



An analysis of the French strategy in the Indo-Pacific

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ABSTRACT

France has emerged as a country with ambitions in the Indo-Pacific. It has vast territories, population and economic interests in the Indo-Pacific which necessitate a coherent national security policy towards this region. Even before the promulgation of its Indo-Pacific strategy, France has been involved in maritime Asia, primarily through defence sales. The changing balance of power has renewed European attention towards the Indo-Pacific wherein France is making its mark. This article studies the drivers of the French Indo-Pacific strategy and goes further to understand the fundamentals that have led to French attention to this region. A careful study of all major French policy articles lays out the strategic thinking in Paris. The article briefly presents bilateral and multilateral engagements of France. While traditional and non-traditional security issues and normative drive are apparent in the public discourse, it is clear that the major drivers are France's military-industrial complex and the desire to be able to influence the regional order.

KEYWORDS

Indo-Pacific; France;
submarines; Indian Ocean;
maritime; navy

Introduction

In recent years, the Indo-Pacific has emerged as a prominent geopolitical reality. As a result, several countries have adopted an Indo-Pacific strategy, which they justify on some basis. For instance, India sees itself as an Indian Ocean-based power; Australia and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) justify it by way of their location; Americans do so through their territories and military presence; the Netherlands and Germany rationalise it by way of their and the European Union's (EU) political-economic interests and transnational issues; and the United Kingdom (UK) states it is to safeguard its economic interests, security and values. Similarly, France, the first European country to publish an Indo-Pacific strategy in 2019, has several reasons to be a stakeholder in this region. It describes itself as a "sovereign Indo-Pacific power"¹ owing to its territories and security interests. France has also released two official documents that describe its position in the Indo-Pacific, namely, the "Defence and National Strategy Review, 2017" and the "France's Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific" (2019). Besides, Emmanuel Macron's speech about an "Indo-Pacific Axis", delivered in Australia in 2018, describes the French President's view.

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Strategic uncertainty is the foundational premise of the French defence and security strategy. There is a sense that the European and Southeast Asian nations have a common purpose in the respective regional integration.² The perception in France is that Southeast Asia is reliant on the United States (US) and Japan for security and France seeks to make a place for itself in this regional security architecture. The line of thinking is that China's ambitions and rivalry with the US can change regional equilibriums and this could impact Europe and thereby France. Trade, both from and to the EU, from Southeast Asia passes through the South China Sea and accounts for 70 per cent of freight bound for Europe.³ In 2016, 7.77 per cent of France's trade, worth US\$ 83.5 billion, passed through the South China Sea.⁴ France also feels that it has not paid adequate strategic attention to this region and that its approach has been rather haphazard. It wants to play a greater role in shaping the outcomes of regional security architecture⁵ through positioning itself as a stakeholder in the Indo-Pacific. Its Indo-Pacific policy is actually to be understood in how it sees itself with respect to Asia, that is, there is recognition that Europe is in relative decline with respect to Asia and the way to remain globally relevant is through being active in the region.⁶ One view holds that at the heart of this outreach into the Indo-Pacific is the notion of ensuring European centrality; and, in fact, France claims that its global actions would sustain European pre-eminence in world affairs. France thus sees itself as among the leading nations of Europe in global affairs as well as a key player in projecting European interests in international relations. This sense of leadership is also applicable in naval matters.

The maritime threats for France are not limited to one area. Owing to its location in Europe and its overseas territories, France's threat perception is geographically diffused and has some variance across the world oceans. This has been described in the policy documents. For instance, the Mediterranean region is a source of terrorism, illegal migration, armed conflict and drug trafficking. The Northern Indian Ocean hosts critical chokepoints from where Europe's energy and trade passes through. The Southern Indian Ocean is home to French overseas territories and is an area known for terrorism, armed conflict and piracy. Here, France is also concerned with submarine surveillance and unauthorised data collection over and under the seabed. Illegal fishing is also a matter of concern. It is a well-known fact that Chinese fishing vessels have been operational in the high seas and their practices are degrading the environment. France is also concerned about the intrusion of fishing vessels in its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and the depletion of fishing stocks in the Mozambique Channel,⁷ Tromelin, French Southern and Atlantic lands.⁸ Hence, the French strategy appears aimed at addressing Chinese military and non-military maritime activities, apart from sustaining a rules-based order and associated facets. In the Pacific, French interests are in the southern part of the ocean and revolve around climate change, natural disasters and drug trafficking. France possesses no territories in the South China Sea, but it has concerns over freedom of navigation. As such, France asserts its freedom of navigation wherever it deems maritime territorial claims excessive. For example, its navy sails across the South China Sea twice a year. In April 2019, a French frigate, *Vendémiaire*, passed through the Taiwan Strait to assert freedom of navigation,⁹ followed by the SSN *Emeraude* in 2021.¹⁰

Since 2002, France has been working towards the delimitation of its continental shelf.¹¹ If successful, France would have the largest maritime territory in the world, thanks to its overseas territories. The commercial potential of such a vast seabed would be immense. There are voices in France that are urging for greater maritime

focus, reviving maritime tradition, and creating more awareness about the maritime sector. There is a sense that France is lagging behind in marine infrastructure development and investments compared to other European countries.¹²

France's engagement in the Indo-Pacific has taken shape under Macron's presidency. He was the first president after Charles de Gaulle to deliver an address at the Ecole de Guerre in February 2020. This is a significant event because the military is central to France's industrial, foreign and security policy. The event, therefore, contextualises France's Indo-Pacific push: "There are gaps between strategic ambitions and available resources"¹³, hence, France is increasingly dependent on its partners to fulfil its ambitions. This is also because since the end of the Cold War, the strength of the French military has been declining.¹⁴ The French policy is characterised by "exceptionalism", which was a legacy of de Gaulle and came into being during the Cold War.¹⁵

Rationale for an Indo-Pacific policy

France is the only European country to have extensive territories – covering 465,422 square kilometres (sq km) – in the Indo-Pacific. This includes numerous islands and the EEZs that come with it. France has an EEZ of nearly 9 million sq km in the Indo-Pacific. Further, about 1.6 million French overseas citizens reside in these overseas territories and departments,¹⁶ out of which nearly 1 million are in the Indian Ocean Region alone¹⁷ and 200,000 French nationals reside in other countries of the Indo-Pacific.¹⁸ (Here, 1.6 million refers to French citizens residing in French territories in the Indo-Pacific while 200,000 refers to French citizens that live in "other Indo-Pacific countries", for example, French citizens that may be living in China or India or Japan.) Therefore, safeguarding its overseas territories, EEZs and citizens is France's primary security goal. To this effect, 7,000 French soldiers guard the Indo-Pacific. The territory and the personnel form a pillar of France's maritime presence in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁹ The Indo-Pacific region is home to several Francophone nations: Djibouti, Madagascar and Seychelles in the Indian Ocean; and Tonga and Vanuatu in the Western Pacific, besides French overseas territories (Table 1).²⁰

Trade and economic interests also form the bedrock of France's interest in the Indo-Pacific. According to the official strategy paper of 2019, France exported goods worth 66.438 billion euros and its imports amounted to 95.930 billion euros in 2018.²¹ The trade in the Indo-Pacific amounted to 14 per cent as exports and 17 per cent as imports outside of the EU in the same period.²² France is concerned about stability of this region as increasing globalisation and interdependence means that events in any part of the Indo-Pacific will have an impact on Europe, and thus on France.

Table 1. French Overseas Territories in the Indo-Pacific.

	EEZ (sq km)	Population
Indian Ocean		
Réunion, Mayotte, Scattered Islands	1,026,037	1,100,000
Pacific Ocean		
Wallis and Futuna	263,422	12,000
New Caledonia	1,457,032	282,000
French Polynesia	4,852,122	276,000
Sub-Antarctic and Arctic Territories		
Amsterdam and St. Paul Islands, Crozet Islands, Kergulen Islands	2,070,343	Nil

Source: Ministère des Armées, "France and Security in the Indo-Pacific," 4.

Its Indo-Pacific strategy is also a reflection of how France sees itself among the leaders of Europe specifically, since it is the only country with such vast territories and population in this part of the world. Hence, its desire to spearhead European engagement in the Indo-Pacific. France's perception of itself as a leader is not limited to Europe, but also has a rational within the Indo-Pacific. Most of the countries in the Indo-Pacific do not want to be forced to choose between either the US or China. In this context, France wants to provide an alternative for cooperation to such countries and safeguard their ability to make strategic choices, as also seek a common ground with countries that cannot openly make an either-or choice. However, such claims are questionable because France may not have the legitimacy to pursue such a goal.

The origins of the French strategy in the Indo-Pacific can be traced back to the 2008 Defence White Paper. This document broadened the French notion of national security, which necessitated a comprehensive outlook and some kind of joint approach. There was also a realisation that the European military spending had been very low, while spending in Asia and in the US had been on the rise. The paper also mentioned that the strategic gravity will shift to Asia by 2025. Yet, instability in Asia, caused by underdevelopment and conflicts, and the danger of ecological disasters would impact global security.²³ In addition, France recognised that multilateral structures, such as the United Nations (UN), World Trade Organization (WTO) and International Monetary Fund (IMF), were weakening since they no longer represented the new political realities. The paper further highlighted that unless the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) was reformed, unilateral actions would continue and thus undermine collective security. Similar concerns over the US and Russia withdrawing from mutual arms control treaties were also expressed.²⁴ Further, asymmetrical tactics and terrorism were identified as significant challenges that would continue to be influential in the future.

Conceptual drivers of the strategy

France has certain ideational drivers for its Indo-Pacific policy. This is in tune with nearly every other country with an Indo-Pacific focus, wherein the policy upholds certain principles or ideals. In the case of France, it is multilateralism – also a fundamental principle of its foreign policy. Multilateralism for France means “the defence of the democratic values of freedom and human rights, the promotion of dialogue to settle disputes, and the guarantee of free movement of goods and people, pursuant to international law”.²⁵ Multilateralism does not mean erosion of national sovereignty, rather an aggregate of national powers. For France, multilateralism is a way to increase the cost of unilateral policies. This becomes important in the Indo-Pacific where China has been initiating unilateral policies. Thus, in a sense, China has encouraged the drive of multilateralism amongst other powers. France predicts that with the rise of China and the subsequent change in balance of power, there will be a restructuring of the American military. In such a situation, these two powers would increasingly indulge in unilateral actions and, in turn, it would encourage other countries to take unilateral actions as well, which raises concerns in France.

France is committed to the preservation of international law. It believes that security of tomorrow is done today. So, it wants to enhance its cooperative relations and partnerships in the region. This is to be achieved through belief in multilateralism and

commitment to international law so as to maintain national and regional security. It is important for France to maintain its influence and capacity to balance the security environment in the Indo-Pacific, thus shaping a security environment that is favourable to France's economic and political ends. Though France sees congruence with other Indo-Pacific strategies in terms of upholding international rules-based order and multilateralism, it still emphasises its own tradition of independence and therefore, it does not align itself with any one Indo-Pacific strategy.²⁶

Just like every other stakeholder in the Indo-Pacific, France attaches great importance to freedom of navigation and the security and safety of sea lines of communication. Its aim in the Indo-Pacific is to find a multilateral solution to the problem of disagreement over common maritime spaces and establish conditions of access. France hopes to do this with its strategic partners in the region.²⁷

Paris wants to approach regional security management through collective security. This will be done mainly through France's various programmes in capacity building in the Indo-Pacific. An example is the support that France offers regional countries participating in UN peacekeeping mission. The French advisor based in the peacekeeping operations training centre in Oudong (Cambodia) regularly organises training sessions for troops preparing to deploy in French-speaking countries. Also, French language courses are offered to many states of the region.²⁸

Tangible policy actions

France has undertaken a range of initiatives in the Indo-Pacific, from military to political and environmental. The policy approach is multidimensional, which allows France to engage with various actors and also in multiple sectors. A comprehensive policy intervention means France can involve itself in all the sub-regions of the Indo-Pacific. The policy documents list out the French government action, which are discussed below.

Military initiatives

Like other stakeholders, France too is concerned about China – specifically Beijing's actions in the South China Sea that undermine the rules-based order – but is aware that the French military is not in a position to meet China's military challenge in the Indo-Pacific. It does not have the numbers like India. So, it seeks qualitative engagement with regional militaries, the kind where French military participation serves as a force multiplier. French military forces would support sovereign forces in enforcement. In that regard, France has identified a "strategic network" of like-minded countries, such as India, Australia, Japan, Singapore, Malaysia, New Zealand, Vietnam and Indonesia.²⁹ In Southeast Asia, France has partnerships with Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, wherein it aims to strengthen strategic autonomy of its partners. It also wants to strengthen the regional security architecture. Specifically, its focus is strengthening maritime security, improving cooperation and enhancing maritime domain awareness. In the Indian Ocean, it has undertaken anti-piracy operations, in particular in the Horn of Africa as part of Operation Atlanta. France has been part of several missions under the European Union Naval Force (EUNAVFOR; Operation Atlanta), the latest being EUNAVFOR MED IRINI that was launched in 2020.³⁰

As a maritime nation, France has interest in upholding the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and maintaining a rules-based order at sea.³¹ “As a maritime, air and spatial power, France possesses high-level intelligence gathering means and significant force projection platforms. France is therefore able to contribute to each aspect of international security with its allies and partners”.³²

Climate change and environment

French Indo-Pacific strategy gives great importance to regional environmental challenges. Given the transnational nature of environmental challenges, a collective approach is necessary. Military assets are often deployed to meet non-traditional security challenges. Hence, the French security establishment sees a link between military and mitigation of environmental challenges, or what is called “strategic integration of link between defence and environment”.³³ In 2019, the Defence Minister, Florence Parly, emphasised France’s goal of engaging across the entire gamut of environmental challenges in the Indo-Pacific. France has various initiatives to this end, such as Defence and Climate observatory that was set up in 2016, environmental risk mapping and support for targeted scientific programmes. Improvement in maritime domain awareness is also a part of it.³⁴ France is quite ambitious about these issues. It is keen on Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) and biodiversity protection. In general, climate change and the Conference of the Parties (COP 21) are very important for France. Hence, it has interest in the islands of the Indo-Pacific. Additionally, France wants to ensure that urban projects in the Indo-Pacific are sustainable.³⁵

Developmental assistance

France brings its experience of finance through France Development Agency (FDA; Agence Française de Développement [AFD]) that provides funding and expertise in renewable energy, climate change, education and skilling, health and social security, biodiversity, employment, mobility and transport, governance, sustainable cities, agriculture, infrastructure and rural development, and gender equality and inclusive businesses.³⁶

ASEAN

France attaches great importance to ASEAN in its Indo-Pacific strategy. It sees alignment with ASEAN’s Indo-Pacific vision, which is based on inclusivity, rule of law, multilateralism, and international cooperation. In September 2020, France became ASEAN’s developmental partner, though the FDA has been present in Southeast Asia for 25 years and has funded projects worth 4 billion euros.³⁷

France’s maritime strategy

Ensuring fundamental maritime security

France has several official documents that spell out its maritime outlook. It has evolved a comprehensive notion of national security and there are two categories under which the

navy's role is perceived. The first one is the basic defence of France – the homeland. A submarine arm is entrusted with the responsibility to protect metropolitan France. As per the 2013 White Paper, four nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) and the five nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs) constitute a “Strategic Submarine Force” (Force Océanique Stratégique or FOST), along with six anti-submarine destroyers, 15 front-line frigates (including air defence frigates and multi-mission frigates), mine warfare vessels and maritime patrol aircraft and other supporting vessels.³⁸ This force is also aimed at deterrence and “to develop the best possible knowledge of SSBN deployment zones”. Besides deterrence, these actions also extend to protection of the EEZ and the resources within, and are classified as “Action of the State at Sea” (*Action de l'État de Mer* or AEM).³⁹

The second component of the French naval strategy is what it calls preventive actions in the “zone of interest”. The operational area for this strategy is West Africa, Arab-Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean in particular.⁴⁰ The French Navy would herein undertake missions against terrorism, piracy, illegal trafficking and such – what are called non-traditional maritime issues. In this regard, an air arm will be stationed in Djibouti and in the Gulf.⁴¹ The AEM is the meta-operational conceptualisation that comprises naval and coast guard functions. It is organised into 10 maritime zones, five of which look after the French overseas territories and two are dedicated for the high seas in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean.⁴² The AEM is expected to provide “minimum” strategic depth around French overseas territories.⁴³ How that is to be achieved is unspecified.

The French Navy intends to involve itself in global crisis management wherein its carrier battle group will be deployed at a theatre that is “7000–8000 kms distant”.⁴⁴ The air assets, independent of the carrier, will also be used for force projection as and where necessary. Alongside, provisions for deployment of amphibious platforms and preparations for ad hoc operations are said to be in place.⁴⁵ In order to meet these goals, naval modernisation would focus on replacing the submarine force with the advanced Barracuda-class SSNs; and at least five submarines are expected to be at sea at any given time. The air component would consist of 300 Rafales and Mirage 2000D.⁴⁶

The French overseas territories and its citizens in the Indo-Pacific are legitimate reasons for France to focus on this region. However, some more details are found in a 2015 document, “National Strategy for the Security of Maritime Areas”. This document defines maritime strategy as one that would

offer a coherent national inter-ministerial framework to improve the fight against maritime insecurity, based notably on an analysis of maritime risks and threats, in the short or medium terms, likely to affect the strategic interests of France and its partners.⁴⁷

In this context, France has been involved in regional maritime regimes through the Djibouti Code of Conduct.

Economic potential of the French overseas territories

When it comes to explaining its Indo-Pacific push, France emphasises on its overseas territories, whose importance goes beyond military considerations. The overseas French territories grant huge EEZs, which are seen as a valuable resource.⁴⁸ The marine resources obtained through these territories are able to finance the overseas departments and

territories (Département et Collectivités d'Outre Mer or DOM-COM).⁴⁹ France acquired these territories as a result of its colonial past and their economic development is a necessity to maintain control.

Opportunities for domestic maritime sector

The overseas territories can be productive as tourist destinations, particularly for cruise liners. This is where France's maritime sector can come in: it would contribute to tourism and general economic growth of the island territories, while also providing an opportunity for the domestic maritime sector.

The maritime sector in France is seen as an important source for economic growth. As per 2013 figures, this sector employed a large number of people and the value of production and services was worth 70 billion euros.⁵⁰ About 295 commercial vessels bore the French flag and one-third of France's 7,000 fishing vessels were overseas. Further, several French companies were said to be leading in their sectors, such as energy, shipbuilding (military and commercial), goods transport, logistics, cruise liners, marine and scientific exploration, laying undersea cables and environmental protection.⁵¹ As per 2017 figures, the maritime sector in France employed 300,000 people and this number was set to triple in the next decade. The potential of blue economy in French territories was estimated to be worth 14 per cent of France's gross domestic product (GDP), valued at 270 million euros. Marine tourism, maritime transport and naval shipbuilding were the biggest contributing sectors.⁵² In 2019, the French Maritime Cluster (CMF) employed more than 340,000 persons and the production from this sector was worth 83 billion.⁵³

Given the extent of French economy that is maritime, it is natural that the foreign and security policy accord immense importance to maritime security and safety. The French Navy is naturally expected to safeguard these interests in the Indo-Pacific. Thus, a strong commercial interest underlines French interest in the Indo-Pacific.

Geopolitical considerations

France's sovereignty and its economic interest are seen in the context of evolving geopolitics. When it comes to addressing regional geopolitics, the foundational logic of French Indo-Pacific policy is to maintain some sort of European presence in Asia. It is noted that American withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan would create power vacuum of a kind which would be sought to be filled. In this context, "emerging" and "returning" maritime powers are expected to shape a new regional balance of power even as American pre-eminence continues. An updated version of the 2015 French document, published in 2019, has a different observation of the geostrategic situation. The assessment describes it as unpredictability seen between the major powers and how the "secondary actors" have increased in numbers and in their influence. The cumulative result of this is the birth of a multipolar order and a "heterogenous international system".⁵⁴ There is acknowledgement, hinting at China (and its presence in the Indian Ocean), that the Western world's edge on maritime surveillance technologies and its capacity to intervene is being challenged, and how it would impede France's (and in turn the Western world's) navigational freedom. The naval strategy is said to be prepared to this effect, including its nuclear arsenal as deterrence.

The Defence White Paper of 2013 offers two categories where military engagement is imagined: one, coercive operations that are undertaken against traditional threats or state-backed conflicts; and two, crisis management operations that have “different military characteristics”, possibly indicating non-traditional or post-modern roles. The defence spending is to be steadily increased from 2013 to 2025, focusing on quality first, and eventually on volumes. For the first five years, starting from 2014, a total of 179.2 billion euros is budgeted and in the next phase, that is, from 2019 to 2025, the expenditure would be 364 billion euros.⁵⁵ Under the guiding principle of strategic autonomy, the armed forces would “wield influence in multinational operations” wherever engaged.⁵⁶ The resources would be allocated as per priority, wherein “[T]he most costly resources are directed where it is most essential and a principle of pooling scarce and critical capabilities that can be allocated to different missions or shared with European partners [will be followed]”.⁵⁷

On July 13, 2018, President Macron signed the new budget law, terming it as “budget for growth”. As mentioned earlier, the multi-year budget aimed to increase defence expenditure to 2 per cent⁵⁸ of the GDP by 2025. The proposed acquisition would cater to all the three services and see an addition of 1,700 armoured vehicles (army), five frigates, four SSNs, nine offshore patrol vessels, 12 refuelling tankers (navy), 28 Rafale jets and 55 upgraded Mirage 2000 fighters (air force). Out of the 34 billion euros earmarked for that year, 650 million euros was towards overseas deployment of troops.⁵⁹

In general, there is substantial emphasis on intelligence gathering and maritime domain awareness in the French maritime strategy and this is also promulgated to the Indo-Pacific. “Knowledge” and “anticipation” are the two strategic functions that have a great deal of focus in France’s national security strategy.

France’s military–industrial complex

The crux of France’s security policy lies at its military–industrial complex. The French government recognises the potential of Asia or the Indo-Pacific as a defence market. It has been noted in several policy documents as to how the US is the predominant player in the Asian markets. The French are striving to compete with the US and Russian defence sales in the Indo-Pacific. The 2013 Defence White Paper recognises the importance of the domestic defence industry for France’s strategic autonomy. The French defence industry includes about 4,000 companies, with revenues worth 15 billion euros (2013 figures) and exports constituting 25–40 per cent of its output. It provides 165,000 direct and indirect jobs.⁶⁰

From 2010 to 2019, France’s defence sales globally were worth 86,788.6 million euros⁶¹ (US\$ 105.28 billion). The total French defence exports to the Indo-Pacific from 2010 to 2019 are listed in [Table 2](#).

In February 2021, France announced a plan to build the third generation of SSBNs which would serve the French Navy from 2030 to 2090. The first submarine would enter the service in 2030 and the remaining three would be inducted every five years hence. After 2035, the current second generation SSBNs would be decommissioned.⁶² The programme has been awarded to the Naval Group, along with other contractors. The SSBN programme is expected to safeguard French sovereignty through operational deterrence.⁶³ This development is in tune with the 2019–25 Military Plan Law to ensure a

Table 2. France's Cumulative Defence Exports to the Indo-Pacific (2010–19).

Country	Export Value (million euros)
Djibouti	2.1
Madagascar	1.3
Mauritius	6.7
Mozambique	12.3
Seychelles	0.2
Somalia	4.2
United States	2,355.3
China	1,159.9
South Korea	1,650.6
Japan	778.6
India	13,380.1
Bangladesh	44.2
Pakistan	881.4
Indonesia	1,622.4
Malaysia	1,721.1
Philippines	27.5
Singapore	1,868.6
Thailand	687.4
Vietnam	211.9
Australia	1,181.2
United Arab Emirates	4,736.1
Saudi Arabia	10,732.7
Kuwait	1,755
Qatar	11,054.2

Source: Ministère Des Armeés, "Rapport au Parlement 2019 sur les exportations d'armement de la France", Parliament report, June 2020.

continued deterrence at sea whereby an SSBN will be at sea at all times. The announcement of this project, codenamed SNLE-3G,⁶⁴ was done by Defence Minister Florence Parly:

[T]he third-generation SSBN will be slightly longer and heavier compared to the Le Triomphant-class SSBN. It will hear better and defend itself better. It will be quieter: it will not be noisier than a shoal of shrimp, which is absolutely exceptional. It will be able to blend in perfectly with the ambient sounds of the sea, which is a guarantee of operational superiority.⁶⁵

International maritime engagements

This section examines notable engagements of the country in the Indo-Pacific. France is involved with several countries in the Indo-Pacific either as a defence partner or as a development financier. In recent years, the French Navy has been conducting naval manoeuvres in contested areas of the East Sea. France has also been participating across the length and breadth of the Indo-Pacific in various forums, like the Shangri-La Dialogue, Tokyo Defense Dialogue, Seoul Defense Dialogue and South Pacific Defense Ministers' Meeting. In addition, France is open to strengthening Indian Ocean Naval Symposium with its partners⁶⁶ and it is a full member of the Indian Ocean Commission. The country has also been conducting naval drills with Japan, the US, India and Australia. France has cooperated with Australia and New Zealand in Pacific islands, particularly from point of view of HADR and climate change. It is also interested in maintaining regional stability along with these partners in the Pacific.

India

France and India's defence cooperation has evolved comprehensively. All the three services conduct regular exercises with each other. At India's Information Fusion Centre for Indian Ocean Region in Gurugram, the first foreign international liaison officer was from the French Navy. French military aircrafts, Mirage 2000 and Jaguars, have been in the service of the Indian Air Force for decades. The successful execution of the Rafale deal amidst all the controversy is indicative of deepening cooperation. France has also permitted the Indian Navy to access French naval facilities at Reunion Island⁶⁷ and India has sought permission to access French facilities at Djibouti.⁶⁸ The Indian Navy's Scorpene-class diesel-electric attack submarines (SSKs) are a product of Indo-French collaboration. Further, France's Naval Group is involved in Project 75I of the Indian Navy. By 2022, six SSKs with air-independent propulsion would be built under Project P 75I.⁶⁹

Both the countries have been founding members of the International Solar Alliance. France's core foreign policy of strategic autonomy and multilateralism is compatible with India's strategic outlook. There is also cooperation in the domain of cyber security. France is supportive of India's pursuit of reformation of the UN to expand the Security Council. Amongst all of India's Indo-Pacific partners, it is France's conception that comes closest to India's. Both India and France have same geographical map when it comes to the Indo-Pacific, that is, from Eastern Africa to the Pacific. Just as India, France lays greater emphasis on the Indian Ocean than the Pacific. The strength of the bilateral relationship is likely to be extended to third countries in the form of joint projects.

Australia

France and Australia find commonality in their desire for multilateralism and a rules-based international order. France's overseas territories include New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and Wallis and Futuna. France is also a member of the Pacific Community, which makes Australia an important partner. Regular bilateral naval exercises are conducted in the Pacific and the Southern Oceans to train to deal with illegal fishing and HADR. In March 2017, both countries signed the Enhanced Strategic Partnership wherein they shared their vision of the Indo-Pacific and stated that they would cooperate with third countries in the region.⁷⁰ In May 2018, Macron was the second French President to visit Australia during which the Provision for Mutual Logistics Support was signed. France was chosen as the preferred international partner for Australia's submarine programme in February 2019.⁷¹ The contract for 12 Barracuda-class SSKs (Shortfin Barracuda) is worth US\$ 50 billion. Using indigenous components, the construction of these SSKs would take place in Australia and is expected to generate 2,800 jobs.⁷²

During his visit to the Australian naval base at Garden Island, Sydney, Macron said that the "new Paris-Delhi-Canberra axis is absolutely key for the region and our joint objectives in the Indian-Pacific region".⁷³ India and Australia are France's "partners of choice".⁷⁴ The first such dialogue amongst foreign secretaries of India, France and Australia was held in September 2020, where they discussed "economic and geo-strategic challenges in the context of the COVID-19" and "cooperation on Marine Global Commons", along with exploring "practical cooperation in ASEAN, IORA and the Indian Ocean Commission".⁷⁵ Likewise, an India-France-Japan partnership is being explored.⁷⁶

China

When Macron spoke about France's presence in the Pacific during his visit to Australia in 2018, he categorically stated that it was not to antagonise China and that France welcomes China's economic and geopolitical rise.⁷⁷ During his visit to China in 2019, Macron and Xi Jinping signed "Beijing Call for Biodiversity Conservation and Climate Change" towards Paris Agreement. Climate change is a significant matter in French policy, so cooperation with China would continue.⁷⁸ During this visit, Macron signed over 40 trade deals worth US\$ 15 billion, but he could not secure any agreement on WTO or state-owned enterprises.⁷⁹

France has been conducting naval movements in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, and has also called for coordinated EU patrol in the South China Sea.⁸⁰ However, French naval exercises are not freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) as undertaken by the US Navy. According to Jean Pierre Cabestan, the French platforms do not enter the 12 nautical mile EEZ around China's artificial islands.⁸¹ China, in turn, has been observing France's growing ties with Australia and India. Also, Indian access to the French military facility in Djibouti (under Mutual Logistics Support Agreement⁸²) has raised concerns.⁸³ However, in general, China does not seem alarmed by France's passage manoeuvres.⁸⁴ France too is carefully balancing its strategy. On the one hand, it makes its presence felt in contested maritime spaces but, at the same time, it is careful not to antagonise China. A *Global Times* editorial published during Macron's visit to Australia described France's balancing act as overestimation of its capacity and also called France opportunistic.⁸⁵ French analysts see Macron's China policy as ambiguous and while it may become firmer in a post-COVID world, France needs to work with China on critical issues like WTO and climate change.⁸⁶

Indonesia

France and Indonesia have been strategic partners since 2011 with the partnership based on the common values of democracy, pluralism, and rules-based international order. Both are united by challenges of globalisation, terrorism, climate change, etc., and attach a lot of importance to multilateral institutions. They also share same vision for the Indo-Pacific on issues of maritime security, free and open space and sustainable development. Both countries are working towards a free trade agreement.⁸⁷ In 2013, both countries had initiated a defence dialogue and in February 2021, the two navies conducted joint exercise in the Sunda Strait. A French SSN and two frigates participated with three warships of the Indonesian Navy.⁸⁸ France has grasped Indonesia's need for economic growth and development. In turn, Indonesia is a promising market for the French defence industry and there is mutual interest in this sector, as seen during Prabowo's visit to France.⁸⁹ Besides, France has been contributing to blue economy in Indonesia by helping it against illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing and marine plastic waste.⁹⁰

ASEAN

France supports ASEAN centrality⁹¹ and through FDA has supported 150 projects worth 4 billion euros. In Southeast Asia, France showcases its commitment to multilateralism

and collective action, as well as its support for maritime security.⁹² France seeks opportunity in urbanisation projects, such as Smart Cities, in China, India and within ASEAN member states.⁹³ In October 2020, ASEAN approved France as a development partner.⁹⁴ French companies are part of over 40 per cent of submarine projects and 20 per cent naval projects in Southeast Asia.⁹⁵

Djibouti code of conduct/marine domain awareness

The importance France assigns to transnational security has been mentioned earlier. In this regard, France is involved in the Western Indian Ocean in various ways. It is the second largest donor (US\$ 50,000) to the Trust Fund established under the Djibouti Code of Conduct.⁹⁶ The Critical Maritime Routes in Indian Ocean (CRIMARIO) is an EU-funded initiative in support of the Djibouti Code. The CRIMARIO is implemented by Expertise France, the French public agency for international technical assistance. The agency would also implement CRIMARIO-II, under which the project is expanded towards South and Southeast Asia.⁹⁷

Conclusion

France is perhaps the only country that has published numerous official documents in the last decade to publicise its Indo-Pacific strategy. From 2013 onwards, there has been an impetus in pursuit of the Indo-Pacific. France's primary goal in the Indo-Pacific is to protect its sovereign interests, territories and nationals as well as explore markets for its defence industry. It also wants markets for its economy. France's national security is contingent on its military and it needs ways to finance its goals. Moreover, the military has always been a prominent factor in France's foreign policy. A comprehensive Indo-Pacific orientation serves as a bedrock to justify military modernisation.

France also sees itself as a leader of Europe and wants to spearhead Europe's engagement with Asia. Post-Brexit and with Germany's own Indo-Pacific policy, France could face competition from European counterparts in the Indo-Pacific.

France is involved with all the Quad members in a trilateral and bilateral format. It is participating in regional affairs on the strength of its military technology, developmental assistance and more importantly, by stressing on strategic autonomy and multilateralism. However, it cannot conduct itself on its own; hence, it has sought partnerships with countries that have heft in their region or sub-region. India is an important partner because of its location and the size of its military and defence market. In the future, when India advances significantly in indigenous defence capabilities, it may impact the bilateral relationship. Indian engagement in the Indian Ocean or larger Indo-Pacific does not come with a colonial baggage, hence New Delhi enjoys goodwill. In all likelihood, France seems to ride this wave, particularly in the Southwest Indian Ocean, to strengthen its presence in its overseas territories through deeper cooperation with India.⁹⁸

Southeast Asia is also an avenue for deepening defence and developmental partnership. France is carefully balancing its relation with China, but both countries will continue to cooperate pragmatically. The US is France's traditional ally and both militaries enjoy a high level of interoperability; in all likelihood, the defence cooperation

will continue to deepen. French Navy's PASSEX seems more of soft power projection. Most importantly, the French Indo-Pacific push is driven by the need to remain relevant in a new global order where the centre of gravity has shifted towards Asia.

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