



The French Strategy for the Indo-Pacific and the issue of European cooperation

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For France, the Indo-Pacific is also a territory where further cooperation is needed with both European and local partners, to promote stability and the rule of international law.

President Macron's speech at the Garden Island naval base in Australia in May 2018 was a major milestone towards the integration of the Indo-Pacific concept in the French national and international policies. Presidential speeches in the region from 2018 to 2021, structured a vision of France's role in the Indo-Pacific, as both a local actor – with territories in both the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean – and a global power able to propose diplomatic, economic and military cooperation for the Indo-Pacific countries.

In 2019, the French Ministry of Armed Forces released *France's Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific*¹, a 24 pages long document to promote the defence orientations and priorities in the region. This defence strategy comes with a governmental strategy document, *France's Indo-Pacific Strategy*², released in 2022, aiming to coordinate all ministries and agencies towards an integrated approach for the region. Yet for France, the Indo-Pacific is also a territory where further cooperation is needed with both European and local partners, to promote stability and the rule of international law. For example, in the Arab-Persian Gulf and more broadly in the whole Indo-Pacific area there is a need to enforce freedom of navigation, following the shift in major energy routes due to the war in Ukraine, to ensure that the UNCLOS regulations remain fully applied. Freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific will not be achieved without cooperation between France, its allies and partners, especially those from the EU, using European Union foreign policy instruments as well as *ad-hoc* cooperation frameworks.

France's orientation in the Indo-Pacific region is therefore consistent with its global strategy: to act as a balancing power able to promote stability and peace in the context of growing tensions and global re-armament.

France and the Indo-Pacific: linking territories

Maritime issues and the protection of the EEZ

France is a power in both the Indian and the Pacific Ocean by virtue of history, with island territories all over the region with large maritime spaces under its responsibility. The rise of France as an administrative monarchy during 17th and 18th century, alongside confrontations with other major European powers, led to the development of overseas territories all over the world including in the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean. Nowadays, more than any other European country France is also an Indian Ocean and a Pacific Ocean country. If from the population point of view this assertion may sound dubious as the total population of French Indo-Pacific territories, including Polynesia and New Caledonia, is less than 2 million inhabitants – compared to the more than 67 million inhabitants of France – the scope is different in terms of maritime territories. Half of French EEZ is concentrated in Polynesia with more than 5 million km of territory².

This maritime territory in the Indian and Pacific Ocean must be protected from a wide array of threats; from illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing to potential direct military

1 Ministry of Armed Forces, *France's Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific*, Paris, 2019.

2 French Government, *France's Indo-Pacific Strategy*, Paris, 2022.

threats. IUU fishing is therefore a major growing threat in the Indo-Pacific, for France and local countries, creating a potential framework for cooperation with all stakeholders. Knowledge and intelligence are therefore important, highlighting the need for information sharing at national and international levels, to anticipate and prevent threats and crises.

The combination of threats and challenges from both states and non-state actors is nowadays complicated by the effects of climate change, whose impact in the Indo-Pacific could be particularly dramatic. The rising sea levels, especially for small islands states is a near-future major threat that could lead to a cascading crisis with population exodus, territory claim and the evolution of fishing zones, etc.

The combination of these issues could also be the basis for hybrid threats to unfold, some of them being potentially supported by a region or a global power to create “strategic disturbance” in Indo-Pacific. The resource rich areas especially, whether in terms of fishing, minerals, or hydrocarbons, are the main points of concern, as they may be interesting targets for some strategic competitors. The issue of the grey zone in the Indo-Pacific is a growing concern for France.

Indian Ocean command (ALINDIEN) and Pacific Ocean command (ALPACI)

To face these issues of enforcing sovereignty, protecting the rule of international law and the endangered environment, France implemented a military command structure able to address both Indian and Pacific Ocean issues by mobilizing operational capabilities from every branch. As for the US Armed Forces, the French regional military commands are by essence joint commands, with a Navy admiral in charge. Therefore, the military forces that are permanently deployed do not only originate from the Navy but also from the Army and the Air Force, with the capability to operate at sea and onshore to protect and defend French overseas territories and their inhabitants.

ALINDIEN is in charge of Indian Ocean forces and operations, with the ability to use the forces permanently based in Djibouti and in the Réunion Island (COMSUP FAZSOI). ALINDIEN also has operational command over all forces in operation in the Indian Ocean and the Arab-Persian Gulf. ALINDIEN is in charge of the French Armed forces positioned in the United Arab Emirates (FFEAU), underlining the orientation of Indian Ocean command towards the protection of strategic commercial and energy routes. The cooperation between France and United Arab Emirates proved to be an important partnership at the strategic levels in dealing both with issues in the Middle East, especially regarding the state and non-state actors that could pose a threat to the freedom of commerce. Moreover, crises in the region over the last 10 years have highlighted that the intergovernmental agreement between France and the United Arab Emirates to create a permanent settlement there for French Armed Forces in 2008, proved to be a smart move. Syria, Iraq and Yemen have been facing situations from major unrest to open conflict and the presence of joint military capabilities, with a naval base, an air base and an Army regiment (5^e RC) gave the French administration a large array of options to deal with each situation. Enhancing cooperation with local partners and providing the ability to intervene quickly if needed is the *raison d'être* of French military command in the United Arab Emirates.

The Pacific Ocean is under the responsibility of ALPACI, whose responsibility and missions could compare with ALINDIEN, being in charge of operations in the Pacific Ocean and having

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the possibility to request the use of the forces permanently deployed in the New Caledonia (COMSUP FANC) and French Polynesia (COMSUP FAPF). Enforcing the sovereignty and the exclusive economic rights of France in the Pacific Ocean is a major challenge, especially considering the size of the EEZ under ALPACI supervision and the forces under permanent command. Yet it is important to underline that France has forces permanently deployed and ready to perform missions all over the Indo-Pacific³, being the only European country to have a permanent military and security operational capability in the area.

In contrast to the United States, which decided to rename their Pacific Command into an Indo-Pacific Command in 2018 to align their military structure with diplomatic priorities, France decided to remain with the Indian Ocean command and a Pacific Ocean command. Yet this does not mean that there is a difference in consideration between the Ministry of Armed Forces and the rest of the French administration, as the MoD endorsed the Indo-Pacific Strategy as a major priority of its international action. The idea of still having an Indian Ocean command and a Pacific Ocean command is to not overload these joint commands with an area of responsibility that could be extended too far to be able to deal swiftly with the wide array of threats and challenges that may occur in the Indo-Pacific. For example, from major state-sponsored threats to humanitarian assistance, following a natural catastrophe.

The Protection of strategic commercial routes

Indo-Pacific and the Mediterranean

For more than sixty years now, Europe has faced the need to secure maritime routes, especially for access to resources, energy as well as industrial primary goods, and also for exporting goods. Since the opening of the Suez Canal in the third quarter of 19th century, the way from European Mediterranean ports to Eastern Asia, through the Red Sea, supplemented the route around the Cape of Good Hope, making the Indo-Pacific a strategic area. The development of oil production in the Arab-Persian Gulf during the 1920s-1930s also reinforced the trade routes' importance, making the Indo-Pacific a vital artery for Europe. Yet after the First Oil Shock, European countries turned to other sources, including Russia, to lower the influence of OPEC countries. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the need to sever economic ties with Moscow as fast as possible to avoid economic pressures from Russia, France and EU countries had to reach for alternative energy providers in oil, fuel and gas. When considering the possibility of finding suppliers that could provide important amounts of oil, fuel and gas, Gulf countries such as United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Qatar emerged. Moreover, the most complicated issue in the first month of the war was not to find oil or gas but fuels. Russia was for a certain number of European countries, including France, a major partner for automobile fuels, especially road diesel that Russia supplied at a level compatible with Euro-6 greenhouse gases emissions regulations. A major issue was to find a supplier that could supply these fuels with the same level of emission, consistent with the EU regulation. Fortunately, India decided in 2020 to change its own national regulation, aligning the new BS6 norms on the Euro-6. Thus, more than only increasing its reliance to the

3 French forces available for deployment in the Indo-Pacific are: 4 Army regiments, 4 frigates, 8 patrol boats, and 4 air bases.

Gulf countries, European countries also increased the share of India in their energy mix, highlighting the growing importance of the Indian Ocean as critical region for Europe.

Yet this situation is not only a matter of resources but also of logistics, because of the need to secure the entire transit from the Indo-Pacific to Europe through the Suez Canal. Therefore, for France, the Indo-Pacific has to be considered, from an energy point of view, integrated with the Mediterranean, including the Suez Canal⁴, the Red Sea and the Bab-el-Mandeb. The protection of hydrocarbons transit from the Gulf and India to Europe should therefore be assured all along the way to European ports with specific chokepoints where piracy, terrorism or hybrid threats are considered potential issues. The Indo-Pacific is linked, from a security point of view to Mediterranean issues and the continuum from Europe to oil and gas resources is nowadays a strategic corridor for all Europeans, underlining the need for a stronger cooperation in terms of security and military deployments.⁵

Deployment of military capabilities in the Indo-Pacific

Given the existence of 2 military commands and the French overseas territories to protect in the Indo-Pacific, the French Armed Forces are deployed permanently in the region, with a light footprint that could be the basis for more important forces in case of security crisis in the future.

The importance of having joint forces, combining the Army, Air Force and Navy, is in the versatility needed to face a large array of security and military crisis from direct military intervention in restoring peace and promoting stability to humanitarian assistance in disaster relief. Moreover, the Army is also engaged in temporary missions in French territories of the Indo-Pacific such as the protection of the Eparsé islands of the Mozambique Canal (Bassas da India, Juan de Nova, Europa). These missions are also testbeds for new capabilities. For example, with the use of a hydrogen powered fuel cell generator to replace the diesel power generator, lowering the environmental footprint and reliance to fossil fuels for expeditionary missions.

The French Navy is also engaged in patrolling the Indo-Pacific region with major deployments from amphibious groups structured around *Mistral class* LHD or even the *Charles de Gaulle* Carrier Strike Group. The French Carrier Strike Group is regularly deployed in the Indian Ocean (missions Herakles, Agapanthe, Bois Belleau, Arromanches); recently in 2019, the Clemenceau mission extended from the Mediterranean to Singapore, the *Charles de Gaulle* CSG being present at Singapore at the time of the Shangri-La dialogue to manifest the will and capability of the French Navy to be present for major diplomatic events. The *Charles de Gaulle* and other major naval units are also often engaged in cooperation with other navies during exercises, such as the Varuna annual exercise with the Indian navy, to strengthen cooperation and interoperability. Yet the Indo-Pacific remains a region where permanent French military capabilities are limited, due to the wide array of missions considered for the French Armed forces, including foreign operations in Africa. As the Indo-Pacific could be a growing area of tensions and potential confrontations, the need to strengthen cooperation with allies and partners, from the region itself and from the EU, is absolutely compulsory to achieve the goal of stability and freedom of navigation.

4 According to the Suez Canal Authority, the oil tankers traffic in the Canal rose by 60% in July 2022 compared to July 2021. Source : <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20221220-egypt-suez-canal-revenues-to-hit-8bn/>

5 Mazzucchi, Nicolas, « La France et l'Europe face à la décontinentalisation des flux énergétiques », *Revue Défense Nationale* 853 (2022/8), pp. 19-24.

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France and the EU, the need for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

Cooperation between European allies

For France, the Indo-Pacific region is important because of the French population and territories and the increasing commercial routes to Europe, especially following of the war in Ukraine. With the increasing reliance on oil and gas coming from the Gulf region and beyond, it is necessary to have capabilities, and awareness in the region in order to protect major assets. As the French forces remain limited in terms of size and capability, particularly because of the security challenges in Europe, the Mediterranean and Africa, so, the need for cooperation is increasing. European countries are facing similar challenges in reorientating supplies, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the need to sever dependence on Russia as fast as possible. So, the fact that the EU has already implemented missions in the Indian Ocean to enhance security over piracy (EU NAVFOR Atalanta⁶) and protection of strategic routes is positive. CSDP missions and state-to-state cooperation are therefore an important part of the global security policy in the Indo-Pacific for France. The military actions in securing the designated hot-points come with a capacity building and cooperation plan that is also included in the 2022 *Strategic Compass*⁷ as a major tool for CSDP. The *Strategic Compass* mentions the ambition to “Conduct, by 2023, live maritime exercises with partners in the Indo-Pacific in addition to more frequent EU port calls and patrols” (p.60).

The 2021 *EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*⁸ is therefore a major step for cooperation among Europeans for the security of the Indo-Pacific, which is an important challenge. This EU strategy is consistent with the French orientation towards an open Indo-Pacific and the need to promote regional and international cooperation for humanitarian assistance, stability and multilateralism, with a focus on climate change-related crises.

Beyond CSDP missions, France also engaged in 2021 with European allies in the *European-led Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASoH)*⁹ with a military side, the mission Agenor, in which France led a coalition of European countries to secure the maritime traffic in the Strait of Hormuz and the Arab-Persian Gulf. The participation of European navies and air forces for awareness and security is a major element for securing the access to the Gulf and enforce the freedom of commerce, for oil and gas especially. This European cooperation, through the Agenor mission, is also very important to highlight the will of a large number of EU countries to provide a direct participation in securing the strategic routes for Europe.

Cooperation with non-EU countries

European cooperation is important in terms of burden-sharing regarding the security of major supply routes. Yet, another format of cooperation appears as important: cooperation with regional partners. The diplomatic and military rise of regional powers will therefore help to provide a complete framework of security all over the Indo-Pacific as long as the multinational cooperation continues to be developed and deepened. India, Australia, Japan, South Korea and other Indo-Pacific countries are investing in their military to enhance or develop new capabilities, from seabed to space, that would improve awareness and operational efficiency in the protection of the rule of international law. Regarding the cooperation with

6 <https://eunavfor.eu/>

7 EEAS, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, Brussels, EU, 2022.

8 EEAS, *EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, Brussels, EU, 2021.

9 <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/operations/emasoh-agenor>

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Indo-Pacific countries, India is a major partner for France, highlighted by the annual exercise Varuna. Beyond India, France is also deeply committed with Japan and Australia, although without being a member of the QUAD. The cooperation with Australia went through difficulties following the cancellation of the contract for *Barracuda* submarines and the publicisation of the AUKUS agreement, yet the situation has improved following the change of government in Australia in 2021. The partnership with Australia is therefore important for France, regarding the challenges in protecting the territories of French Polynesia and New Caledonia.

As France has a strong presence in the Southwestern part of the Pacific Ocean, where an important number of states, especially small island states, are facing the direct impact of climate change, ALPACI is also very engaged with the multilateral cooperation for humanitarian assistance. In 1992, France signed with Australia and New Zealand the FRANZ Agreement to coordinate and provide support to Pacific states and territories after a natural disaster. French, Australian and New Zealand forces have operated in common several times to provide assistance (Tonga, Vanuatu, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, etc.) and have proposed providing coordination and training for local military forces. The annual exercises to enhance cooperation between major Southwestern Pacific countries is an important event in terms of military diplomacy. Moreover, the FRANZ Agreement is also the first intergovernmental agreement specifically oriented towards the natural disaster assistance and could be a benchmark for potential future international agreements on the support against the effects of climate change.

France tries to follow a "Third way" in reinforcing the presence of France in the Indo-Pacific, in protection of national territories and European strategic assets, yet without an aggressive posture.

Conclusion: The balancing power

Promoting multilateralism and the rule of international law, in a region where global powers intend to affirm their dominance is an important challenge that could only be achieved through a global approach combining diplomacy, a strong defence stance and the will to position France as a balancing power.

Therefore, the issue of partnerships both with Indo-Pacific countries (among them India, Japan and Australia), major Western allies (United States and United Kingdom) and European countries, bilaterally or through the EU, is the cornerstone of the French policy in terms of security. The will to position France as a major diplomatic power, able to participate to dispute settlement as a third-party, also participate this policy to promote security in the Indo-Pacific.

During General de Gaulle's term as French President, the diplomatic doctrine was the preservation of a "Third way", positioning France as a major Western power, yet not automatically aligned on US orientations. Nowadays, the French administration tries to follow this path in reinforcing the presence of France in the Indo-Pacific, in protection of national territories and European strategic assets, yet without an aggressive posture. The participation to diplomatic forums as well as to regional or bilateral military missions and exercises is the tangible manifestation of the "balancing power" orientation.



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