

“Subrahmanyam Jaishankar: ‘Europeans understand that what happens in the Indo-Pacific concerns them’ Le Figaro online and print page 8 (21/02/22, reported by Fabrice Nodé-Langlois)

INTERVIEW - The Indian Foreign Minister spoke to Le Figaro on the eve of a ministerial conference on the strategic Indo-Pacific region, the scene of Chinese ambitions. Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar was invited to a ministerial conference on the Indo-Pacific organised by the French Presidency of the European Union in Paris on Tuesday. He met on Sunday with his counterpart Jean-Yves Le Drian and was due to meet the Minister of Defence, Florence Parly.

Le Figaro. - India has not condemned the concentration of Russian troops on the Ukrainian borders. Is this position related to the fact that Russia is one of your suppliers of weapons?

Subrahmanyam JAISHANKAR. - I don't think diplomacy can be reduced to arms supplies and condemnations. There is much more substance and nuance to foreign policy. The situation in Ukraine is the result of a complex chain of circumstances over the last thirty years. Most countries, such as India and France, which is very active, are seeking a diplomatic solution. The real question is: are you mobilised to find a good solution or are you content with posturing? India can talk with Russia, with other countries, within the UN Security Council and supports initiatives like those of France.

You are participating in this conference in Paris on the Indo-Pacific. What importance do you attach to this meeting?

The very fact that this conference is taking place is very important. For a long time, with the remarkable exception of France, most European countries had little or no involvement in the Indo-Pacific. Things are changing. The European Union now has an Indo-Pacific strategy, France, of course, but also Germany and the Netherlands have theirs. So does the UK. The Europeans understand better that what happens in the Indo-Pacific concerns them and that the world does not stop at the periphery of Europe.

What are your concerns about China in this region? How do you see the New Silk Roads Initiative?

My concern is that international relations must respect great principles. We all want respect for international law, territorial integrity, national sovereignty and common goods. We want the initiatives of some to be transparent, to have no hidden agenda. If the initiatives of country A or country B respect these principles, fine. With regard to the connectivity initiative (one of the names given to the New Silk Roads project, editor's note), we find it difficult to understand projects that are neither transparent nor market-driven. One of the corridor projects, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, violates our territorial integrity because it passes through the territory of Jammu and Kashmir, which is illegally occupied by Pakistan. This is not acceptable.

What is the situation on the Chinese border in the Himalayas two years after the armed clashes?

The Chinese had concentrated large forces on the Line of Control in the spring of 2020, in violation of the agreements. We had to deploy our forces in response. And when military forces face each other, things can go wrong. This is what happened. There was a clash with soldiers killed on both sides. It affected our bilateral relationship. Since then,

there have been discussions between military commanders. But it is clear that we will not let either side unilaterally change the status quo.

Is India ready to restart talks with Pakistan?

Who should make the first move and why? Pakistan, clearly, believes that international terrorism, i.e. harbouring, arming, training and then sending terrorists across borders, is an acceptable form of state action. We do not agree. Our neighbour has made some commitments to us, and it must stick to them.

Terrorism is one of the areas of cooperation between France and India...

We have a very close relationship with France, which is improving with time. The high quality of our relationship touches on sensitive areas: defence, nuclear, space. France has been a valuable partner in these areas. As regards counter-terrorism, I prefer not to say more, as this is not a subject for public discussion.

Can France expect a green light soon for the construction of EPR nuclear reactors in Jaitapur?

It is a complex dossier, with technical and financial dimensions. The project is moving forward. EDF and our nuclear company, NPCIL, have been talking for a long time. It is difficult to predict when they will succeed. But I can say that India shares with France the vision that nuclear power is a very suitable energy for the fight against climate change. The more we develop renewables, the more we will need generation sources like nuclear to provide base load capacity. Our relationship with France is very important because it is a great country that pursues an autonomous path, that occupies a central place in a multipolar world that India also supports, in favour of a more democratic and balanced international order. France has never narrowed its horizon. Prime Minister Modi and I are convinced that this relationship can be further strengthened to meet together new challenges for the coming decades.

The EU and India have been discussing a free trade agreement for 15 years. When will it come to fruition?

An attempt at an agreement failed in 2013. Mr Modi came to power in 2014 and expressed interest in restarting the talks, but the EU has not responded. Until 2021, until the Porto summit, there was hardly any discussion. A new energy and sense of urgency has been injected into the issue. Free trade agreements, especially with the European Union, are very complex. It is in our interest to do so because the EU is our biggest trading partner.

A few months ago, the European Parliament asked India to act more effectively against inter-religious violence and hate speech. Could human rights complicate your relations with Europe?

First of all, I don't know exactly what you are referring to. Members of Parliament can take individual positions and it should be checked whether what they say is factual. It is important that democracies respect each other. If I were to look at the imperfections of Europe, I could keep myself busy, I could make a statement every day. But I don't. Of course, democracies have their flaws, but are open enough to acknowledge them. I have lived for the last 45 years in eight different foreign countries, and I can tell you that India is one of the most open societies there is. Before I make a judgement on a French debate, for example, I would really take the time to understand it well.

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