

FRANCE'S INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY IN 2021: CHARACTERISTICS, CAPABILITIES, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific has quickly become a focal point in global geopolitics as a singular strategic space that is not only central to global economic activity and energy security, but also to rising power fissures, geopolitical competition and preserving the rules-based order. The rise of China in the Indo-Pacific has, over the past few years, been accompanied by its unilateral, aggressive actions that challenge the status-quo, throwing the region into flux. The emerging US-China great power competition has tested the strength of the regional security architecture, with China posing a challenge to the regional maritime trading order. Economically too, with a third of the total global trade passing through the region, it has quickly become of central concern to all the international actors dependent on it. As a result, much as Europe's geopolitical fissures once drew global powers to its sphere, extra-territorial states are increasingly drawn to the

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France was the first EU member nation to publish an Indo-Pacific strategy paper in 2018, marking the region as a clear priority in its foreign policy outlook under the leadership of President Emmanuel Macron.

Indo-Pacific's orbit—and its frictions—whether due to economic, geopolitical, geo-strategic, or environmental concerns. While European powers are not traditional security actors in the Indo-Pacific, they have increasingly sought to think strategically about the region. France,¹ Germany,² the Netherlands³ and the UK⁴ have all featured Indo-Pacific strategies as a part of their foreign policy formulations. Most recently, the EU released a preliminary Indo-Pacific strategy, that is expected to be formally adopted in September 2021.

Amongst these external actors, France was the first EU member nation to publish an Indo-Pacific strategy paper in 2018, marking the region as a clear priority in its foreign policy outlook under the leadership of President Emmanuel Macron. In 2019, France's interest in the region was codified in key government papers, such as, France's Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific (by the French Ministry for the Armed Forces) and the French Strategy in

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1. Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, *The Indo-Pacific region: A priority for France*, (Paris: Directorate for Asia and Oceania, France Diplomacy, updated April 2021), at <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/asia-and-oceania/the-indo-pacific-region-a-priority-for-france/>.
 2. Federal Foreign Office of Germany, *Germany-Europe-Asia: Shaping the 21st Century Together: The German Government Adopts Policy Guidelines on the Indo-Pacific Region* (Berlin: Federal Foreign Office, September 1, 2020), at <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2380514/f9784f7e3b3fa1bd7c5446d274a4169e/200901-indo-pazifik-leitlinien--1--data.pdf>.
 3. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for strengthening Dutch and EU cooperation with partners in Asia*, AVT/BZ-201002-011A (The Hague: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, November 2020), at <https://www.government.nl/binaries/government/documents/publications/2020/11/13/indo-pacific-guidelines/Indo-Pacific+Guidelines+EN.pdf>. Also see Sebastian Strangio, "Following France and Germany, the Netherlands Pivots to the Indo-Pacific", *The Diplomat*, November 18, 2020, at <https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/following-france-and-germany-the-netherlands-pivots-to-the-indo-pacific>.
 4. HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, CP 403 (London: APS Group on behalf of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office, March 2021), at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/975077/Global_Britain_in_a_Competitive_Age-the_Integrated_Review_of_Security__Defence__Development_and_Foreign_Policy.pdf.

the Indo-Pacific (by its Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs).⁵ Since then, Paris has led the charge in promoting and shaping the EU's vision for engagement with the region. It has, in other words, come to act as a bridge between Europe and the Indo-Pacific.

This paper outlines the fundamental tenets of France's Indo-Pacific strategy and, by extension, its approach towards China. Are Paris' objectives driven primarily by economic or strategic concerns? It analyses the recently released update on France's Indo-Pacific

strategy to explore how French presence has evolved since 2018 in terms of diplomatic engagement and military activity.⁶ The paper briefly looks at France's response to the formation of Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) alliance to argue that the Franco-Indian partnership will hold added importance in coming times. Furthermore, it questions the role of the augmented French presence in the region and the efficacy of stepping up diplomatic and military engagement in restraining Chinese aggression. It explores whether France's approach is sustainable and how it could develop further in the coming times.

For France, the Indo-Pacific is not merely a geopolitical construct but a geographical reality. It perceives itself as an "island-state" of the Indo-Pacific due to its comparatively extensive territorial and military presence in the region.

FRANCE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC: A LOCAL OR EXTERNAL POWER?

For France, the Indo-Pacific is not merely a geopolitical construct but a geographical reality. It perceives itself as an "island-state" of the Indo-Pacific due to its comparatively extensive territorial and military presence in the region. France's connection with the region is unique in that it is the only European nation with territories spanning the Indian and Pacific Oceans, from the eastern coast of Africa to the South Pacific and off the western coast of Central America (see Table 1). These territories—namely, Mayonette, Scattered Island, La Réunion,

5. Ministère des Armées, *France's Defence Strategy In the Indo-Pacific* (Paris: Délégation à l'information et à la communication de la défense, 2019), https://apcss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/France-Defence_Strategy_in_the_Indo-Pacific_2019.pdf; Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, *The Indo-Pacific region*, n. 1.

6. Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, *La stratégie de la France dans l'Indopacifique*, n. 6.

Vanuatu, New Caledonia, Wallis & Futuna, French Polynesia, Clipperton Islands and French Antarctic and Sub-Antarctic territories—are home to over 1.6 million French citizens. Strategically, they provide France with the world's second largest exclusive economic zone (EEZ) after only the US, stretching 11 million square kilometres; this makes up 93 per cent of France's total EEZ. Notably, 14 per cent of French exports and 17 per cent of its total imports (barring armaments) are traded with the Indo-Pacific region; as of 2017, France holds foreign direct investment (FDI) stocks worth €108 billion. With the global economic centre of gravity shifting from the Atlantic to the Pacific, the Indo-Pacific has become critical to France's trade interests.⁷ Not only is it home to six of the world's biggest economies (members of the G20)—Australia, China, India, Indonesia, Japan and South Korea—but its maritime trade routes linking Europe to the Pacific Ocean (via the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia). France's economic engagement has been steadily growing over time to €320 billion in direct investment in 2018 (a 75 per cent increase from 2008), providing a market for one-third of non-EU French exports and supporting over 7000 French companies.⁸ Apart from the region's growing economic share in world trade, Paris also recognises its vitality in terms of biodiversity and climate change.

Table 1: French Presence in the Indo-Pacific

<i>Territory/Country</i>	Number of French Nationals	EEZ (in square kilometres)
<i>Mayotte-Reunion-Scattered Islands</i>	1,100,000 inhabitants	1,026,037 sq. km
<i>French Antarctic and Sub-Antarctic Territories</i>	-	2,070,343 sq. km
<i>New Caledonia</i>	282,000 inhabitants	1,457,032 sq. km
<i>Wallis & Futuna</i>	12,000 inhabitants	263,422 sq. km
<i>French Polynesia</i>	276,000 inhabitants	4,852,122 sq. km

7. Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, *The Indo-Pacific region*, n. 1.

8. Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, *The Indo-Pacific region*, n. 1; Pierre Morcos, "France: A Bridge between Europe and the Indo-Pacific?", Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 1, 2021, at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/france-bridge-between-europe-and-indo-pacific>.

<i>Clipperton</i>	-	438,048 sq. km
<i>China</i>	Over 30,000 nationals	-
<i>India</i>	10,000 - 30,000 nationals	-
<i>Australia</i>	10,000 - 30,000 nationals	-
<i>Japan</i>	10,000 - 30,000 nationals	-

Source: Compiled by the author based on data from the French Ministry for the Armed Forces

Such connections justify France's presence as a 'resident' Indo-Pacific state and have become a starting point for France's strategy towards the region. Importantly, the vast spread of France's territories in the region has mandated a rather broad geographical definition of the Indo-Pacific, making it a more apt geographical construct to represent French interests compared to 'Asia-Pacific'. Notably, France is the only European state with a natural role in the region, effectively serving as a bridge connecting Europe and the Indo-Pacific.

The China Factor

While these diversified geographical and economic connections are central to France's drive to be recognised as a local actor in the Indo-Pacific, its strategy is contextualised by the regional geopolitical tensions. France's pivot towards the Indo-Pacific, and attempts to shape the regional norms and order, is drawn staunchly on China's growing presence. With 57 years of diplomatic ties, both states share a global strategic partnership with high-level strategic, economic and human exchanges dialogues.⁹ In their 1997 and 2010 Sino-French Statement, both countries established a new framework for bilateral cooperation for the 21st century. They pledged to collaborate in building a multi-polar political and economic order that is prosperous, stable, secure and balanced.¹⁰ They also sought to jointly tackle shared

9. Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, *France and China: Bilateral Relations*, (Paris: Directorate for China, France Diplomacy, March 2019), at <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/china/france-and-china/>; "China, France pledge to strengthen comprehensive strategic partnership", Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Libya, November 4, 2010, at <http://ly.china-embassy.org/eng/zggk/t768622.htm>.

10. "China and France aim to build a long-term full partnership", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, accessed July 21, 2021, at https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/ziliao_665539/3602_665543/3604_665547/t18031.shtml

challenges—including terrorism, disarmament, nuclear non-proliferation and multi-trade—and “oppose any attempt to dominate international affairs.”¹¹ However, in recent years, particularly in light of the geopolitical upheavals caused by the pandemic, France-China relations have been more tense.

In 2019, Xi’s visit to Europe saw French President Emmanuel Macron lead a united European front in pushing China to address issues like unfair trade practices, restricted market access for European corporations, slow pace of opening up, lack of transparency and human rights issues, which were identified as obstacles to the France-China relationship (and more broadly, the Europe-China partnership).¹² While China is important to French economic interests—especially in the tourism sector—economic tensions, political frictions and human rights infringements feature more prominently in their bilateral dynamics. This is also evident in several of Macron’s public statements, in which he openly criticises Beijing and portrays a growing willingness to stand up to China. For instance, in a press conference post an EU summit in March 2019, against the background of a heating US-China trade war, Macron concluded that the “time of European naïveté” vis-à-vis China was over,¹³ while calling on the EU to view China first through a geopolitical and strategic lens, rather than prioritising trade ties. Macron has also cautioned European partners regarding China’s financing and investment practices, particularly under President Xi’s flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),¹⁴ while calling for a more coordinated European approach so as to prevent China from continuing to take advantage of the EU’s internal divisions.

11. Ibid.

12. Eleanor Albert, “Are China-France Relations in Trouble?”, *The Diplomat*, May 3, 2019, at <https://thediplomat.com/2019/05/are-china-france-relations-in-trouble/>; Rick Noack and James McAuley, “France’s Macron visits China to talk fairer trade and the future”, *Washington Post*, January 8, 2018, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/01/08/frances-macron-visits-china-to-talk-fairer-trade-and-the-future/?utm_term=.6e580a1a6d71

13. Michael Peel, Victor Mallet and Miles Johnson, “Macron hails ‘end of Europe naïveté’ towards China”, *Financial Times*, March 22, 2019, at <https://www.ft.com/content/ec9671ae-4cbb-11e9-bbc9-6917dce3dc62>

14. John Irish, “Macron warns of Chinese risk to African sovereignty”, *Reuters*, March 12, 2019, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-djibouti-france-idUSKBN1QS2QP>

The COVID-19 pandemic only added further strain to Paris-Beijing ties. China's aggressiveness was evident as European states battled the pandemic, especially with regards to its wolf warrior diplomatic tactics which saw Beijing attempt to frame itself as a 'global saviour' while abrasively criticising and promoting 'fake news'.¹⁵ In a tone reminiscent of Russian-style information manipulation, France has borne witness to derisive and snide tweets by the Chinese Embassy (with a staggering 8700 posts since the page's opening).¹⁶ In fact, France was forced to express official "disapproval" of "public stances" by Chinese representatives.¹⁷ More recently, in a sign of escalating diplomatic tensions, Chinese social media insults directed at a French academic who criticised China prompted Paris to issue a strong warning that it was not a "doormat" and would not tolerate "threats and intimidation."¹⁸ Such instances have not only raised political frictions, but also worsened the French public's perception of China. Essentially, France's changing dynamics with Beijing as well as its physical presence in what is quickly becoming a region central to global geopolitical balance has made France particularly cognisant of the importance of the Indo-Pacific axis.

The Central Tenets of Paris' Indo-Pacific Strategy

Macron's more hawkish position on China has been accompanied by a bolder foreign policy—and its pivot to the Indo-Pacific is predicated on this strategy. Paris' Indo-Pacific strategy, driven by a vision for a "stable,

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15. A buzzword, 'fake news' is often confused with the several types of misinformation, disinformation and hoaxes. Here, 'fake news' is used as a comprehensive term, defined as fabricated information intentionally designed to mislead or manipulate.
 16. Etienne Soula, "France Gets a Taste of Beijing's 'Wolf Warrior' Diplomacy", Alliance for Securing Democracy, GMF, April 21, 2020, at <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/france-gets-a-taste-of-beijings-wolf-warrior-diplomacy/>
 17. Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, "Communiqué issued by M. Jean-Yves Le Drian, Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs", Directorate for China, France Diplomacy, April 14, 2020, at <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/china/news/article/communique-issued-by-m-jean-yves-le-drian-minister-for-europe-and-foreign>.
 18. Sébastien Seibt, "Wolf warriors and a 'crazed hyena': French researcher 'not intimidated' after clash with China envoy", *France 24*, March 23, 2021, at <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20210323-wolf-warriors-and-a-crazed-hyena-french-researcher-not-intimidated-after-clash-with-china-envoy>; Asia Nussbaum and William Horobin, "French Minister Slams China's Threats and Intimidation", *Bloomberg*, March 23, 2021, at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-03-23/france-s-beaune-slams-china-s-threats-and-intimidation>

While Paris' strategy continues to highlight the need for constructive high-level dialogue with China, it also displays a clear shift in weightage to other partners based on shared values and interests.

law-based, multipolar order," seeks to envision France as an "inclusive and stabilising power."¹⁹

To realise this vision, France identifies five key objectives for its Indo-Pacific defence strategy:²⁰

- To ensure and defend France's sovereignty, territorial integrity, the protection of its nationals and its EEZ.
 - To contribute to the safety of common spaces by promoting military and security cooperation.
 - To preserve access to common areas amidst intensifying strategic competition and unstable military environment.
- To help maintain strategic stability and military balance of power through international action via multilateralism.
 - To anticipate and respond to the security risks posed by climate change.

The strategy is reinforced by four pillars.²¹ *First*, to initiate stronger action in responding to regional challenges, such as maritime security, terrorism and organised crime. *Second*, to strengthen France's strategic partnerships with like-minded regional partners India, Japan, Australia, South Korea, Indonesia and Singapore. While Paris' strategy continues to highlight the need for constructive high-level dialogue with China, it also displays a clear shift in weightage to other partners based on shared values and interests. *Third*, to play a greater role in regional organisations to promote multilateralism. The Association of Southeast Nations (ASEAN) and its derivate bodies, like the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM+), the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF),

19. Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, *The Indo-Pacific region*, n. 1.

20. Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, *La stratégie de la France dans l'Indopacifique*, n. 6, p. 55.

21. Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, "United States - Visit by Jean-Yves Le Drian - speech at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace," Directorate for the United States, France Diplomacy, July 14, 2021, at <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/united-states/events/article/united-states-visit-by-jean-yves-le-drian-speech-at-the-carnegie-endowment-for>.

and the Pacific Community (SPC) feature prominently under this agenda; issue-specific forums like the Heads of Asian Coast Guard Agencies Meeting (HACGAM), the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP), and the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) are also included in France's focus on the region. While Paris is already a part of these bodies as a full-fledged or dialogue partner (it is a founding member of the SPREP), it aims to deepen its contributions and engage more broadly with these bodies. *Fourth*, through increased participation in regional forums and deepened bilateral frameworks, Paris aims to promote cooperation in commonalities (like climate change, biodiversity, blue economy, healthcare, digital technology, and high-quality infrastructure and connectivity). Within this context, France is committed to advancing engagement with the Indo-Pacific via the EU, particularly through collaboration in sustainable development and stability, under an extension of the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy.

FRANCE'S PARTNERSHIPS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

Since 2018, these four tenets of France's Indo-Pacific strategy have been amply visible in its foreign policy decision-making and conduct. In other words, the Indo-Pacific has become an area of priority for Paris; its commitment to the region is visible in the significant and tangible progress that France has made in its strategic engagement with key partners.²²

An India-centred Vision?

France's vision (and geographical definition) for the region dovetails well with that of India, with New Delhi serving as a central pillar in its regional

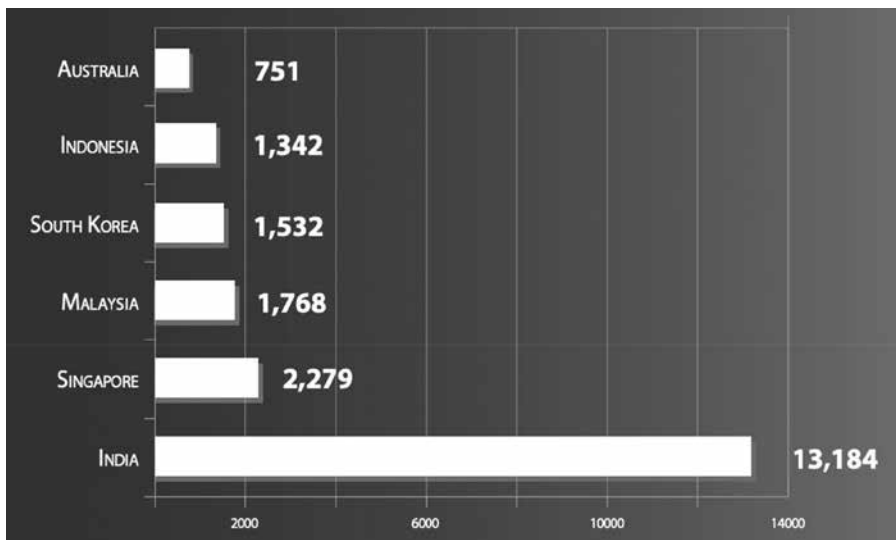
22. Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, *France's Partnerships in the Indo-Pacific*, (Paris: Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, April 2021), <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/photos-publications-and-graphics/publications/article/france-s-partnerships-in-the-indo-pacific-apr-2021>.

outreach. First, both states emphasise the need for a multipolar regional order forged through inclusiveness and continued engagement with China. By comparison, US and Japan's 'free and open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP) strategy relegates inclusiveness to a secondary goal; inclusivity was only accorded equal importance in more recent Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) statements under Biden. Second, unlike the US, Japan and Australia, for whom the Indo-Pacific comes as an extension of the Pacific, France accords equal weightage to the Indian Ocean. Bilaterally, both states have come to share a strong, strategic and broad-based partnership spanning sectors like defence (VARUNA naval exercises), defence procurement (see Figure 1),²³ nuclear power,²⁴ space,²⁵ climate change and renewable energy,²⁶ maritime security, infrastructure development,²⁷ blue economy and cooperation within regional and global forums. India is not only a market for French military hardware (most prominently the Rafale jets) but also a low-cost base for manufacturing for export to the rest of the Indo-Pacific.²⁸ Both are co-chairs of the International Solar Alliance (ISA) and support each other in the IORA and Indian Ocean Commission (IOC); France recently agreed to join India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), which seeks to bring together regional powers in an inclusive format focused on common interests.²⁹

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23. Shishir Gupta, "On Rafale and deadly Panther choppers, India gets a huge offer from France", *Hindustan Times*, January 10, 2021, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/france-offers-to-shift-panther-chopper-assembly-line-to-india-rafale-too-101610181121676.html>
 24. PTI, "India-France making 'satisfactory progress' on nuclear power plant pact: Government", at *Economic Times*, January 3, 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/energy/power/india-france-making-satisfactory-progress-on-nuclear-power-plant-pact-government/articleshow/67368750.cms?from=mdr>
 25. Doug Messier, "France, India Space Cooperation to Focus on Climate and Human Spaceflight", *Parabolic Arc*, October 1, 2020, at <http://www.parabolicarc.com/2020/10/01/france-india-space-cooperation-to-focus-on-climate-and-human-spaceflight/>.
 26. Saurabh Chaturvedi, "France's Total agrees to acquire 37.4% of India's Adani Gas", *Market Watch*, October 14, 2019, at <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/frances-total-agrees-to-acquire-374-of-indias-adani-gas-2019-10-14>.
 27. PTI, "India, France sign two agreements to boost cooperation in Railway", *Financial Express*, March 11, 2018, at <https://www.financialexpress.com/infrastructure/railways/india-france-sign-two-agreements-to-boost-cooperation-in-railway/1094458/>
 28. Salvatore Babones, "Why France Has a Much Better India Strategy Than America", *Foreign Policy*, February 1, 2021, at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/02/01/france-india-better-strategy-than-america/>
 29. PTI, "India, France explore ways to strengthen cooperation in Indo-Pacific", *Business Standard*, April 13, 2021, at https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/india-france-explore-ways-to-strengthen-cooperation-in-indo-pacific-121041301175_1.html

France also backs India's candidacy for a permanent UNSC seat,³⁰ and both the countries coordinated their strategies as they acted as successive UNSC Presidents in July and August 2021.³¹

Figure 1: Main Partners of France in the Asia-Pacific as Regards to Armaments in millions of euros (2008-2017)



Source: French Ministry for the Armed Forces

Based on such synergy, France has sought to build its alliances in the region around India. In 2020, both launched a trilateral with Australia to form a Paris-Delhi-Canberra axis with three areas identified for joint action: maritime security, protecting marine resources and environment (through joint projects under the ISA), and enhanced cooperation under multilateral forums (including IORA, IOC and the G20 ahead of India's presidency in 2023).³² Although currently limited, this "outcome-oriented" grouping has

30. Express News Service, "France backs India candidature for permanent UNSC seat: Florence Parly", *Indian Express*, September 11, 2020, at <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/france-backs-india-candidature-for-permanent-uns-c-seat-florence-parly-6591287/>.

31. Emmanuel Lenain, "France and India's successive presidencies are a force for good in UN Security Council", *Indian Express*, July 1, 2021, at <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/france-and-indias-successive-presidencies-are-a-force-for-good-in-un-security-council-7383349/>.

32. Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, *France's Partnerships in the Indo-Pacific*, n. 22.

Franco-Japanese special strategic partnership has found increased convergence under Paris' pivot to the Indo-Pacific...

In June 2019, they established a roadmap for an Indo-Pacific partnership covering four areas: maritime security, climate change, quality infrastructure and healthcare.

extensive potential for practical cooperation,³³ such as in exploring a 'China+One' strategy for supply chain resilience, defence manufacturing and technologies, intelligence-sharing, infrastructure-building, military exercises and politico-diplomatic ventures.³⁴

Similarly, the Franco-Japanese special strategic partnership³⁵ has found increased convergence under Paris' pivot to the Indo-Pacific, which Tokyo championed under former President Shinzo Abe. In June 2019, they established a roadmap for an Indo-Pacific partnership covering four areas: maritime security, climate change, quality infrastructure and healthcare.³⁶ As part of

this elevated relationship, both states have already initiated joint military exercises and joint development projects, including those in Southeast Asia.³⁷ In January 2021, France held a joint workshop with India and Japan on maritime security and digital connectivity;³⁸ this marked the first step in Paris' effort to gradually

33. Ministry of External Affairs, "1st Senior Officials' India-France-Australia Trilateral Dialogue," (press release, n.d., Ministry of External Affairs Media Centre, September 9, 2020), at <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/32950/1st+senior+officials+indiafranceaustralia+trilateral+dialogue>

34. Niklas Swanström, Jagannath Panda and Mahima N. Duggal, "Balancing China in the Indo-Pacific: France Joins Hands with India and Australia", Issue Brief, Institute for Security and Development Policy, November 2, 2020, at <https://isd.eu/content/uploads/2020/11/Balancing-China-in-the-Indo-Pacific-IB.pdf>

35. Céline Pajon, "A New Japan-France Strategic Partnership: A View from Paris", Lettre du Centre Asie, No. 74, Ifri, November 16, 2018, at https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/pajon_japan_france_strategic_partnership_2018.pdf

36. "Japan-France Summit Meeting", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, June 26, 2019, at https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/we/fr/page4e_001052.html; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Roadmap on Japan-France Cooperation for Opening New Horizons between Japan and France under an Exceptional Partnership (2019-2023) [Translated]*, (Tokyo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, June 2019), at <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000492473.pdf>

37. Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, *France's Partnerships in the Indo-Pacific*, n. 22.

38. "Foreign Secretary's Introductory Remarks at the India-France-Japan Workshop on the Indo-Pacific", Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, January 19, 2021, at <https://mea>.

build an Indo-Pacific bloc to complement the Paris-Delhi-Canberra trilateral. This trilateral would not only strengthen France's presence and engagement in the region, but also contribute to the advancement of India-Japan third country cooperation agenda.

In a few of years, Paris has significantly augmented its diplomatic and political presence in the Indo-Pacific. It has built on its partnerships with Indonesia, Singapore and Vietnam to emerge as a development partner for ASEAN—a vital move to balance

China's own aid outreach to the region. It has expanded the mandate of its development agency, Agence française de développement (AFD), to conduct and participate in both bilateral and regional projects, and work in tandem with regional partners. Critically, France also successfully pushed the EU to adopt conclusions on a strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific (expected to be fully shaped by September 2021) and promote the need for a coherent EU strategy on China.³⁹

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France's India Connect Post-AUKUS

The already immense importance that New Delhi holds in Paris' regional diplomatic strategy is only likely to be further augmented after the AUKUS debacle. The AUKUS coalition, announced in September 2021, commits to bolster Australia's capabilities by leveraging the expertise of the US and UK through enhanced sharing of defence-related science and information technology and deeper integration of industrial bases

gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/33397/Foreign_Secretarys_Introductory_Remarks_at_the_IndiaFranceJapan_Workshop_on_the_IndoPacific; Indrani Bagchi, "India, France & Japan plan Indo-Pacific bloc", *Times of India*, January 20, 2021, at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-france-japan-plan-indo-pacific-bloc/articleshow/80356858.cms>

39. General Secretariat of the Council, *Council conclusions on an EU Strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific* (Brussels: Council of the European Union, April 2021), at <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7914-2021-INIT/en/pdf>

and supply chains.⁴⁰ The first joint endeavour under AUKUS involves supporting Australia's development of nuclear-powered submarines (for which the US will transfer its nuclear propulsion technology and UK provide technical assistance). This development caused Canberra to suddenly break its 2016 submarine deal worth over €50 billion with France to Paris's intense fury; France saw the move as a "stab in the back" and a serious breach of mutual trust by both Australia and the US.⁴¹ The abrupt, undiplomatic, and even brutal way the cancellation was announced only furthered France's lividity. It grossly undermined France's Indo-Pacific strategy. The Franco-Australian submarine deal was a key factor underpinning French presence and partnerships to show its commitment to the region; its cancellation therefore sent a message that France was being sidelined from Washington's consolidating security architecture. This in turn will make it more difficult for proponents of the Indo-Pacific in France to "defend an alliance of democracies against China to collaborate with a US administration whose methods are abrupt, including with regard to its own camp."⁴²

Importantly for India, the incident weakens the France-Australia security partnership that reinforces the Paris-Delhi-Canberra trilateral.⁴³ Not only did France recall its ambassador to Australia (and the US), but also cancelled its upcoming ministerial meeting of the trilateral. As France rethinks its approach to the region and devises strategies to continue to bolster its presence in the region post AUKUS, the France-

40. "Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS", Statements and Releases, White House, September 15, 2021, at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/15/joint-leaders-statement-on-aukus/>.

41. Jules Darmanin and Zoya Sheftalovich, "'Stab in the back': France slams Australia, US over move to ditch €50B submarine deal", *Politico*, September 16, 2021, at <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-slams-australia-us-e50b-submarine-deal/>.

42. Valerie Niquet and Marianne Peron-Doise, "AUKUS and Submarines: The Fallout for France", *The Diplomat*, September 18, 2021, at <https://thediplomat.com/2021/09/aukus-and-submarines-the-fallout-for-france/>.

43. Pierre Morcos, "How France-Australia Cooperation can Help Stabilize the Indo-Pacific", *War on the Rocks*, April 5, 2021, at <https://warontherocks.com/2021/04/how-franco-australian-cooperation-can-help-stabilize-the-indo-pacific/>.

India partnership can gain added importance. In their most recent interaction in September 2021, Prime Minister Modi and President Macron reemphasised mutual trust and respect in the prized Paris-Delhi partnership and committed to deeper and broader cooperation.⁴⁴ As France increasingly recognises that transatlantic tensions will continue to feature in the coming times, Paris and Delhi can work to strengthen their binary as middle powers; France can help reinforce India's strategic autonomy (such as through increased defence trade, and supporting India's industrial and technological base), while India can be a key pillar of French Indo-Pacific approach.

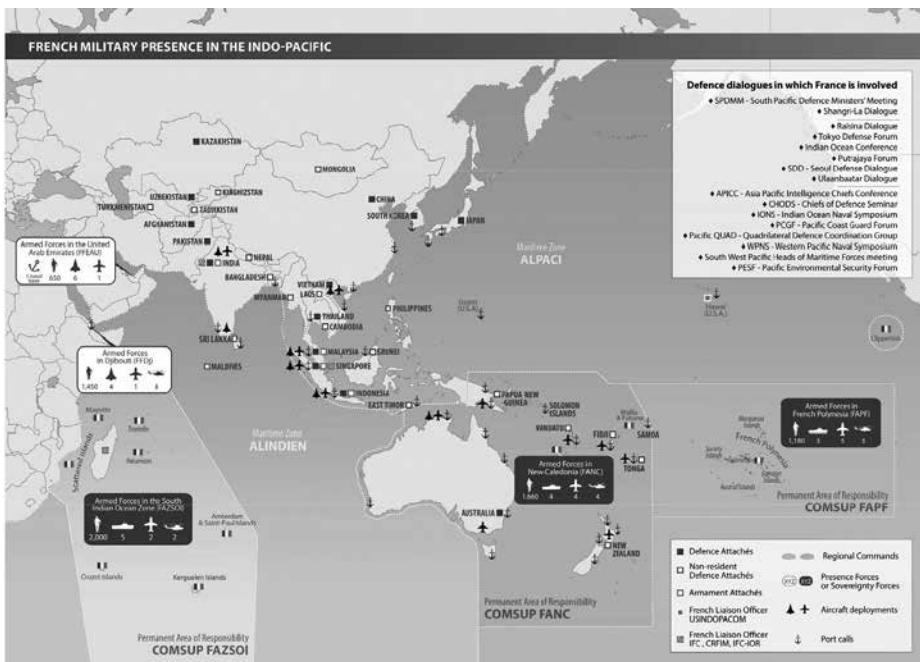
FRANCE: AN INDO-PACIFIC MILITARY POWER?

France's diplomatic endeavours in building alliances in the Indo-Pacific are complemented by its military presence in the region, which is divided into three permanent areas of responsibility: the South Indian Ocean Zone, New Caledonia, and French Polynesia (see Figure 2).⁴⁵ In the Indian Ocean, France has over 4000 personnel divided over bases at the United Arab Emirates, Djibouti, La Réunion and Mayotte Islands. In the Pacific, France has almost 3000 military personnel spanning New Caledonia and French Polynesia. The strength and capacity of the forces in these commands is detailed in Table 2. Over 60 per cent of France's total permanent overseas military commitments are stationed in the region to deal with potential security threats. In addition, Paris maintains defence attachés, armament attachés and liaison officers in 33 regional powers, which are central in shaping interactions with key Indo-Pacific powers; this network has essentially facilitated the creation of a security continuum from the East Africa to Western America.

44. "PM speaks on telephone with President of France", Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, September 21, 2021, at <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/34291/PM+speaks+on+telephone+with+President+of+France>.

45. Ministère des Armées, *France and Security in the Indo-Pacific* (Paris: Délégation à l'information et à la communication de la défense, May 2019), 7, at <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/layout/set/print/content/download/532754/9176250/version/3/file/France+and+Security+in+the+Indo-Pacific+-+2019.pdf>.

Figure 2: French Military Presence in the Indo-Pacific (2018)



Source: French Ministry for the Armed Forces

Table 2: French Military Presence in its Indo-Pacific Commands

Military Base	Capacity
North Indian Ocean (United Arab Emirates and Djibouti)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combat aircraft (6 Rafale in the UAE and 4 Mirage-2000 in Djibouti) • 8 helicopters • 1 tactical transport aircraft
South of the Indian Ocean (La Réunion and Mayotte islands)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 surveillance frigates equipped with 1 helicopter each • 1 supply and support vessel • 2 patrol vessels (including 1 polar patrol vessel) • 2 tactical aircraft
Pacific Ocean (New Caledonia and French Polynesia)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 surveillance frigates equipped with 1 helicopter each • 2 multi-dimensional ships • 3 patrol vessels • 2 multi-mission ships • 5 maritime surveillance aircraft • 4 tactical transport aircraft • 5 helicopters

Source: Compiled by the author based on data from the French Ministry for the Armed Forces

In studying French military capabilities, it is also important to recognise that France's commitment to security in the region is multi-dimensional. France's 2017 Defence and National Security Strategic Review painted an alarming picture of how major upheaval in the region now posed a direct threat to France and Europe, and military power on the international stage was crucial to achieving French ambitions.⁴⁶ This was reinforced in the 2021 update to this Strategic Review, which took into account the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and US-China competition.⁴⁷ The 2021 update to France's Indo-Pacific strategy further contextualised these in the region.⁴⁸ Power assertiveness, return of strategic great power competition, deteriorating rule of law and multilateralism, maritime conflicts, incremental use of hybrid strategies through new technologies, terrorism, proliferation, as well as unconventional security challenges like climate change are all identified as threats requiring urgent attention. This change in the strategic, politico-legal and technological regional environment has emphasised the urgency of modernisation—as laid out in France's Military Planning Law of 2018—to build a “coherent, agile and innovative armed forces model.”⁴⁹

Such extensive recognition of threats that have a direct consequence on France's national security has caused Paris to step up its military activities in the region. In part, this focus is driven by a need to match a persistent trend amongst Indo-Pacific powers to invest heavily in large and modern militaries; the region is home to seven of the world's 10 highest defence budgets, making it prone to a tougher operational environment and undermining of regional and global balance of power. Apart from humanitarian and disaster relief (HADR) and anti-trafficking

46. Strategic Review Committee, *Defence and National Security Strategic Review* (Paris: Délégation à l'information et à la communication de la défense, October 2017), at <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/content/download/520198/8733095/file/DEFENCE%20AND%20NATIONAL%20SECURITY%20STRATEGIC%20REVIEW%202017.pdf>.

47. Ministère des Armées, *Strategic Update 2021* (Paris: Délégation à l'information et à la communication de la défense, February 5, 2021), at <https://cd-geneve.delegfrance.org/Defence-and-National-Security-Strategic-Review-1890>.

48. Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, *La stratégie de la France dans l'Indopacifique*, n. 6.

49. Ministère des Armées, *Strategic Update 2021*, 8.

missions, these bases are also central to France's surveillance activities in the region, protecting its EEZ and participating joint military exercises (see Table 3).

Table 3: French Bilateral and Regional Military Exercises in the Indo-Pacific

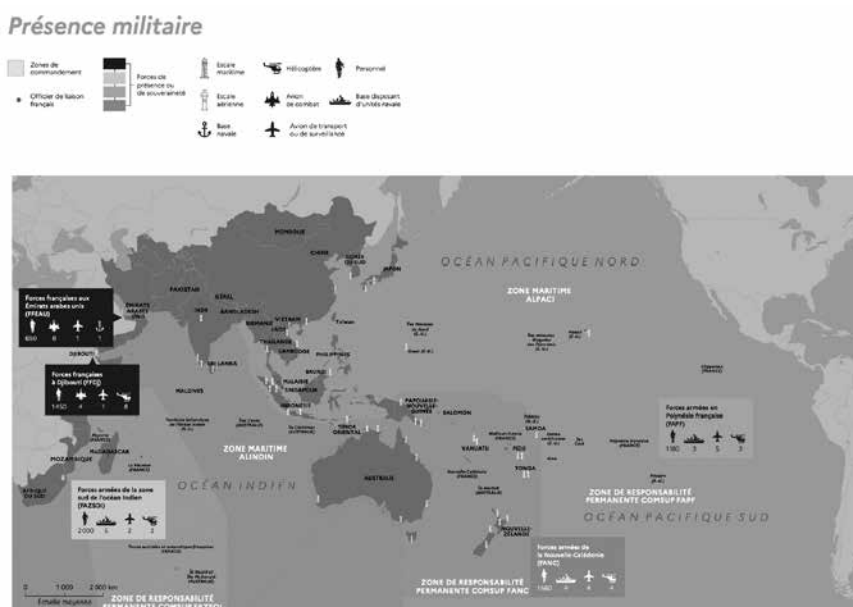
Countries/Region	Joint Military Exercises
India	Varuna (Naval), Garuda (Air Power), Shakti (Army) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annual bilateral exercises Desert Knight (Air Power) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First edition held in January 2021, jointly organised as part of France's SKYROS deployment • Both participated with their Rafale jets (among others)
Australia	Pitch Black (Air Power), Kakadu (Naval) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Biennial simulated warfare exercise with multilateral participation from Indo-Pacific powers Australian Army Skill at Arms Meet (Army) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A competition for individuals and armed units between Australia and foreign armies invited to participate, to allow an assessment of capabilities Koolendong (Army) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • US-Australia led exercise with French participation since 2016
South Korea	Key Resolve <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annual multilateral exercise led by US-South Korea, involving several hundred thousand soldiers and civilians • Complex exercise comprising smaller air, land and sea exercises Ulchi Freedom Guardian <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • World's largest computer-based simulation exercise held annually

Thailand	Cobra Gold (Army) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annual multinational exercise organised by US and Thailand, with French participation (alongside Mongolia, Nepal, New Zealand, Fiji and Philippines) Pirab Jabiru <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Biennial exercise co-organised by Thailand and Australia, with over 100 participants from 20 countries • Peace-keeping exercise involving militaries, police forces, government and non-governmental organisations
Singapore	Coores, Marixs
Indonesia	Komodo (Navy) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Biannual multilateral exercise focused on HADR
Mongolia	Khaan Quest (Armed forces) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annual multinational exercise co-organised by Mongolia and the US focused on UN peacekeeping
Bay of Bengal	La Pérouse (Naval) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Led by France, includes India, Japan, Australia and the US alongside France, first edition held in April 2021
United Arab Emirates (UAE)	Desert Flag-VI (Air Power) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involves UAE, US, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and France • Observer forces: Jordan, Greece, Qatar, Egypt, South Korea
Indian Ocean	Papangue (Armed forces) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multinational exercise organised by France in Reunion to enhance interoperability in evacuating nationals • Involves deploying land, sea and air assets
Pacific Ocean	Marara, Equateur, Croix du Sud <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organised by France via its French Polynesian and New Caledonian Armed Forces and focused on HADR

Source: Compiled by the Author

France's Military Deployments to the Indo-Pacific

Notably, according to a recent French government update, France's permanent military capabilities in the Indo-Pacific remain unchanged



Following this, the Marianne mission saw, for the first time in the Western Pacific, the deployment of the nuclear attack submarine L'Emeraude, to conduct a patrol of the highly contentious South China Sea waters.⁵³ It aimed to not only affirm freedom of navigation and rule of international maritime law—the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)—but also demonstrate France's ability to deploy strategic resources 15,000 km away and over long durations (8 months), despite the difficulties imposed by the health crisis.⁵⁴

Importantly, France has focused extensively on augmenting its Air Force and Space presence in the region, such as through its contribution to the missions of the forces of sovereignty, through its participation in exercise *Pitch Black* 2018 (Australia), *Pegasus* 2018 missions (South-East Asia) and *Skyros* 2021 (Indian Ocean). France and India also held joint air exercise *Desert Knight-21* (in addition to their on-going *Garuda* series) in January 2021, deploying fighter jets (including Rafale), transport and tanker aircraft; the mega exercise came as the Indian Air Force remains in a state of high operational readiness in light of border tensions with China.⁵⁵ In the maritime domain, in April 2021, both states conducted the 19th edition of their annual naval exercise, *Varuna*, with "high tempo-naval operations at sea, including advanced air defense and anti-submarines exercises, intense fixed and rotary wing flying operations including cross deck helicopter landings, tactical manoeuvres, surface and anti-air weapon firings, underway replenishment and other maritime security operations."⁵⁶ They came as a part of the long-

53. Sebastian Seibt, "France wades into the South China Sea with a nuclear attack submarine", *France 24*, February 12, 2021, at <https://www.france24.com/en/france/20210212-france-wades-into-the-south-china-sea-with-a-nuclear-attack-submarine>.

54. Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, *La stratégie de la France dans l'Indopacifique*, n. 6, p. 24.

55. PTL, "Indian, French air forces to conduct 5-day joint military drill near Jodhpur from January 20", *Times of India*, January 18, 2021, at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/indian-french-air-forces-to-conduct-5-day-joint-military-drill-near-jodhpur-from-january-20/articleshow/80332123.cms>.

56. Ministry of Defence, "Exercise Varuna - 2021" (press release, Release ID: 1713839, Press Information Bureau, April 24, 2021), at <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1713839>; Also see Rajeshwari Pillai Rajagopalan, "India-France Naval Exercise: Growing Strategic Synergy", *Diplomat*, May 13, 2021, at <https://thediplomat.com/2021/05/india-france-naval-exercise-growing-strategic-synergy/>.

term deployment (February to June 2021) of the French CSG for *Mission Clemenceau 21* in the Mediterranean, Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean.⁵⁷ The India-France military logistics agreement of 2018 provides further synergy between the two countries, widening their respective strategic outreach and enhancing interoperability.

India is far from the only focus for French military activity in the region. Paris has also led the *La Pérouse* exercises in the Bay of Bengal in April with the Quad member states since 2019, with India joining its 2021 edition.⁵⁸ In the Pacific, it organises the Southern Cross in New Caledonia and also participates in fishery policing and rescue operations post-natural disasters, via its armed forces based in New Caledonia and Ploynesia, under the FRANZ agreement.⁵⁹ Notably, France, Japan, Australia and the US initiated their first-ever large-scale joint exercises in southwest Japan and the East China Sea.⁶⁰ The drill took place against the backdrop of China's rising maritime assertiveness vis-à-vis the disputed Senkaku islands and Beijing's Taiwan reunification agenda, to bolster cooperation between like-minded powers.

Such deployments offer France an avenue for greater cooperation with critical partners such as India, Japan, Australia and the US. This expanded defence in the Indo-Pacific theatre (with allies India, Japan and Australia), first instituted in 2019, is a strong symbol of France's commitment to strengthen its presence and partnerships and acts as a bridge linking the region to Europe. Further, they demonstrate a gradually building convergence between France and the Quad, opening the possibility of a 'Quad+France' framework. This is further complemented by French involvement in regional defence dialogues—like the ADMM+, South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting

57. Ministère des Armées, *Press Kit—Clemenceau 21 Mission* (Paris: Ministère des Armées, February 18, 2021), at https://www.defense.gouv.fr/english/content/download/606899/10193070/Press%20Kit_Clemenceau21_ENG.pdf.

58. Milind Kulshreshtha, "French Naval Exercise La Perouse: India Joins to Mke it Full QUAD", *Financial Express*, April 3, 2021, at <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/french-naval-exercise-la-perouse-india-joins-to-make-it-full-quad/2226137/>.

59. Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, *La stratégie de la France dans l'Indopacifique*, n. 6, pp. 55-56.

60. "Japan embarks on joint military manoeuvres with US, France, Australia", *Nikkei Asia*, May 11, 2021, at <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Japan-embarks-on-joint-military-maneuvers-with-US-France-Australia>.

(SPDMM), Shangri-La Dialogue, Raisina Dialogue, Tokyo Defense Forum, Indian Ocean Conference, Putrajaya Forum, Seoul Defense Dialogue (SDD), Ulaanbaatar Dialogue, Asia Pacific Intelligence Chiefs Conference (APICC), Chiefs of Defence Seminar (CHODS), Pacific Coast Guard Forum (PCGF), Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group (Pacific QUAD), Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS), South West Pacific Heads of Maritime Forces Meeting, Pacific Environmental Security Forum (PESF), and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS).

Simultaneously, it should be noted that France's military commitment to the Indo-Pacific is driven, at least in part, by commercial factors as well. India features as a major market for French military equipment. France's sale of 36 4.5 generation nuclear-capable Rafale fighters, six Scorpene-class submarines, light utility helicopters and missile systems to India;⁶¹ 12 conventional attack submarines and Australia;⁶² and upgrades to French equipment (six Lafayette frigates and 60 Mirage 2000 fighter jets) sold to Taipei in 1991⁶³ only demonstrate its commitment to the long-term security of the region.

THE ROAD AHEAD: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

France's human, territorial, political and military presence in the region has facilitated the formation of trust-based, close and long-term partnerships with like-minded states. In many ways, France's acute focus on regional partnerships has helped frame France as a resident Indo-Pacific power, thereby legitimising its position and role in the region. However, to fully realise its potential in the region, Paris must actively pursue new avenues for deepening engagement and constantly evolve its strategy to tackle persisting challenges to French engagement.

61. Rahul Bedi, "Rafale Delivery Underlines France's 'Below Radar' Role as Key Source of Weapons for India", *The Wire*, July 30, 2020, at <https://thewire.in/security/rafale-delivery-underlines-frances-below-radar-role-as-key-source-of-weapons-for-india>.

62. Nigel Pittaway, "Australian defence leaders defend submarine buy with France's Naval Group", *Defense News*, January 17, 2020, at <https://www.defensenews.com/2020/01/17/australian-defense-leaders-defend-submarine-buy-with-frances-naval-group/>.

63. Yang Chung-hsin, "French arms sales could tip the scales", *Taipei Times*, June 1, 2020, at <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2020/06/01/2003737389>.

A Balancing Act

Paris's key task going ahead is striking a strategic balance between the US and China, whose primary fields of competition overlap in the Indo-Pacific. Already characterised as an intense rivalry in the economic and technological domains, Paris recognises the real threat of the competition extending to the military domain amidst an uncontrolled escalation.⁶⁴ Moving forward, Paris must navigate these tensions to prevent a crisis while balancing its ties with US and China. Although the 'Indo-Pacific' remained absent from recent US-France interactions,⁶⁵ both have several overlapping security interests in the region giving them increased convergence. Accordingly, the Indo-Pacific will be, as the French Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs stated, "at the heart of a renewed and rebalanced transatlantic partnership" that is slowly taking shape under Biden.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, despite this increasing convergence with the US, a bipolar Cold War-like scenario of "highest possible" conflict, where France is forced to align with either the US or China, is not in Paris' interest.⁶⁷

Simultaneously, Paris must find ways to constrain behaviour of regional players who threaten to undermine stability or disintegrate the international order. China is at once a partner, competitor and strategic rival for Paris (and the EU);⁶⁸ how Paris balances these overlapping dimensions will dictate the success of Paris' regional objectives. Therefore, engagement with Beijing

64. Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, *La stratégie de la France dans l'Indopacifique*, n. 6.

65. White House, "President Biden's Meeting with President Macron", US Embassy & Consulates in France, June 12, 2021, at <https://fr.usembassy.gov/president-bidens-meeting-with-president-macron/>; Office of the Spokesperson, "The United States and France: Allies, Partners, and Friends", US Embassy & Consulates in France, June 24, 2021, at <https://fr.usembassy.gov/the-united-states-and-france-allies-partners-and-friends/>.

66. Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, "United States—Visit by Jean-Yves Le Drian—speech at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace".

67. Rym Momtaz, "Macron: EU shouldn't gang up on China with US", *Politico*, February 4, 2021, at <https://www.politico.eu/article/macron-eu-shouldnt-gang-up-on-china-with-u-s/>; "France won't align with US or China on Indo-Pacific", *Times of India*, June 11, 2021, at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/europe/france-wont-align-with-us-or-china-on-indo-pacific/articleshow/83420182.cms>.

68. Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, "United States - Visit by Jean-Yves Le Drian", n. 66.

must be balanced by a strong stance on promoting universal values (such as against Chinese digital authoritarianism), while also regulating US-China trade, technology and security competition.

France will need to navigate these waters delicately and act as a balancing and stabilising regional power; here, strategic partnerships with other middle power states—India, Japan and Australia—as well as ASEAN will be crucial. In concert with these actors, France must lead the way in shaping the transatlantic pivot towards the region such that the approach is defined not by confrontation but promotion of an inclusive region underpinned by a rules-based order. This will ensure the continuation of multilateralism's strengthening and the promotion of Europe's strategic autonomy. Now that France has successfully framed its regional presence as a local actor, it must conceive ways to become a regional leader in order to shape tomorrow's equilibrium today.

Overcoming Colonial History

France has contended that through electing delegates to the French National Assembly and Senate, it has established itself as a local democratic actor rather than an external colonial power. However, while the Réunion and Mayonette islands (départements) are inalienable French territories, New Caledonia, French Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna Islands are categorised as French overseas collectives with broad autonomy.⁶⁹

Although France's territories and military presence give it resident power status, its quest for legitimacy in the region is predicated on its colonial legacy. France's history of conducting nuclear tests in these territories (1966-1996) remains a source of intense resentment in French Polynesia, whose residents tend to view them through a colonial or racist lens.⁷⁰ In 2018, New Caledonia held a referendum on independence from France, which saw

69. See David Scott, "France's "Indo-Pacific strategy: regional power projection", *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2019, pp. 76-103, at <https://dscottcom.files.wordpress.com/2019/08/france-indo-pacific-1.pdf>.

70. "France denies covering-up nuclear tests near French Polynesia in Pacific", *France 24*, March 7, 2021, at <https://www.france24.com/en/asia-pacific/20210703-france-denies-covering-up-nuclear-tests-near-french-polynesia-in-pacific>.

France's regional engagement efforts—particularly its bid to join IORA—have seen strong opposition from regional actors, including South Africa, Madagascar, Comoros, and (until recently) Australia, over its nuclear colonial past.

a narrow victory in favour of staying. In this context, France's regional engagement efforts—particularly its bid to join IORA—have seen strong opposition from regional actors, including South Africa, Madagascar, Comoros, and (until recently) Australia, over its nuclear colonial past.⁷¹ Therefore, while French strategic presence in the region is crucial, the political situation in South Pacific is complex with continued growth of pro-independence parties and movements. More notably, the local governments of these territories are seeking increased economic and investment ties with China,⁷² and could potentially complicate the narrative that they could act as bulwarks to Chinese expansionism.⁷³ Therefore, France's capabilities in the region are contingent on the "evolution of its territories on the statutory level and their will and capacity to be relays for regional action in Paris";⁷⁴ France must address these issues head-on and urgently to maintain its regional position.

A Quad Connect

Under such considerations, France's existing independent military capabilities, while adequate for undertaking sovereignty missions and joint exercises, face certain limitations; this only accentuates the importance of its partnerships and joint activities, and development of air and naval

71. Indrani Bagchi, "France's colonial link hits bid to join Indian ocean group", *Economic Times*, January 29, 2019, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/frances-colonial-link-hits-bid-to-join-indian-ocean-group/articleshow/67735530.cms>.

72. For instance, see David Wroe, "China casts its net deep into the Pacific with \$2b fish farm", *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 18, 2018, at <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/china-casts-its-net-deep-into-the-pacific-with-2b-fish-farm-20180518-p4zg69.html>.

73. Nic Maclellan, "Momentum for independence from France in the Pacific shouldn't be underestimated", at *The Strategist*, July 15, 2019, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/momentum-for-independence-from-france-in-the-pacific-shouldnt-be-underestimated/>.

74. Nicolas Regaud, *France's Indo-Pacific strategy and its overseas territories in the Indian and Pacific oceans* (Australia: Australian Strategic Policy Institute Limited, 2021), p. 4, at <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/frances-indo-pacific-strategy-and-its-overseas-territories-indian-and-pacific-oceans>.

capacities. A closer connect with the Quad grouping as a whole can be crucial to augment French pre-positioned capabilities in the region. The France-led *La Pérouse* exercise already saw it working with the Quad states on tactical manoeuvres for surface warfare, anti-air warfare and air defence.

However, there remains immense room for issue-based cooperation; for instance, Paris could be an important partner in the Quad's vaccine initiative to support Australia's mandate of 'last-mile' delivery of vaccines to remote littoral states. Furthermore, in its capacity as a link between Europe and the Indo-Pacific, France could mobilise European support for COVID-19 response and recovery in the region. Europe (alongside India) is a major producer of vaccines and a key part of the global COVAX program, and could support vaccine production efforts in the region to expand manufacturing capacities of regional states. In addition, France could also be a value-added partner in the Quad's climate change and emerging technologies initiatives. Paris' Indo-Pacific strategy has evolved uniquely in that it distinctively frames climate change as a foremost national security challenge, making it a natural partner for the Quad. In emerging tech too, as US-China great power competition intensifies, France's addition could help project a more inclusive space; critically, India, Japan and Australia can collaborate with France to frame rules for the domain to prevent competition from transcending into conflict.

Similarly, considering France's role as a trade power in the region, it can collaborate with regional economic, trade and investment-driven initiatives such as the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) and the Blue Dot Network (BDN) that are led by Quad states. Risk diversification in order to create open and resilient supply chains has emerged as a priority theme in France during the pandemic, with a staggering 73 per cent of organisations looking to change their

A closer connect with the Quad grouping as a whole can be crucial to augment French pre-positioned capabilities in the region. The France-led *La Pérouse* exercise already saw it working with the Quad states on tactical manoeuvres for surface warfare, anti-air warfare and air defence.

supply chain strategies to adapt to the shifting environment.⁷⁵ It can therefore draw considerable benefit from being a partial or full dialogue partner in the India-Japan-Australia-led SCRI, which aims to build alternate global supply chains governed by democratic values and resilient to future disruptive events. Moreover, working with the US-Japan-Australia-led BDN could help France further bolster its regional developmental aid efforts while balancing growing Chinese influence. The BDN essentially aims to act as a certification authority to encourage quality infrastructure via high transparency and sustainability standards. With the resources that Paris brings, it could push to transform the still-nascent agency into a broader, multi-stakeholder 'marketplace' venture that can promote democratic values while enhancing the quality and quantity of infrastructure and connectivity investments.⁷⁶ Importantly, this could help balance the China's BRI, which is a source of concern for France as well as the Quad states.

The German Question

Even as the Indo-Pacific region gains prominence in European outlook, it is evident that the two powers leading this initiative—France and Germany—do not have entirely compatible visions for the region. Both states continue to have obvious differences in their approaches to and priorities within the region, and share notably dissimilar dynamics with China. For one, Germany remains significantly dependent on the Chinese economy, and is therefore much more eager to continue engaging with Beijing. Therefore, while France perceives itself as a strategic local actor, Germany's stance draws primarily on its economic interests in the region; this includes its stake as a major trading nation dependent on open sea lanes and a stable environment conducive to economic growth. On the other hand, France

75. Roshan Gya, Cyndi Lago, Michael Becker, et al., *Fast Forward: Rethinking supply chain resilience for a post-COVID-19 world* (Singapore: Capgemini Research Institute), 5, at https://www.capgemini.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Fast-forward_Report.pdf

76. Jerre V. Hansbrough, "From the Blue Dot Network to the Blue Dot Marketplace: A Way to Cooperate in Strategic Competition", in Alexander L. Vuving (ed.) *Hindsight, Insight, Foresight: Thinking about Security in the Indo-Pacific* (Honolulu: Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2020), at <https://apcss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/11-Hansborough-25thA.pdf>.

has displayed a more comprehensive view encompassing the defence and security domains (which includes climate change). Moving forward, France will face a challenge in shaping the EU's Indo-Pacific engagement such that it is favourable and contributes to realising France's vision.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, since the implementation of its Indo-Pacific strategy, France has made several strides in regional engagement. It has all but succeeded in portraying itself as a regional actor with a critical role to play as a link to Europe. Not only has Paris greatly emphasised its bilateral partnerships and engaged increasingly in mini-lateral groupings, but it has also reinforced focus on multilateral institutions in the region. Moreover, it has enhanced its military activities, particularly in terms of joint exercises, with the aim to demonstrating and strengthening its commitment to the region. Nevertheless, several challenges face France as it enters into the next phase of its Indo-Pacific engagement, which will, in all likelihood, be influenced considerably by the emerging European framework. Navigating a rapidly intensifying US-China rivalry, overcoming persisting historical resentments within the region, shaping Europe's Indo-Pacific approach and initiating deeper avenues for cooperation are key challenges that France will need to contend with in the short- to medium-term future. France's response to these challenges and opportunities will determine whether it achieves its ambition of establishing itself as a stabilising power protecting freedom and the rules-based order.