'



JEROME BONNAFONT: "What people have to bear in mind is that European Pressurised Reactor is recognised everywhere as the highest in safety, and the new safety system which is being built in France, Finland and China has been co-developed with our safety agency."—PHOTO: H. VIBHU

The last decade has seen the India-France relationship evolving from mere buyer-seller congeniality into a robust strategic partnership with collaborative ventures in assorted realms. The euphoria over the civil nuclear agreement is still in the air, but project delays and widespread resistance to nuclear plants loom large. In an interview with Special Correspondent S. Anandan in Kochi, French Ambassador to India

Jerome Bonnafont seeks to clear the air on some of the issues, contending that the bilateral bond is developing at a good pace, but not rapidly enough. Edited excerpts from the interview, which was conducted on board the French Navy's amphibious assault ship Mistral, as it called at the Kochi port during a five-month-long training cruise.

In the wake of the nuclear tragedy at Fukushima in Japan, there has been opposition from various quarters to the setting up of French EPRs [European Pressurised Reactors] at the proposed Jaitapur nuclear facility on the grounds that EPR is of recent origin and therefore, unproven. There is also a general apprehension the world over about the safety of nuclear installations...

After the accident at Fukushima, it is clear that everybody has to embark upon a very comprehensive review of their safety mechanisms to ensure that what has tragically been striking at Japan does not happen anywhere else. We're doing that, each of us, at the national level, whereas France says we should do it at the international level as well, and discuss international ways to improve nuclear safety worldwide.

We are inviting a conference on June 7 to discuss that among members of governments in charge of nuclear energy in order to see how we can, on the basis of IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] in particular, improve worldwide the safety systems and standards [of atomic power plants] and implement those systems. That is critical.

When it comes to Jaitapur, there has been a decision by the Prime Minister of India a few days ago

to continue the project. We welcome the decision, which is the sovereign decision of India. And Areva is making sure that they accelerate their discussions with NPCIL [Nuclear Power Corporation of India Limited] in order to take into consideration whatever problem NPCIL might want to raise and finalise agreements, knowing that in December [2010] they agreed with NPCIL on the general framework of agreement and early works agreement.

Further, there is a debate in India [on the safety of nuclear plants]. I think there is a debate in every democracy and it is their legitimate right to discuss what concerns them. We absolutely don't want to intervene in this.

However, I'd like to underline that the EPR is designed to have improved energy efficiency and safety systems. EPR is based on reactors which are already functioning. We've more than 50 of these reactors in operation in France. And the safety system [of EPR] has been improved by a double shelter instead of a single shelter, as by definition it is safer to have a double shelter; by a sort of ashtray in case of a melting down of the core nuclear substance to help it cool by way of automatic release of oxygen when there is hydrogen, in order to avoid internal explosion and have water instead.

There are five or six big safety improvements over the existing system [that make it] far more resistant to earthquake or any sort of damage that can happen around or inside. What people have to bear in mind is that EPR is recognised everywhere as the highest in safety, and the new safety system which is being built in France, Finland and China has been co-developed with our safety agency. The [French] government has given the green signal for the construction of EPR in Flamanville on the basis of validation of the concept by our safety agency. The agency is clearing the project step-by-step and it is not going to give the commissioning authorisation before it has been able to see and inspect the full centre in full functioning.

If the thing [the NPCIL-Areva deal] is concluded, which I believe it will be, at the time the Indian EPR will be in operation, the Chinese, the Finnish and the French EPRs will have been functioning for more than five years, which means you will have five years of checking how it works before it works in India. There will be a lot of possibility of experienced learning by that development.

Both countries have agreed to collaborate on space research and development, which is significant given the hard times faced by ISRO. The satellites thus jointly developed are to be launched this year. Is that on schedule?

What I understand is that Megha-Tropiques, the first satellite which is supposed to study climate in tropical areas — which means it is of particular importance for agriculture in monsoons — is going to be launched before the end of the year. The second one [Sarat] might be a little delayed, but we are hoping this would also be launched this year. We've full confidence in the scientific, technical and managerial capabilities of ISRO.

Any plans to expand the cooperation into other areas? Space exploration, maybe?

In the declaration of intent which was signed in Bangalore during President Sarkozy's India visit — and it's really an important sign that our President decided to start his India visit in Bangalore in ISRO, which is a statement that we are confident that ISRO in its past track operation is good and that it should be expanded — we've given them the mandate to see together how they can expand it in other areas like telecommunication, space exploration...

In the joint statement, it was mentioned that the contract for the much-delayed upgrade of the Indian Air Force's Mirage-2000 aircraft would be inked soon. It's five months since.

Commercial negotiations are always long; there are so many things to agree upon. It's very complex. It has to go through many processes, so it takes time. But we're hopeful it'll be completed soon.

In a major step in the Medium Multi Role Combat Aircraft (MMRCA) procurement process, India has shortlisted from six contenders the French Dassault Rafale and Eurofighter Typhoon, asking

them to renew their commercial bids. The process has had many twists and turns from the time the Request for Proposal went out with speculative stories doing the rounds, MMRCA files going for jaunts and the like. How do you view the latest development?

At this stage, I'll be extremely sober and quick in my answer. Rafale is an exceptional plane which is in operation in many significant fields of operation showing its performance there. We're very satisfied that it is allowed to continue in the race. The French government is giving 100 per cent support to Dassault and for the continuation of its discussions with the Government of India.

Is there a Navy angle to the MMRCA competition? While Rafale boasts a naval variant, the Typhoon naval version is under development. Would there be a French pitch if the Indian Navy sought to buy a new carrier-borne fighter?

I'm not going to elaborate on that.

When the Request for Information went out last year for six more next generation submarines as part of Navy's Project 75-I (India), the French apparently made an offer of bigger Scorpenes. Isn't that a bit awkward, given that the six Scorpenes contracted by India under ToT (transfer of technology) via Project 75 is overdue?

One thing is extremely simple: the contract [as part of Project 75] has to be well-executed and in that respect, at the docks [in Mazagaon Dock], they are working super fast. I go there from time to time. The Joint Chief of Staff of our armed forces, Admiral Edouard Guillaud, visited the docks when he was in India a few months back. The general impression we have is that there has been a slow beginning for many reasons. Now they're working super fast, and I think they're making very, very good progress. How it is going to continue in the next few months is a matter of great attention of both governments [and they are ensuring] that no obstacle is put in the way of implementation of this programme. It is an exemplary project and one has to understand the complexity of what is being done. It would have been the old way to do things to build it in France and transfer it full-fledged to India. But that's not what has been chosen. What has been chosen is the transfer of know-how of industrial capacity and technology to India to put it in a position to do it progressively. That is far more complex. The end result, however, will be two-fold: India with six first-class submarines, among the most modern in the world, and India being capable of continuing to build them by itself in the future.

There was a project between MBDA and DRDO to jointly develop Maitri short range surface-to-air missiles on the Trishul platform. Has it taken off?

Well, it is approximately at the same stage as the Mirage-2000 upgrade, which means we are in the final stages of negotiation. They've an understanding on many points, but there are a couple of things to be finalised. I am optimistic, as in the case of Mirage upgrade, of rapid completion [of talks]. It'll be a landmark agreement as it is about the co-development of a new missile. It will be a joint venture between two countries; the building capacity will be India, which will be used by India and which can also be used for export markets.

Will France buy it once it is operational?

Once it's developed, we might consider building it [the production facility] in France or buy it from India. But, I don't know. The future will have an answer to this.

One area where full potential has not been tapped is bilateral trade and investment.

I'll nuance your analysis a bit. On trade, we had known rapid expansion up to 2008. Then we had barriers because of the financial crisis and the civil aviation difficulties in India which slowed down considerably the rate of delivery of appliances which had been ordered. Now we're back to normal when it comes to economic growth and the civil aviation sector has improved a lot. So I hope we're heading for more rapid growth in our imports and exports. Already last year, Indian exports to France surged by 35 to 40 per cent compared to the year before, which is quite impressive. The French exports to India [during this period] picked up by 15 to 18 per cent.

Investment-wise, the French are investing huge amounts in India. We've approximately €10 billion of French industrial investment in India. All major companies are here. Now there are two fields where we would like to see an acceleration of growth: SMEs (small and medium enterprises) in India and Indian investment in France. Although we believe it's picking up, there is vast potential to be tapped by Indian investors in the European market.

Interview with Jerome Bonnafont, French Ambassador to India.