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Expand G-8 to include India: Sarkozy

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NEW DELHI: French president Nicolas Sarkozy, chief guest at the Republic Day parade, has already seen his visit to India given all the colour he could possibly want, and perhaps a lot that he could do without.

But on Friday, Sarkozy and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh put bilateral strategic cooperation into higher gear by preparing the ground for more intensive ties in trade and investment, technology transfer, space and joint research and development, particularly in the defence sector. This successfully took the headlines away from Sarkozy's private life and girlfriend, which was hogging the limelight until now.

Echoing British prime minister Gordon Brown, on a whistle-stop visit only a couple of days ago, Sarkozy backed India's global ambitions to the hilt. "India must be a permanent member of the Security Council. How can we organize a meeting of G8 for two-and half days and invite the G5 for lunch on Day 3 ? France will not accept this injustice. It's not only a matter of right for this continent. G8 in Tokyo can immediately be turned into G13."

Sarkozy, though, called India to pull its weight in the 'new world'. The most pressing issue, he said, was Iran. "We need India to convince Iran that their path (of seeking a nuclear weapons programme) is a dead-end street."

On their part, both PM and leader of the Opposition L K Advani asked Sarkozy to reverse the turban ban. According to MEA sources, Sarkozy explained that there were restrictions on wearing of religious symbols in certain public places.

After talks this morning, India and France signed five agreements, including one for construction and operation of a nuclear reactor at Cadarache in France, which is the home of the ITER project. A pact for transfer of sentenced prisoners was also signed. A joint statement issued after the talks laid out a roadmap for the next steps in this strategic partnership.

So, while Sarkozy will not go back with anything close to a \$30 billion prize that he did after his recent visit to China, the India prospects are no less attractive, though they may take longer to see the light of day.

"France and India have decided to give a new impetus to their strategic cooperation for development of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes as an expression of their strategic partnership," said a joint statement issued after the talks. Noting that the two countries wanted to "broaden and boost" their partnership in atomic field, the statement said "to this end, France and India have finalised negotiation in regard to reaching a bilateral agreement for civil nuclear cooperation."

The agreement will form the basis of wide-ranging bilateral cooperation from basic and applied research to full civil nuclear cooperation, including reactors, it said.

Signing of the pact, however, will have to await firming up of a India-IAEA safeguards agreement. "We will pass the operational phase as soon as India concludes an accord with the IAEA and that the international rules of the suppliers' group are changed," Sarkozy said.

Sarkozy said France wants to participate in India's arms purchase programme. Earlier Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said: "We have agreed to go beyond a buyer-seller relationship. We will increasingly focus on joint research and development projects, transfer of technology and greater military exchanges."

"I think it is very important that India and France should cooperate, share information and intelligence

gathering for defence of the values which are dear to both our countries," he said in a joint news conference.

France will bid for the 126 combat aircraft tender, which will be the biggest defence purchase India will make in a long time. Later Sarkozy said: "France would like to be here for arms purchase contracts." Acknowledging that France had to make progress on transparency, (which cost them the Eurocopter deal), Sarkozy said: "We don't want to be treated worse than others. When there is a call for tenders they should not be cancelled."

The Indian government has put out a request for proposals from six suppliers: Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Dassault Aviation (Rafale), Eurofighter Typhoon, Swedish Gripen and Russian MiG 35.

Meanwhile, even though a helicopter deal fell through weeks before Sarkozy's visit, it's expected that France will be the favoured one when the bidding resumes. Meanwhile, France is also expected to be the one to get a tender for the upgrading of India's Mirage fleet, against a cheaper bid by Israel.

Singh described his talks with Sarkozy as "very productive and wide-ranging," adding, "This partnership is long standing and rests on shared values and similar approaches to regional and global issues."

After talks this morning, Singh announced India would set up an Indian cultural centre in Paris, while France would facilitate travel of larger numbers of Indian students into France for higher studies. In a departure from previous practice, France would allow Indian students to take temporary jobs to meet the cost of their education and stay.

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