



CENTRE FOR AIR POWER STUDIES

In Focus

New Delhi

CAPS InFocus: 04/2024

23 January 2024

India-France Partnering in the Indo-Pacific: Positioning Japan

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Source: Modern Diplomacy



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Keywords: India, France, Indo-Pacific, Japan, Security

Countries in the Indo-Pacific region are realigning their foreign policy outlooks and national security plans due to changes in power diffusion and transition. China's unreserved power projection and push for unipolarity present the main obstacle to the Indo-Pacific region's quest for multipolarity. France is one of India's closest allies and a strategic partner in Europe along with being the second largest arms supplier to India. This year, India's Republic Day celebrations will include French President Emmanuel Macron as the Chief Guest which shows that France is an all-weather friend to India.¹

The growing collaboration between France and India takes on greater relevance in light of the Ukraine invasion, which has created polarised views of partnerships and foreign policy decisions. France and India strive for a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific, similar to how Japan strives for a peaceful Indo-Pacific region. India had requested the French government in October 2023 for the purchase of 26 Rafale Marine aircraft (worth U.S. \$6 Billion) for the Indian Navy to bolster its capabilities in the Indian Ocean.

Two important nations with large economic and geopolitical interests in the Indo-Pacific area are France and India. "Prime Minister Modi's vision of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and President Macron's vision of security and cooperation outlined in the Indo-Pacific Strategy of France" should be aligned, as stated in the new Indo-Pacific roadmap.² The roadmap also distinctly intensifies the understanding reached between these two Indian Ocean powers through the 2018 signing of the "Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region" and emphasises the observable results more.³ As a resident power with colonies in both the Indian and Pacific oceans, France views the Indo-Pacific region as a "geographical reality." Approximately 93 per cent of the French Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is located in the Indo-Pacific area, home to the 1.65 million people who call France home.⁴ Additionally, 8300 French servicemen are stationed in this area by France. This demonstrates the Indo-Pacific region's strategic significance to France.⁵

France's entry into India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) and leadership of the maritime resource and marine security pillars are two recent advancements in the partnership. France and India are both The India Ocean Rim Association (IORA) members. France joined IORA in 2001 as a discussion partner and became a full member in 2020, focusing on important topics like biodiversity protection, climate change, and maritime safety and surveillance.

Under the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), which was established in the Seychelles in 1984, France and India also collaborate.⁶ With an emphasis on island nations, the IOC unites five African countries in the Indian Ocean. France, representing Reunion, is a full member state in the IOC, while India is an observer state.⁷ This regional organisation addresses a broad range of topics, including marine safety, renewable energy, ecological preservation, and resource management. Furthermore, under the framework of the 2020 India-France-Australia trilateral dialogue, both nations also engage in trilateral interactions. "Ensuring peace, security, and adherence to international law in the Indo-Pacific" is the stated goal of the discussion.

Additionally, an MOU pertaining to the provision of "Reciprocal Logistics support between the Armed Forces" was signed by the two nations in March 2018. India and France collaborate extensively in the maritime sector in the area. Since 1993, the fleets of the two nations have regularly engaged in bilateral exercises aimed at promoting maritime cooperation. Japan and France too conducted a military drill in the Pacific in September 2023 between their ground forces for deepening coordination among the like-minded countries. India and Japan also conducted a bilateral Air Force exercise, 'Veer-Guardian' in 2023. Likewise, India and France too have been engaged in a bilateral military drill between the Indian Air Force (IAF) and the French Air and Space Force named, Exercise Orion which was conducted in 2023 and was the first overseas exercise for the IAF's Rafale aircraft. These Defence exercises show deep engagements between the nations.

Following Prime Minister Modi's July 2023 Bastille Day visit to France, the two nations issued a joint statement highlighting their strong defence collaboration and their goal to expand their industrial relationships in areas such as cooperative combat aircraft engine development.⁸ France can be a valuable partner for domestic defence manufacturing, knowledge sharing, and research, as it is India's second-largest defence exporter.

Positioning Japan

Minilateral agreements, such as the Quad (India, Japan, Australia, and the US), have been a common feature of the architecture of the strategically important and contested Indo-Pacific region. In the Indo-Pacific, minilateralism mainly unites "like-minded partners" by rallying around "shared values." Japan is a country that has a good relationship with India for decades and both nations cooperate in the region significantly. Moreover, France, India, and Japan are in a position to work together to preserve the Indo-Pacific region's security and stability.

The three nations share a great deal of concerns and interests, particularly in light of China's growing aggressiveness and revisionism about its territory and maritime claims. Concerned about the future of international order, all three nations worry that China's increasing strength and capabilities may lead to an American retreat. Japan, France, and India are actively working to keep the Indo-Pacific region stable and secure. With the 2018 announcement of the IPOI and the release of its new National Security Strategy (NSS), Japan has increased its level of commitment to the security and stability of the Indo-Pacific region. The future of international order worries all three nations equally. They favour the democratisation of the UN Security Council's decision-making process because they fear the council would become paralysed.

The importance of Southeast Asian geography and ASEAN Centrality has been emphasised by France, Japan, and India in their Indo-Pacific strategies. France, Japan, and India are crucial exporters of weaponry to Southeast Asian nations as well as major economic allies.

In Sri Lanka, France, Japan, and India have united to counter China's expanding influence and advance an open and inclusive Indo-Pacific region. Their approach emphasises fostering connectivity, economic cooperation, and marine security, which reflects their fears about China's growing regional dominance. As part of a bigger plan to counterbalance China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific and establish a rules-based order, these states are cooperating with Sri Lanka.

In March 2023, a multilateral Maritime Exercise 'La Perouse' was conducted involving ships, helicopters and personnel of the Australian Navy, French Navy, Japanese Maritime Self-Defence Force, Indian Navy and the US Navy in the Indian Ocean region. The French Navy led the exercise which has the dual objectives of improving maritime domain awareness and maximizing maritime coordination among participating navies in the Indo-Pacific area.

Way Forward

Increased tangible collaboration between France and India can offer a dependable engagement angle for island nations, primarily concerning development, security, and climate change adaptation, while enhancing the diplomatic efforts of like-minded allies in the area. While France's Indo-Pacific strategy prioritises maintaining territorial sovereignty and access to shared maritime zones, New Delhi's regional ambitions guarantee sustained attention to maritime concerns.

As G20 members, France, Japan, and India can contribute significantly to the creation of international standards for the digital economy and the use of digital technology to support

sustainable growth. Many smaller companies in these nations stand to gain a great deal by promoting their products using digital technologies. India, France and Japan can expand their security and defence partnership by conducting military drills and exercises among their ground and air forces.

The three democratic nations may work together to identify shared interests and advance productive trilateral partnerships in order to counter China's expanding hegemony in a number of future industries, as well as to advance digital inclusivity and an inclusive Indo-Pacific region governed by inclusive norms.

NOTES:

¹ Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "India Announces Republic Day Chief Guest: French President Emmanuel Macron," Observer Research Foundation, January 05, 2024, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-announces-republic-day-chief-guest-french-president-emmanuel-macron#:~:text=Clearly%2C%20the%20French%20president's%20confirmation,at%20India's%20Republic%20Day%20celebration>. Accessed on January 10, 2024.

² Monish Tourangbam and Mayank Chari, "The French Connection: India-France Partnership for the Indo-Pacific Zeitgeist," Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP), September 21, 2023, <https://isdp.eu/content/uploads/2023/09/Brief-France-Sep-21-FINAL.pdf>. Accessed on January 10, 2024.

³ Ibid

⁴ Gesine Weber, "France in the Indo-Pacific: Not so Ambivalent after all," *9Dashline*, May 10, 2023, <https://www.9dashline.com/article/france-in-the-indo-pacific-not-so-ambivalent-after-all>. Accessed on January 11, 2024.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Abhishek Kumar, "India and France in the Indo-Pacific," Indian Council of World Affairs, November 03, 2023, https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=1&ls_id=10130&lid=6460#:~:text=India%20and%20France%20also%20cooperate,member%20state%20in%20the%20IOC. Accessed on January 11, 2024.

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Christina Mackenzie, "India, France increase defence ties with new Rafale jet and submarine buys," *Breaking Defence*, July 18, 2023, <https://breakingdefense.com/2023/07/india-france-increase-defense-ties-with-new-rafale-jet-and-submarine-buys/>. Accessed on January 12, 2024.