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France in the Indo-Pacific: The Need for a Pragmatic Strategic Posture



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Executive Summary

The impact of the AUKUS security pact signed by Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States in September 2021 underscored limitations and contradictions in France's strategic posture in the Indo-Pacific. Firstly, a precarious balancing act is challenging to sustain amid deteriorating security. Secondly, there is a gap between France's ambitions and its level of operational commitment in this region. As US-China rivalry reaches its peak and the likelihood of a high-intensity conflict in the region seems greater than ever, this report advocates for a pragmatic recalibration of France's strategic posture in the Indo-Pacific. This adjustment should be grounded in a realistic reframing of ambitions and an analysis of France's core interests and the threats it faces.

France's current Indo-Pacific strategy aims to safeguard its sovereign interests, mitigate the risks of instability stemming from interstate tensions, Chinese expansion, and cross-cutting threats, whilst influencing the region's strategic balance. Paris seeks to achieve this final objective by assuming the role of a "balancing power" (*puissance d'équilibre(s)*) and presenting a distinct third way, separate from the United States and China. France possesses several assets that support its engagement in this region: its overseas land and maritime territories, its prepositioned forces, consistent military deployments, and a significant number of local partners. However, France must address numerous challenges. It must clarify its ambiguous diplomatic stance, which traps it between the US and China; align its ambitions with its military resources, which remain inadequate given the scope of its missions and the size of the region; and strengthen its regional presence, notably by redefining and improving relations with its overseas territories.

The deteriorating security environment in the Indo-Pacific region poses a significant threat to French and European interests. Paris needs to fully understand the global implications of a major crisis. Four high-risk areas for high-intensity conflict stand out as particularly relevant to French interests: the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea, the Korean Peninsula, and the northern Indian Ocean (in relation to Iran). Maritime security, environmental security, and the management of common resources (oceans, space), referred to as "non-traditional" security risks, are already sources of escalating tensions and factors of conflict in the medium term. A crisis arising from any of these risks would significantly affect shipping, energy supply, and digital communication flows. A major crisis in the Indo-Pacific would thus pose a triple challenge for France: safeguarding its overseas territories and the well-being of its citizens, securing maritime

flows—encompassing both commerce and energy—, and maintaining its credibility as a power in the Indo-Pacific and on the global stage.

Given the strategic stakes and risks, France must adopt a more pragmatic strategic approach. The idealistic aspiration to be a “balancing power” should evolve into a more pragmatic posture especially with regard to its relationship with the US. This would enable France to participate in relevant and effective initiatives, and groups. In addition, France should consistently involve its overseas territories in the formulation and implementation of the French approach in the Indo-Pacific.

The defense posture should notably be based on enhanced capabilities, reformed governance—especially in the Asia-Pacific region where the current organization lacks clarity—, and greater access to air and naval facilities in the region. These elements are essential for establishing the credibility of the actions of the French armed forces. Finally, Paris must reflect on the role France will play in the event of a major conflict in the region.

This report presents recommendations aimed at clarifying, streamlining, and strengthening the French strategic posture in the Indo-Pacific:

Diplomatic dimension

- ▀ **Clarify the French diplomatic stance in the US-China rivalry.** Acting as a “balancing power” should remain an idealistic aspiration but should give way to a more pragmatic stance, especially in relation to the US.
- ▀ **Enhance the role of France as a convening power (*puissance partenariale*).** A clear stance would allow France to engage with relevant and effective initiatives and groups, including those initiated by Washington, and take a more proactive approach to the establishment of networks and clusters.
- ▀ **Strengthen coordination with French overseas territories.** Paris should take their concerns into account and involve them in the definition and implementation of the French strategy in the Indo-Pacific.
- ▀ **Rethink the way French overseas territories are represented in regional organizations and international dialogues.**

Military dimension

- ▀ **Adapt and streamline the governance of joint forces in the Asia-Pacific region** by redefining the responsibilities of the various military authorities.
- ▀ **Work to establish access to air and naval support facilities** in Singapore, India, Australia, and Japan to provide logistical support for operations conducted in the northern Indo-Pacific.

- ▀ **Enhance the capabilities of French sovereign forces** by rapidly positioning surface vessels with increased capabilities, particularly in anti-submarine warfare, and developing a surface and underwater drone program to improve surveillance of France's vast maritime domain in the Indo-Pacific.
- ▀ **Address the contested maritime spaces through enhanced dialogue with Southeast Asian countries, offering operational and legal assistance**, on issues such as maritime security, the fight against illegal fishing and maritime pollution, and increased assistance in the event of natural or humanitarian disasters.
- ▀ **Develop regional maritime security hubs in the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia.**
- ▀ **Anticipate a major crisis and France's role** in this region, including the potential deployment of a carrier strike group in the northern Indian Ocean, with capable European countries (particularly Italy and the United Kingdom).

Résumé

Le choc du pacte de sécurité AUKUS, signé entre les États-Unis, l'Australie et le Royaume-Uni en septembre 2021, a mis en évidence les limites et contradictions diplomatico-militaires de la posture stratégique de la France dans l'Indo-Pacifique : d'une part, une posture équilibrée difficilement tenable dans un contexte de forte dégradation sécuritaire et, d'autre part, un fossé entre les ambitions et le niveau d'engagement opérationnel dans cette région.

Alors que la rivalité sino-américaine atteint aujourd'hui son paroxysme et que la probabilité d'un affrontement dans la région semble plus importante que jamais, cette étude plaide pour un recalibrage de la posture stratégique de la France dans l'Indo-Pacifique, fondé sur un recadrage réaliste des ambitions et une analyse de ses intérêts fondamentaux et des menaces qui pèsent sur eux.

La stratégie indopacifique de la France vise à protéger ses intérêts souverains, réduire les risques d'instabilité dus aux tensions interétatiques, à l'expansion chinoise, aux risques transversaux, mais aussi à peser sur l'équilibre stratégique de la région, en s'appuyant sur les notions de « puissance d'équilibre(s) » et de « troisième voie », au-delà des seuls États-Unis et de la Chine. La France dispose de nombreux atouts pour agir dans cette zone : ses territoires insulaires et maritimes, ses forces prépositionnées, ses déploiements militaires polyvalents ainsi que ses nombreux partenaires locaux. Elle doit cependant encore relever un certain nombre de défis pour clarifier une posture diplomatique qui est parfois mal comprise et qui l'enferme dans l'étau sino-américain, mettre en adéquation ses ambitions et ses moyens, toujours insuffisants au vu des missions et des élongations, et renforcer son ancrage régional, notamment par la clarification de ses relations à ses territoires d'outre-mer.

La détérioration de l'environnement sécuritaire en Indo-Pacifique constitue une menace considérable pour les intérêts français et européens. Paris doit prendre toute la mesure des conséquences globales qu'aurait une crise majeure. Quatre zones à haut risque de conflit se distinguent particulièrement pour les intérêts de la France : le détroit de Taïwan, la mer de Chine méridionale, le pourtour de la péninsule coréenne et le nord de l'océan Indien (autour de la question iranienne). Les enjeux de sécurité maritime, de sécurité environnementale et de gestion des communs (océans, espace), qualifiés de risques de sécurité non traditionnels, sont par ailleurs déjà sources de tensions croissantes et constituent des facteurs de conflit à moyen terme.

Ces crises potentielles en Indo-Pacifique impacteraient fortement le transport maritime, l’approvisionnement énergétique et le flux numérique et poseraient à la France *a minima* un triple défi : la protection de ses territoires ultramarins et de ses ressortissants, la sécurisation des flux maritimes ainsi que la crédibilité de son rôle de puissance au sein de l’Indo-Pacifique et plus largement la préservation de son statut sur l’échiquier international.

Au regard de ces enjeux stratégiques et des facteurs de risques, cette étude considère qu’il serait souhaitable de faire évoluer l’approche stratégique française vers davantage de pragmatisme. Agir comme une « puissance d’équilibres » doit rester une aspiration idéaliste et céder le pas à une posture plus pragmatique, notamment face aux États-Unis. Cette posture de clarté permettrait à la France de s’associer à des initiatives ou regroupements pertinents et efficaces. Paris devrait également s’efforcer de se coordonner systématiquement avec ses territoires d’outre-mer pour la définition et mise en œuvre de son approche indopacifique. Par ailleurs, la posture de défense en Indo-Pacifique devrait notamment s’appuyer sur une progressive montée en puissance capacitaire, une réforme de la gouvernance, spécialement en Asie-Pacifique où l’organisation actuelle est peu lisible, ainsi que sur une densification et un renforcement de ses points d’appui aéromaritimes, indispensables à la crédibilité et la résilience de l’action des forces armées françaises dans la région. Enfin, la question du rôle de la France – et plus largement de l’Union européenne – en cas de conflit majeur dans cette région nécessiterait d’être anticipée.

Plusieurs recommandations sont formulées dans cette étude, avec pour objectif de clarifier, rationaliser et renforcer la posture stratégique française dans l’Indo-Pacifique :

Dimension diplomatique

- ▀ **Clarifier la ligne diplomatique dans la rivalité sino-américaine** : agir comme une « puissance d’équilibres » doit rester une aspiration idéaliste et céder le pas à une posture plus pragmatique, notamment vis-à-vis des États-Unis.
- ▀ **Renforcer la notion de puissance partenariale** : une posture de clarté permettrait à la France de s’associer à des initiatives ou regroupements pertinents et efficaces, et d’être plus proactive dans la mise en place de réseaux et de clusters.
- ▀ **Renforcer la coordination avec les collectivités d’outre-mer**, en prenant en compte leurs préoccupations et en les intégrant à la définition et la mise en œuvre de la stratégie française en Indo-Pacifique.
- ▀ **Repenser le mode de représentation des territoires d’outre-mer dans les organisations régionales et dialogues internationaux.**

Dimension militaire

- ▀ **Ajuster et simplifier la gouvernance interarmées en Asie-Pacifique** par une redéfinition des zones de responsabilité des autorités militaires.
- ▀ **Travailler à l'établissement de réels points d'appui** aéromaritimes à Singapour, en Inde, en Australie et au Japon pour soutenir logistiquement les déploiements menés dans le nord de l'Indo-Pacifique.
- ▀ **Améliorer les capacités des forces de souveraineté** en positionnant dans les meilleurs délais des bâtiments de surface dotés de capacités accrues, notamment en matière de lutte anti-sous-marine, et en développant une filière drone de surface comme sous-marine, permettant d'améliorer la surveillance de l'immense domaine maritime français en Indo-Pacifique.
- ▀ **Agir face à la contestation des espaces maritimes par un dialogue et un soutien, opérationnel comme juridique, renforcés avec les pays du Sud-Est asiatique** : sécurité maritime, lutte contre la pêche illégale et la pollution maritime, soutien accru face aux catastrophes naturelles ou humanitaires.
- ▀ **Développer des pôles régionaux de sécurité maritime** en océan Indien et en Asie du Sud-Est.
- ▀ **Anticiper une crise majeure et le rôle de la France dans cette région** avec le possible déploiement d'un groupe aéronaval dans le nord de l'océan Indien avec les pays européens en mesure d'y contribuer (Italie et Royaume-Uni en particulier).

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Introduction

The vast Indo-Pacific region, defined by France as stretching from the east coast of Africa to the west coast of the Americas, is now considered a pivotal strategic area. Home to 60 percent of the world's population, and accounting for 40 percent of global gross domestic product (GDP), it has become the main driver of the global economy, but it is also a space where international norms are increasingly under threat, from the South China Sea to the Korean Peninsula.

As a hotbed of interstate tensions fueled by territorial disputes and cross-cutting issues such as the impact of global warming, piracy, and the proliferation of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, the Indo-Pacific is also the arena in which the future world order underpinned by the rivalry between the United States and China is taking shape. As the problems mount, the conditions for cooperation have become increasingly challenging. The dynamics of strategic competition, and the fragmentation of the regional security architecture into multiple cooperative frameworks with varying degrees of openness and formality are obstacles to the multilateral coordination essential to ensuring stability.

Against this backdrop, about a dozen countries have published specific Indo-Pacific strategies. The main principles and objectives of the French strategy were outlined in a keynote speech by President Emmanuel Macron at the Australian Navy base on Garden Island in 2018,¹ and then fully developed by the Ministry of the Armed Forces and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2019.² France was the first country in Europe to adopt an Indo-Pacific strategy and is also the only country with sovereign interests in the region. Its overseas territories make it a resident power.³ France has the second largest maritime domain in the region (around 9 million km²) and over seven thousand military personnel permanently stationed there.

While aware of the challenges posed by China, France is careful not to adopt a confrontational approach, and promotes a different model for the Indo-Pacific to those pursued by the United States (US) and China. Its official strategy rejects the idea of being trapped in a bloc logic and is

1. "Speech of the President of France at the Sydney Naval Base, Garden Island", Elysée, 2018.

2. "2030 French Strategy in Asia-Oceania: Towards an Inclusive Asian Indo-Pacific Region", Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, 2018, available at: www.diplomatie.gouv.fr.

3. These territories consist of the islands of Mayotte and Réunion, the Scattered Islands, and the French Southern and Antarctic Lands in the Indian Ocean, and New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, French Polynesia, and Clipperton Island in the Pacific Ocean.

primarily based on maintaining an open, inclusive space based on respect for international law and multilateralism.

The term “balancing power” (*puissance d'équilibre(s)*), which Macron has used on numerous occasions, including in France’s 2022 *National Strategic Review*,⁴ has raised questions among certain partners and allies. This is because it suggests a 'third way' while rejecting the notion of 'equidistance' between major powers.⁵ This attitude is sometimes difficult to understand, and consequently has a negative impact on France’s influence, and its ability to promote its interests and develop its partnerships.

The limitations and contradictions of France’s approach to the Indo-Pacific have been highlighted by the tensions arising from the launch of the AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, and US) security partnership in September 2021.⁶ This tripartite military pact drew attention not only to the incongruity of France’s “balancing” stance in the context of a sharply deteriorating security situation, but also to the gap between France’s ambitions and its actual level of operational commitment to the region. Several analyses, including by French authors, have highlighted these structural weaknesses and identified the risk of a gradual erosion of France’s credibility in the region.⁷ In a previous publication, we also noted that one year after the launch of AUKUS, France had not substantially changed its defense strategy in the Indo-Pacific.⁸

Now, however, with the US-China rivalry at its height, the prospect of a confrontation in the region seems more serious than ever. The deteriorating security environment in the Indo-Pacific poses a significant threat to French and European interests.⁹ Although deterrence and military retaliation in the

4. “By 2030, I want France to have consolidated its role as a balancing, united, globally influential power, a driving force for European autonomy, and a power that assumes its responsibilities by contributing, as a reliable and supportive partner, to the preservation of multilateral mechanisms based on international law”: Emmanuel Macron, preface, *National Strategic Review*, November 28, 2022, available at: www.sgdsn.gouv.fr.

5. See, for example, Macron’s speeches at the ambassadors’ conferences in September 2022, available at: www.elysee.fr; and “[W]e want to speak with everyone and build trust-based diplomacy, a diplomacy of balances in the plural and not one of equidistance, through which we can build concrete solutions to the challenges I raised and to this fragmentation underway”, and August 2023, available at: <http://www.elysee.fr>.

6. AUKUS is a tripartite military security pact between Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom, publicly announced on September 15, 2021.

7. C. Pajon, “Indo-Pacifique: refonder l’engagement français après AUKUS”, Ifri, 2022, available at: www.ifrimaps.org; C. Perrin *et al.*, “La stratégie française pour l’Indo-Pacifique : des ambitions à la réalité”, *Rapport d’information*, n° 285, Sénat, January 25, 2023; M. Duchâtel, “La crédibilité de la France dans l’Indopacifique: premières pistes”, Institut Montaigne, May 2023; A. Bondaz, “La France, une puissance d’initiatives en Indo-Pacifique”, FRS, November 15, 2022.

8. J. Bachelier and C. Pajon, “France and AUKUS: Bouncing Back to Live Up to Pacific Challenges”, *Briefings de l’Ifri*, Ifri, November 3, 2022.

9. A regional military crisis could potentially threaten French territories in the region. France and the European Union (EU) also have significant economic interests in the region that would be jeopardized by any destabilization resulting in the disruption of production and supply chains for components critical to their industries, as well as maritime transport. The Indo-Pacific countries

Indo-Pacific depend primarily on the US, France must be fully prepared for the global repercussions of a major crisis, blockade, or conflict in the Taiwan Strait, North Korea, the South China Sea, or the North-West Indian Ocean. Such an event would present France with at least three major challenges: protecting its overseas territories and citizens, securing maritime flows—both trade and energy—and the credibility of its role as a power in the Indo-Pacific, and preserving its standing on the global stage.

In this study, based on an analysis of France’s core interests and the threats to them, we argue for a recalibration of France’s strategic posture in the Indo-Pacific, along with a realistic readjustment of its ambitions. While the concept of a “balancing power” can remain an idealistic aspiration, promoted at the highest levels of government in an echo of the Gaullist posture of “grandeur,” strategic implementation must be refocused on realistic, achievable goals: protecting its sovereign interests, contributing to regional stability, and potential intervention in the event of a conflict (power interests). In military terms, these are already ambitious objectives that require increased capabilities, an overhaul of command structures, and a denser network of support locations—all essential to ensure France’s credibility and clarify its approach to the region.

This approach should also include considering ad hoc involvement in existing cooperation platforms from which France has actively excluded itself in the past for fear of being perceived as part of an “anti-China coalition”—such as the Quad,¹⁰ AUKUS, and the Partners in the Blue Pacific¹¹—in line with the principles of flexibility and inclusiveness advocated by its own Indo-Pacific strategy.

In this study, we will first examine France’s current strategic posture in the Indo-Pacific, and its strengths and limitations, before highlighting potential crisis and conflict zones, and the risk factors present in the region. Finally, we propose a series of recommendations and areas for consideration that would result in a defense posture better suited to French and European interests in the region.

represent a third of the EU’s total trade with non-European states, and 30 percent of global shipping passes through the South China Sea.

10. The Quad is a strategic security dialogue between the US, India, Japan, and Australia. See, for example: “Quad Leaders’ Joint Statement: ‘The Spirit of the Quad’”, March 12, 2021, available at: www.au.usembassy.gov.

11. “Statement by Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States on the Establishment of the Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP)”, White House, June 24, 2022, available at: www.whitehouse.gov.

France's approach to the Indo-Pacific: Strengths and weaknesses

France's presence and defense capabilities in the Indo-Pacific are of strategic importance for safeguarding its interests. Believing that no single power can ensure stability in the region, Paris advocates cooperation and communication and seeks to promote its view of the Indo-Pacific as “a space that is open and inclusive, free of all forms of coercion and governed in accordance with international law and multilateralism”.¹² While France has many assets to build on in the region —notably its island and maritime territories, its pre-positioned forces, and a large number of partners—it nevertheless faces several major challenges in clarifying its diplomatic stance, aligning its ambitions with its resources, and thereby strengthening its credibility.

The history of the concept of the “Indo-Pacific” in France

The geopolitical sense of the term “Indo-Pacific” emerged in the mid-2000s, in the context of the rapprochement between Japan and India, as a way of emphasizing the economic and security maritime continuum of the Indian and Pacific Oceans.¹³ In 2007, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe spoke to the Indian Parliament of a “confluence of the two seas”,¹⁴ describing the emergence of a new area stretching from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean, within which Japan sought to develop new partnerships.¹⁵ This concept emphasized the dominant role of flows, which is central to globalization. Also in 2007, four states that call themselves as “maritime democracies” (Japan, the US, Australia, and India) came together to form the “Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue” or “Quad”. In 2016, during his second term in office (2012–20), Abe unveiled the first strategy for a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific”, positioned as a liberal alternative to the Chinese

12. “The Indo-Pacific: A Priority for France”, Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, September 2022, available at: www.diplomatie.gouv.fr.

13. C. Pajon, “La coopération maritime nippo-indienne : réinvestir l'Asie par la mer”, *Politique étrangère*, Vol. 74, No. 3, 2009, pp. 637–648.

14. A. Shinzo, “Confluence of the Two Seas”, Speech to the Parliament of the Republic of India, August 22, 2007, available at: www.mofa.go.jp.

15. J. Bachelier, “Vers une région indopacifique”, *Revue Défense Nationale*, February 23, 2018, available at: www.defnat.com.

“Belt and Road Initiative” or “New Silk Road” project launched by Xi Jinping in 2013.

Australia’s 2013 Defense White Paper¹⁶ referred to the “strategic arc” of the Indo-Pacific as being shaped by regional geostrategic dynamics. At this time, Rory Medcalf, a professor at the Australian National University, argued that stronger economic and security ties between the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean were creating a single strategic system, and that Australia should see itself as a major actor in this region owing to its two-ocean geography. He emphasized the need for Australia to draw closer to India, with a view to diluting China’s regional influence.¹⁷

In India, whilst academics and the military had been using the term “Indo-Pacific” since the late 2000s,¹⁸ it was not until 2012 that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh first referred to the concept, declaring at an ASEAN summit that “a stable, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific region is critical for our own progress and prosperity”.¹⁹

In 2017 the Trump administration appropriated Japan’s idea of a “free and open Indo-Pacific”, marking a shift from the “Pivot to Asia” strategy previously pursued by Barack Obama. In mid-2018, the Hawaii-based US Pacific Command (USPACOM) was renamed the United States Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM), as a sign of the US’s military-centric approach to the region. The Trump administration’s foreign policy has been characterized by its disdain of multilateralism shown by its withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership,²⁰ and a particular focus on rivalry with China. Washington’s approach to the Indo-Pacific was more focused on US national interests (based on an “America First” approach) than on defending the liberal international order. The Biden administration has since revised the US’s Indo-Pacific strategy, re-emphasizing multilateralism and placing strategic partnerships and regional alliances at the center of the US approach to counterbalancing China.²¹

16. “Defence White Paper 2013”, Australian Government, Department of Defence, 2013, available at: www.defence.gov.au.

17. R. Medcalf, “The Indo-Pacific: What’s in a Name?”, *The American Interest*, October 10, 2013, available at: www.the-american-interest.com.

18. G. Khurana, “Security of Sea Lines: Prospects for India-Japan Cooperation”, *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2007, pp. 139–153; C. R. Mohan, “Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012.

19. M. Singh, “Opening Statement by Prime Minister at Plenary Session of India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, December 20, 2012, available at: www.mea.gov.in.

20. In January 2017, shortly after taking office as the forty-fifth president of the United States, Donald Trump announced that the US was withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a trade agreement negotiated with eleven other countries in the Asia-Pacific region. The purpose of the TPP was to create a vast economic space in the region based on common trading norms and standards, to perpetuate a liberal framework and counterbalance Chinese ambitions.

21. “Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States”, The White House, February 2022, available at: www.whitehouse.gov.

The emergence of this new geostrategic concept was followed with interest in France. However, the 2013 French *White Paper on Defense and National Security*²² did not refer to the concept, and focused more on the Indian and Pacific Oceans than on the East Asian coast, presenting France as a “sovereign power and a player in the security of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific”.²³ That same year, at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, the then Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian’s speech referring to France as an “Asia-Pacific power” was met with some skepticism. Chinese Admiral Li Ji summed up the prevailing view: “For us, France is in Europe”.²⁴

Over the next few years, France’s image in the region improved. In 2016, Paris signed major defense agreements with India and Australia, hence strengthening its strategic commitment to the region. The deal signed with New Delhi in September 2016 included the delivery of thirty-six Rafale fighter jets, and in July of the same year, the French company DCNS (now Naval Group) won a \$39 billion “contract of the century” to supply twelve conventionally powered attack submarines to the Australian Navy by 2050.²⁵ This long-term agreement, along with the renewal of the two strategic partnerships signed in 1998 with India and in 2012 with Australia, was a statement of France’s ambitions in the region. In the period 2008–17, the Asian region accounted for 29 percent of total French arms orders.²⁶

While the concept of the Indo-Pacific made sense to the French Navy and the French strategic community, it only began to influence the wider circle of policymakers in 2013–15, when the idea of the “maritimization of the world”²⁷ was used to justify France’s growing interest in this key region: “The Asia-Pacific region is notably characterized by the size of its maritime spaces and the communication routes that cross them, from the Yellow Sea to the Arabian Gulf. These are vital to both European and Asian nations and form the main jugular vein of globalization”.²⁸

In 2016, a French Senate report examining Franco-Australian relations and the role played by France in the “New World” noted the value of the

22. *French White Paper on Defence and National Security - 2013*, Ministère de la Défense, April 29, 2013, available at: www.vie-publique.fr.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

24. S. Kauffmann, “La France peut-elle devenir une puissance de l’Asie-Pacifique?”, *Le Monde*, June 2, 2013.

25. A. Bauer, “Année 2016 atypique pour les exportations d’armes”, *Les Echos*, March 7, 2017.

26. “Rapport au Parlement 2018 sur les exportations d’armement de la France”, Ministère des Armées, June 2018, p. 15, available at: www.defense.gouv.fr.

27. The term “maritimization of the world” describes the growing importance of the oceans, and highlights the crucial role played by communication routes, shipping, the exploration of ocean resources, and maritime security. Oceans are not merely borders, but also connections between regions and continents. See, for example: J. Lorgeoux and A. Trillard, “Maritimisation : la France face à la nouvelle géopolitique des océans”, *Rapport d’information No. 674 (2011–2012)*, Sénat, July 17, 2012.

28. “La France et la sécurité en Asie-Pacifique”, Ministère de la Défense, Direction des Affaires Stratégiques (DAS), April 2012.

“Indo-Pacific” concept to describe the economic and security continuum formed by the two contiguous oceans linking Europe and Asia and recommended the development of a French Indo-Pacific strategy. This was published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Armed Forces in 2019, following its first official mention in Macron’s Garden Island speech in 2018.²⁹

The concept of the “Indo-Pacific” remains highly geopolitical in nature, primarily reflecting the interests and ambitions of the countries that have adopted it. France, for example, has a broader geographic definition of the zone as extending from the east coast of Africa to the entire Pacific Ocean, while the US does not include the Western Indian Ocean, which falls under the operational responsibility of its Central Command (CENTCOM)³⁰ rather than INDOPACOM. Whether focused on counterbalance or containment, despite their differences, these Indo-Pacific strategies all have one thing in common: they have been developed in response to the destabilizing effects of Chinese expansion in the region.

The genesis and principles of the French approach to the Indo-Pacific

The development of France’s Indo-Pacific strategy was driven by three major concerns: first, safeguarding France’s sovereign interests in the region; second, reducing the risks of instability owing to interstate tensions, Chinese expansion, and cross-cutting risks; and finally, influencing the strategic future of the region as a responsible international power.

Safeguarding French interests

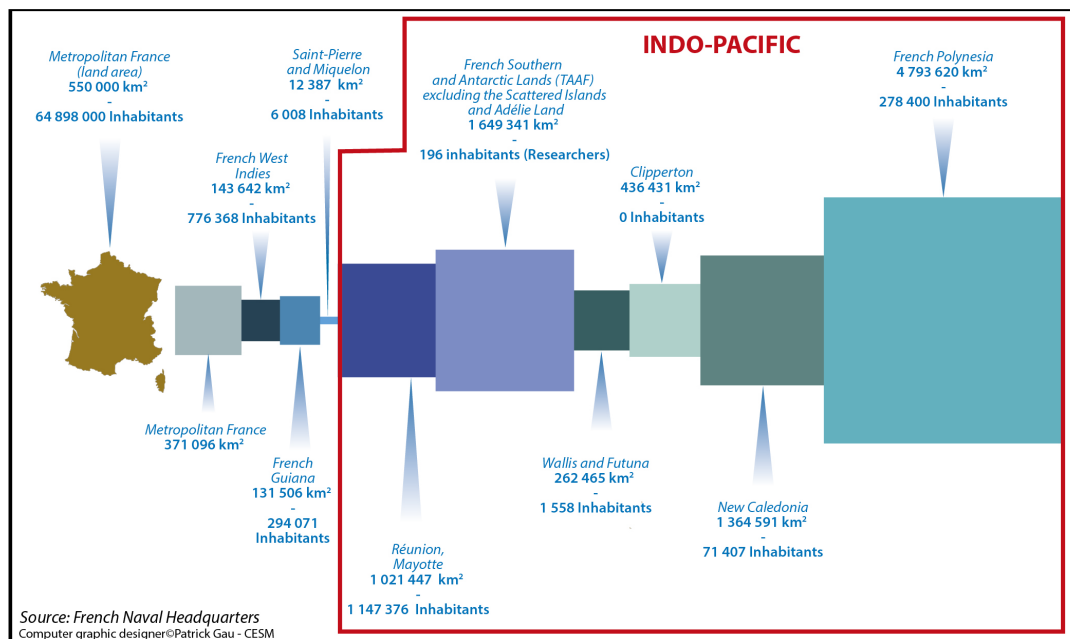
Unlike other European countries, France sees the Indo-Pacific primarily in terms of sovereignty and the protection of its overseas territories and their associated maritime domains, since 90 percent of France’s maritime domain is located in this region.³¹ France also wants to protect its citizens—more than 1.6 million of whom live in the overseas territories, and over 200,000 of whom live in other countries in the region—and, according to the official line, to make an active contribution to the stability, sustainable development and prosperity of the countries neighboring its overseas territories.

29. “France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy”, Ministère des Armées, 2019, available at: www.defense.gouv.fr.

30. The CENTCOM area of responsibility stretches from north-east Africa through the Middle East to central and south Asia. See US Central Command, “CENTCOM Area of Responsibility”, available at: www.centcom.mil.

31. The maritime domain of French Polynesia alone spans almost 4.8 million km²—an area the size of Europe.

Figure 1: The size of France's Exclusive Economic Zones around the world



Source: French Naval Headquarters

Beyond these “core” interests, several geostrategic developments have been identified by the French authorities over the past decade as potential threats to their interests in the region. First and foremost is China’s maritime expansion in the East and South China Seas, and the risks it poses to freedom of navigation and the peaceful resolution of disputes.³² The opening of a major Chinese military base in Djibouti in 2017 has also raised serious concerns. The risks posed by the development of the Belt and Road Initiative since 2013, in particular the mechanism of getting developing countries into excessive debt and their resulting economic and political dependency, have subsequently convinced France’s foreign affairs and economics ministries of the need to better define its national interests and strategy towards China, including in the Indo-Pacific.³³

The 2017 *Defence and National Security Strategic Review*³⁴ identifies the risks associated with China’s rise in terms of ambition (“to become the dominant power in Asia”, and “to match or overtake the power of the United States”), military build-up (“the Chinese defense budget is now four times that of France”), and challenges to the rules-based order (“the South

32. China’s posture consists of openly challenging treaties it has itself signed and ratified, such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

33. A. Ekman *et al.*, “La France face aux Nouvelles Routes de la soie chinoises”, *Études de l’Ifri*, Ifri, October 2018; “Les nouvelles routes de la soie”, *Trésor-éco*, No. 229, Direction Générale du Trésor, Ministère de l’Économie et des Finances, October 2018, available at: www.tresor.economie.gouv.fr.

34. *Defence and National Security Strategic Review 2017*, French Republic, October 2017, available at: www.vie-publique.fr.

and the East China Seas remain the priority areas of China's assertive policy, with Beijing invoking 'historical rights'). The *National Strategic Review* of November 2022³⁵ also expresses concern about the growing strategic convergence between Beijing and Moscow.

Macron has also repeatedly highlighted the dangers posed by Chinese hegemony and predatory practices, particularly during his visits to French territories in the region—a way of reaffirming the legitimacy of French sovereignty over its overseas territories.³⁶ During his historic tour of the independent Pacific islands in July 2023, he implicitly alluded to China in his references to “predatory great powers”, illegal fishing, “numerous loans with unconscionable conditions that literally choke development” and in condemning “in the Indo-Pacific, and especially in Oceania, the emergence of new imperialisms and a power logic that threatens the sovereignty of several states, often the smallest and most vulnerable”.³⁷ France's strategy in the Indo-Pacific is, therefore, primarily guided by a high level of vigilance towards China.³⁸

Environmental security, the protection of biodiversity and the oceans, and the conservation of marine,³⁹ energy,⁴⁰ and mineral⁴¹ resources are also key issues for France in this region, particularly given the vast maritime domain of its overseas territories.⁴²

35. *National Strategic Review*, November 28, 2022, available at: www.sgdsn.gouv.fr.

36. See, for example: “In this part of the world, China is gradually establishing its hegemony [...] if we don't get our act together, we will soon be subjected to a hegemony that will restrict our freedoms and our opportunities”, Macron's speech in Nouméa, New Caledonia, May 5, 2018, available at: www.elysee.fr; “But I'm telling you now, in the coming years, we betide the small, we betide the isolated, we betide those who are subjected to the influence and the incursions of hegemonic powers who come for their fish, their technologies, and their economic resources”, Macron's speech in Papeete, Tahiti, July 28, 2021, available at: www.elysee.fr, referring obliquely to China; and “If independence means deciding tomorrow to have a Chinese base here, or to be dependent on other fleets, good luck! That's not what I call independence”, Macron's speech in Nouméa on July 26, 2023, available at: www.vie-publique.fr.

37. “Discours du Président de la République”, Port Vila, July 27, 2023, available at: www.elysee.fr.

38. H. Meijer, “Pulled East. The Rise of China, Europe and French Security Policy in the Asia-Pacific”, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2021.

39. The Indo-Pacific has some of the world's richest fishing grounds, but these resources are under threat from overfishing and illegal fishing. Sustainable fishing is essential to stabilizing fish stocks.

40. The Indo-Pacific has energy resources with huge potential, including oil and gas deposits in the South China Sea, the Bay of Bengal, and the Arafura Sea. However, the exploitation of these resources raises questions about sovereignty, resource sharing, and environmental impact.

41. The Indo-Pacific seabed contains precious minerals such as polymetallic nodules. However, underwater mining raises several environmental concerns in this region, due to its impact on particularly fragile marine ecosystems.

42. See N. Regaud, “Politique de sécurité climatique du ministère des Armées en Indo-Pacifique: un puissant vecteur de coopération internationale”, *Les Champs de Mars*, Vol. 35, February 2020, pp. 199–209, available at: www.cairn.info; A. Bondaz and A. Taithe, “Prendre en compte les enjeux de sécurité environnementale en Indo-Pacifique”, *Revue Conflits*, March 6, 2023.

Reducing the risks of instability

China's maritime expansion in the region is driving instability in two main ways.

First, by pursuing a “fait accompli” strategy, China has already gained a foothold in the region, by reclaiming from the sea and militarizing several small islands in the South China Sea claimed by Vietnam and the Philippines. This development sets a worrying precedent, challenging the primacy of law over force, and threatening freedom of navigation. In 2016, at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, Jean-Yves Le Drian stressed the need to discourage unilateral power plays in the China Seas, fearing that such action could spread to other regions such as the Mediterranean.⁴³ While not officially taking sides in sovereignty disputes, Paris regularly deploys its ships in the South and East China Seas, including as part of the Jeanne d'Arc missions or using the Floréal-class surveillance frigates based in New Caledonia and French Polynesia. In June 2019, the aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* also docked in Singapore before sailing to the Gulf of Thailand. In conjunction, the armed forces minister Florence Parly declared that France would continue to defend international law in a “steady, non-confrontational but obstinate way”,⁴⁴ noting that any disruption of shipping routes would have a dramatic impact on Europe's economic and commercial security.⁴⁵

The second factor of instability is the power imbalance in the region in favor of China. France therefore wants to strengthen the “strategic autonomy” or “sovereignty” of its Southeast Asian partners—who are being actively courted by both China and the US—by supplying defense equipment and providing development assistance on environmental and health issues.⁴⁶ In addition to Chinese expansion, the French government sees increasing Sino-American rivalry as a factor of instability.⁴⁷

France's Indo-Pacific strategy is therefore also aimed at countering the negative effects of this growing polarization by promoting a multipolar, multilateral approach⁴⁸ governed by the rule of law, as Jean-Yves Le Drian,

43. J.-Y. Le Drian, “Fourth Plenary Session: The Challenges of Conflict Resolution, 15th Asia Security Summit”, IISS, June 5, 2016.

44. F. Parly, “Speech at Shangri-La Dialogue”, June 1, 2019.

45. The Indo-Pacific now accounts for around 20 percent of the French market, and this share has almost doubled in twenty years. The increase in shipping traffic over the last two decades has been driven solely by Asia (transatlantic traffic has remained stable over the same period).

46. “France's Partnerships in the Indo-Pacific”, Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, April 2021, pp. 42 and 46, available at: www.diplomatie.gouv.fr.

47. “France's Indo-Pacific Strategy”, Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, 2021, p. 10, available at: www.diplomatie.gouv.fr.

48. France is a member of the Indian Ocean Commission, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS), the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting (SPDMM), and the Heads of Asian Coast

then foreign affairs minister, explained in 2021: “Beyond any logic of blocs, we therefore intend to champion a third path in the Indo-Pacific, for responding to today’s upheavals with all well-intentioned powers”.⁴⁹ France has thus not aligned itself with the US policy developed under the Trump administration and generally pursued by the Biden administration, which it considers to be overly military-centric and confrontational toward Beijing: “France rejects both extremes: naivety about China’s behavior, and alignment with a confrontational policy that would fuel tensions”.⁵⁰ Ultimately, this approach seeks to promote a multipolar order that allows France and Europe to follow their own path, while maintaining a space for dialogue with Beijing.⁵¹

Finally, “non-traditional” security issues, such as the impact of climate change, are increasingly affecting the stability of the region, making populations more vulnerable, hampering development, and exacerbating interstate rivalries over access to natural resources. France believes that an inclusive approach and the continued pursuit of international cooperation are key to responding to these transnational challenges.⁵²

Shaping the strategic future of the region and reasserting French influence

The Indo-Pacific region is also full of “power interests” for France, including countering the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. As a permanent member of the United Nations (UN) Security Council, France contributes to the UN-mandated missions in Asia, and is particularly involved in monitoring the embargo against North Korea.⁵³

France also promotes respect for international law,⁵⁴ in particular the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and contributes to the strategic stability of the region by regularly deploying its naval and aerial

Guard Agencies Meeting (HACGAM) and is a dialogue partner of the Pacific Islands Forum, and a development partner of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

49. “France’s Partnerships in the Indo-Pacific”, Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires étrangères, April 2021, p. 2, available at: www.diplomatie.gouv.fr.

50. “Entretien avec Emmanuel Macron, candidat à l’élection présidentielle”, *Magazine DSI*, April 2022, available at: www.aren24.news.

51. We note President Macron’s state visit to China from April 5 to 7, 2023.

52. S. Banerjee and P. Basu, “Strengthening Partnerships to Counter Non-Traditional Security Threats in the Indo-Pacific”, *Special Report*, No. 185, ORF, March 3, 2022, available at: www.orfonline.org.

53. France is part of the Enforcement Coordination Cell, an *ad hoc* US-led coalition based in Japan that monitors the UN-mandated embargo against North Korea.

54. C. Monteiro Da Silva, “Falü zhan: la ‘guerre du droit’, une version chinoise du *lawfare*?”, *Raisons politiques*, Vol. 85, No. 1, 2022, available at: www.cairn.info; A. Férey, “Vers une guerre des normes?”, *Focus stratégique*, No. 108, Ifri, April 2022.

capabilities, particularly in the South and East China Seas, the Taiwan Strait, and the northern Indian Ocean.⁵⁵

In terms of its desire to establish itself as a major international actor, another key area of influence for France is the regulation of new domains such as the internet, the oceans, and space, as well as new technologies such as artificial intelligence.⁵⁶ If it wants to remain a relevant geopolitical actor in the world order shaped by the US-China rivalry, France must not only be proactive, but also speak with a distinctive voice.

France's strategy in the Indo-Pacific is therefore based on a "geopolitical anxiety"⁵⁷ in response to changing international power relations. Although France's primary goal is to safeguard its interests in the region, it also sees the Indo-Pacific as an opportunity to reassert its position. This constructivist dimension partly explains the gap between the official rhetoric of the Indo-Pacific as being a "priority" for France and the actual resources available to make a real commitment to the region.⁵⁸

France's approach to the Indo-Pacific, particularly under Macron's leadership, is therefore based primarily on the perception of a major crisis in the global order and the multilateral framework established in 1945, and is driven by the desire "to prevent the Sino-American duopoly, the dislocation, the return of hostile regional powers".⁵⁹ Given the significance of the China factor in the genesis of France's approach to the Indo-Pacific, this "balancing" position has sent a confusing message to both partners and competitors about Paris's ambitions and role in the region.

Assets: Presence, capabilities, deployments, and partnerships

France has several assets on which to draw in the Indo-Pacific: its long-standing presence in the region and its island and maritime territories; its pre-positioned forces and multi-purpose military deployments; and the support of numerous strategic partners.

55. UNCLOS gives all states the right to navigate and operate outside territorial waters and in international straits. While France exercises this right, it does so without conducting conflict operations, such as freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in the waters of the islands reclaimed by China in the Spratlys or Paracels—as is notably the case with the US.

56. See the recent summit on North-South financing, UN summit on oceans.

57. See I. Saint-Mézard, *Géopolitique de l'Indo-Pacifique*, Paris: PUF, 2022. Saint-Mézard borrows the concept of "geopolitical anxiety" from Chengxin Pan, defining it as a chronic anxiety that affects the "ontological being" of states, i.e., their identity and national narrative.

58. J.-J. Roche, "La France et l'universel", *Annuaire français des relations internationales (AFRI)*, Vol. I, 2000, available at: www.afri-ct.org. Jean-Jacques Roche refers to France's "schizophrenic diplomacy", which is constantly striving for dialectic resolution of the contradictions arising from the simultaneous pursuit of new horizons (prestige and power, claims to universalism) and defense of immediate interests.

59. E. Macron *et al.*, "The Macron Doctrine", Groupe d'études géopolitiques, November 16, 2020, available at: www.legrandcontinent.eu.

A long-standing presence in the region

France's long-standing presence in the Indo-Pacific dates back to the colonization of the island of Réunion (formerly Bourbon) in the seventeenth century.⁶⁰ In the nineteenth century France established colonies and protectorates that brought territories such as Indochina (Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia), Madagascar, New Caledonia, and part of Polynesia under French rule. The decolonization movements of the twentieth century, which included a long and bloody conflict in Indochina (1946–54), resulted in the withdrawal of the French presence.

However, France remained a member of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) until 1964, and played an important role during the Vietnam War, including De Gaulle's Phnom Penh address in 1966, and the peace talks hosted in Paris between 1968 and 1973.⁶¹ In the Pacific Ocean, France maintained its presence, but this was marked by controversy, notably over nuclear testing in the 1960s and 1970s and in 1995, along with events such as the Matignon Accords in the 1980s, and the independence of the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu). In the Indian Ocean, in 1976 France was forced to withdraw from Diego Suarez in Madagascar and repatriate its forces to Réunion. The independence of the Comoros in 1977 raised questions about the status of Mayotte, while also challenging the continued existence of the French Southern and Antarctic Lands.

France's involvement in Asia has therefore been "intermittent".⁶² Its loss of influence in the region was seen as a problem at a time of strong economic growth in Asian countries. Although Asia was declared to be the "new frontier" of French foreign policy in 1993, France's re-engagement in the region remained limited,⁶³ marked by its vote in favor of the embargo against China following the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, and the sale of frigates to Taiwan. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, France's Asia policy remained focused on China, with President Jacques Chirac supporting China's accession to the World Trade Organization, and the signing of a strategic partnership with Beijing in 2003. President François Hollande (2012–17) subsequently encouraged the diversification of economic and strategic partnerships in Asia, referring to a "French-style pivot to Asia".⁶⁴

60. P. Bonnichon, P. Geny, and J. Nemo (eds.), *Présences françaises outre-mer (XVIIe-XXIe siècles). Tome I - Histoire: périodes et continents*, Paris: Académie des Sciences d'Outre-Mer, Karthala Éditions, 2012.

61. P. Journoud, *De Gaulle et le Vietnam (1945-1969)*, Paris: Tallandier, May 2011.

62. J.-C. Peyronnet *et al.*, "Reprendre pied en Asie du Sud-Est", *Rapport d'information No. 723 (2013-2014)*, Sénat, July 15, 2014.

63. R. Dorient, "Un septennat de politique asiatique: quel bilan pour la France?", *Politique étrangère*, Vol. 67, No. 1, Ifri, 2002.

64. H. Terres, "La France et l'Asie : l'ébauche d'un 'pivot' à la française?", *Notes de l'Ifri*, No. 75, Ifri, April 2015.

Yet all that now remains of the French colonial presence is the “confetti of empire”:⁶⁵ territories of varying status, some of which are used as bases for a military presence. The military activities conducted from these bases include both operations linked to State Action at Sea, SAS [*Action de l’État en mer*]⁶⁶ in the maritime zones of the French overseas territories, and specific deployments dedicated to maritime surveillance and naval diplomacy elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific. France’s sovereign forces [*forces de souveraineté*] also play an important role, through professional training—via the adapted military service scheme. These sovereign forces perform public service missions, supervise air transport operations, and contribute to regional intelligence.

The French defense ministry typically views the overseas territories as assets owing to their geographic location and their ability to project French power in the Indo-Pacific, often likening them to geopolitical “aircraft carriers”. Conversely, the foreign affairs ministry has tended to overlook these territories, while the overseas territories ministry has focused more on social issues. Local governments and residents are now challenging this mainland imposed strategic vision, expressing a legitimate desire to be actively involved in shaping France’s Indo-Pacific strategy.

The European Union (EU), meanwhile, refers to the French overseas territories as “outermost regions”⁶⁷ (ORs) or “overseas countries and territories”⁶⁸ (OCTs), depending on whether they are an integral part of the Union or not. It is difficult for France to promote the interests of its territories in Brussels, where the prevailing view is that they are primarily a French matter, and that the specific problems of the ORs and OCTs are not relevant to most EU member states. However, given the natural fisheries and mineral resources of these territories and the solutions they can provide for sustainable development of oceanic islands, they could become showcases for the EU in the region, or even centers of excellence and innovation hubs,⁶⁹ over and above the value of their geographical location.

The ports of the French overseas territories are also located on secondary shipping routes of growing value and have the potential to

65. E. Tenenbaum, M. Paglia, and N. Ruffié, “Confettis d’empire ou points d’appui ? L’avenir de la stratégie française de présence et de souveraineté”, *Focus stratégique*, No. 94, Ifri, February 2020.

66. “Action de l’État en mer”, Secrétariat général de la mer, available at: www.gouvernement.fr.

67. The ORs are regions located a significant distance from the European continent that are still an integral part of the EU. They currently consist of the French overseas departments of Guadeloupe, Martinique, French Guiana, Réunion, and Mayotte; the Azores and Madeira (part of Portugal); and the Canary Islands (part of Spain). These regions benefit from certain advantages, such as access to European regional development funds.

68. The OCTs are dependent territories of certain EU member states that are not an integral part of the EU. They have a special status and are covered by EU cooperation and assistance policies. France has several OCTs, mainly located in the Pacific Islands (New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and Wallis and Futuna).

69. J.-M. Regnault and R. Tevahitua, “Les Outremers dans la stratégie Indo-Pacifique française”, *Revue internationale et stratégique*, Vol. 129, No. 1, 2023, pp. 83–91.

become major regional hubs. This is already the case for the large seaport in Réunion, which is used by the CMA-CGM shipping company⁷⁰ instead of Mauritius as a transshipment hub in the Indian Ocean. New Caledonia is also well positioned to become a regional hub for digital connectivity, shipping, and military cooperation, with the announcement of a new submarine cable to Vanuatu, the expansion of air links to Japan, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand, and the US, and the planned opening of a regional training center for non-commissioned officers.

Paris has also encouraged its overseas territories to deepen relations with their neighbors, to promote French interests within regional organizations such as the Indian Ocean Commission and the Pacific Islands Forum, as well as in specialized commissions focused on the environment (the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme) or fisheries (the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission, and the South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organisation).

Diverse, multi-purpose deployments

France's modern, versatile armed forces enable it to regularly deploy military capabilities from the mainland, and to contribute to the stability and security of the Indo-Pacific region.

Its air-land and maritime intervention capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region are based on the permanent presence of four land units: the Second Marine Infantry Regiment on Réunion, the Foreign Legion Detachment in Mayotte (DLEM), the Pacific Marine Infantry Regiment of New Caledonia (RIMaP-NC), and the Pacific Marine Infantry Regiment of French Polynesia (RIMaP-P). The Armed Forces of New Caledonia (FANC) are set to become a key pillar of air-land operations in the Pacific, and France's 2024–2030 Military Spending Act (LPM) provides for a significant strengthening of their land capabilities, including an increase in troops and the planned deployment of the Serval light multi-role armored vehicle by 2030.

The armed forces of New Caledonia and French Polynesia alternately hold two annual multinational joint exercises, known as “Marara” and “Croix du Sud”, based in French Polynesia and New Caledonia respectively. These exercises focus on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR).

The land units also regularly cooperate with the armies of neighboring countries, either in the form of joint exercises or by providing expertise in specialized training. Their resources include the Tropical Training Center on Réunion, the Nautical Commando Training Center in Nouméa, and the overseas and foreign environment training center in Tahiti. The regiments also make use of the presence of air and sea assets to conduct cooperative

70. Compagnie maritime d'affrètement – Compagnie générale maritime.

actions with more distant partners, including Australia, New Zealand, the US, and Japan. These activities are carried out either from support points in the region, or by troops deployed from mainland France, notably as part of the Jeanne d'Arc mission. Between 2022 and summer 2023, the land forces agreed to eleven operational military partnerships—a mix of training and joint exercises—with various partner countries, including Bangladesh, Singapore, Indonesia, and the Cook Islands. Finally, land cooperation with countries in the Asia-Pacific region also takes the form of cooperative actions that take place in mainland France, including training in areas such as artillery or air-land combat, and joint exercises such as SHAKTI, which alternates between French and Indian territory.

In 2021, the patrol of the nuclear-powered attack submarine *Émeraude*, as part of the Marianne mission,⁷¹ marked a break with usual practice, as it was the first submarine patrol to be publicized by the media since 2001.⁷² Also in 2021, the Jeanne d'Arc mission⁷³ participated in two major exercises in the Bay of Bengal (the Lapérouse exercise) and Japan (the ARC 21 exercise),⁷⁴ reinforcing France's regional influence and interoperability with its main regional partners. Earlier, in 2019, the French carrier strike group was deployed to the Gulf of Thailand in conjunction with the Shangri-La Dialogue,⁷⁵ just as France published its first Indo-Pacific strategy.

In addition to the semi-annual Garuda exercises held with the Indian Air Force since 2003, the French Air and Space Force deployed three Rafale fighter jets, two Phénix Airbus Multi-Role Tanker Transport (MRTT) aircraft, and two A400M Atlas aircraft to the Asia-Pacific in 2021, culminating in the Heifara-Wakea exercise,⁷⁶ which was designed to train forces and demonstrate France's ability to deploy rapidly to the area. The Pégase deployments continued in August 2022, and then in June 2023, with up to ten Rafale jets, five MRTT, and four A400Ms participating in various exercises and interactions with France's main partners and allies in the region (Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, and the US).⁷⁷ In 2024, the gradual intensification of the Pégase mission is set to continue, with two major components focused on Asia and the North and East Pacific.⁷⁸

71. In 2020 and 2021, a nuclear-powered attack submarine (SNA *Émeraude*) and a support vessel (BSAM *Seine*) undertook a seven-month mission that took them to the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

72. V. Groizeleau, "Retour sur le déploiement indopacifique du SNA *Émeraude* et du BSAM *Seine*", *Mer et Marine*, April 27, 2021.

73. The Jeanne d'Arc mission is an annual operation by the French Navy that lasts five to six months and completes naval officer training.

74. "Coopération navale et terrestre dans l'Indopacifique", Ambassade de France au Japon, available at: www.jp.ambafrance.org.

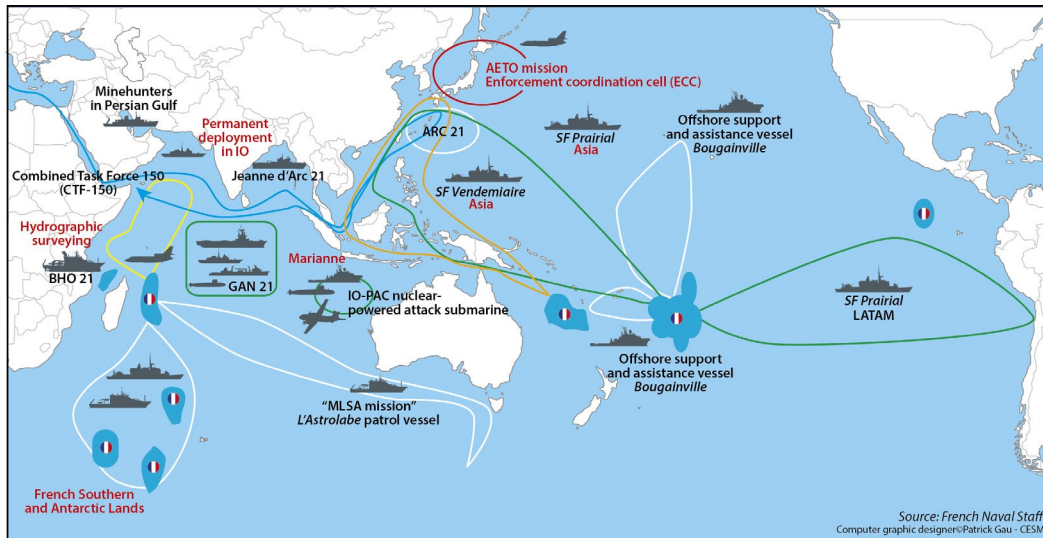
75. "Sommet de Shangri-La : le « Charles de Gaulle », roi du port de Singapour", RFI, June 2, 2019.

76. "Mission HEIFARA-WAKEA", Ministère des Armées, available at: www.defense.gouv.fr.

77. "Mission PEGASE 2022", Ministère des Armées, available at: www.air.defense.gouv.fr.

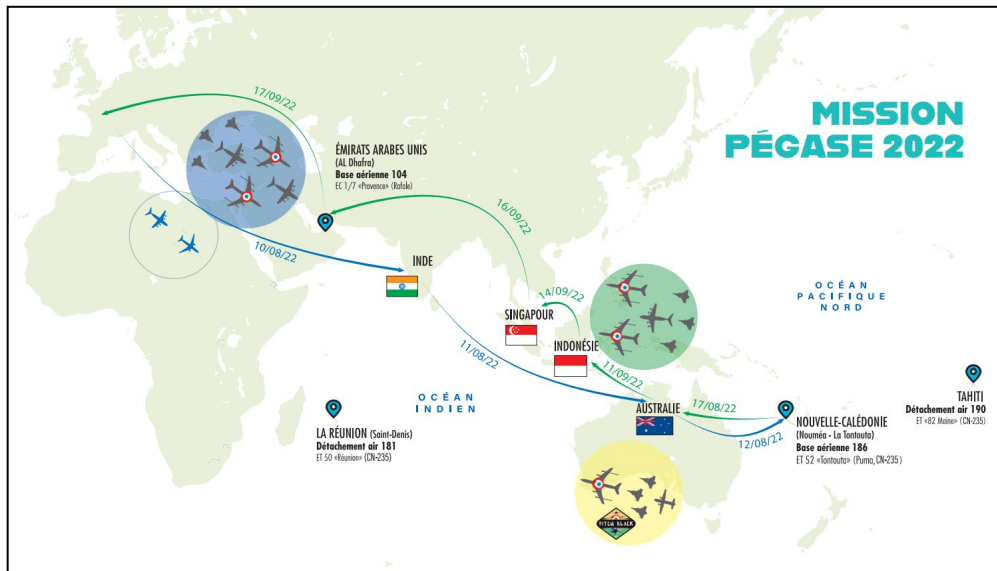
78. Interviews at the Ministry of the Armed Forces, conducted between January and April 2023.

Map 1: French naval deployments in the Indo-Pacific in 2021



Source: French Naval Staff

Map 2: Pégase deployment in 2022



Source: Air and Space Force Staff

Numerous partnerships

France has a network of strategic partners and promotes flexible cooperation formats. Its main partners include India, Japan, the US, and Australia, along with several Southeast Asian countries including Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Singapore.

These partnerships are based not only on shared values and interests, but also on defense agreements and security cooperation based on improved information sharing and interoperability. They support French deployments in the Indo-Pacific and help France to monitor its territories.

For example, in March 2020, despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, a P-8I Poseidon aircraft from the Indian Navy visited Réunion to conduct a maritime patrol in coordination with the French forces.⁷⁹ The French and Indian armed forces also participate in a number of joint exercises designed to improve their interoperability, such as the Varuna naval exercise and the Garuda air exercise. The two partners have also decided to jointly develop a satellite constellation to improve maritime surveillance in the Indian Ocean.

Australia is another partner with the military and industrial assets to support France's complex warships deployed in the Pacific. The strategic partnership between Paris and Canberra focuses on HADR and maritime and environmental security.⁸⁰ In this area, France and Australia cooperate with New Zealand, within the FRANZ Arrangement for HADR coordination and, in conjunction with the US, within the Pacific Quad for maritime surveillance and the fight against illegal fishing. While Franco-Australian relations cooled following the announcement of the AUKUS pact and the cancellation of the submarine supply contract with DCNS (now Naval Group), the strategic partnership has been restored with the visit of the new Prime Minister Anthony Albanese to France in July 2022 and the establishment of 2+2 ministerial consultations on foreign affairs and defense.⁸¹

Japan is another important partner in the Indo-Pacific. Bilateral security cooperation between the two countries has been gradually institutionalized, a comprehensive maritime dialogue has been established, and a mutual logistics support agreement⁸² has facilitated more ambitious joint exercises since 2019. The ARC21 amphibious exercises, which took place on Japan's southwestern islands in May 2021 and involved French,

79. X. Vavasseur, "Indian Navy P-8I MPA in Reunion Island for Combined Training with French Forces", *Naval News*, March 5, 2020.

80. "France and Australia Sign Landmark Space Cooperation Agreements", *Spacewatch Asia Pacific*, March 1, 2019, available at: www.spacewatch.global.

81. "Joint Statement - Second France-Australia Foreign and Defence Ministerial Consultations", Paris, January 30, 2023, available at: www.diplomatie.gouv.fr.

82. E. Pflimlin, "France-Japon : un partenariat d'exception réaffirmé", IRIS, January 24, 2022.

US, Japanese, and Australian defense forces, also demonstrated the significant progress made on interoperability between the four partners.⁸³ However, a new post-2023 bilateral roadmap has yet to be signed, and negotiations on the implementation of a mutual access agreement are progressing slowly.

Trilateral discussions (France-Australia-India, and France-India-United Arab Emirates) are now developing from these bilateral relations.

Despite its reluctance to formally join the Quad format, Paris has demonstrated its ability to bring together major naval powers by hosting the La Pérouse naval exercise with the four Quad members for the first time in April 2021 and again in March 2023.⁸⁴

Although sometimes misunderstood and interpreted in different ways, France's "balancing" position may also appeal to certain regional actors that do not want to be squeezed between the US and China, such as India and certain countries in Southeast Asia (Indonesia and Singapore) and the Pacific islands.⁸⁵ The EU stance of "strategic autonomy" championed by Macron, who has called on European states not to be, "influenced by the US agenda" or "followers" of the US, is regularly emphasized to support the expansion of France's strategic partnerships in the region—which have included a flurry of arms deals.⁸⁶

The French rhetoric about the importance of the Indo-Pacific has also gained traction in Europe. In September 2020, Germany published its own Indo-Pacific strategy, followed by the Netherlands and several other European countries, including Italy, the Czech Republic, and most recently Lithuania.⁸⁷ Paris also strongly encouraged the EU to adopt its own Indo-Pacific strategy, which was duly published on September 16, 2021.⁸⁸ The EU strategy works in synergy with and complements the French strategy. The EU has significant capacity to support sustainable development, infrastructure, and capacity-building, notably through the Global Gateway initiative announced in December 2021, and naturally has greater influence in this area, as Brussels seeks to become a strategic player in critical technologies. Therefore, working at the EU level enables France to promote

83. "Exercise Arc-21 in Japan", French Foreign Legion Information, May 22, 2021, available at: www.foreignlegion.info.

84. X. Vavasseur, "Australia France India Japan and the United States Take Part in Exercise La Pérouse", *Naval News*, April 6, 2021.

85. Interviews in Paris and Singapore with experts on Southeast Asia, April–May 2023.

86. "La France renforce sa coopération avec l'Indonésie et veut éviter toute escalade en Asie-Pacifique", *Ouest-France*, November 26, 2022.

87. Spain, Denmark, and Sweden are also working on a framework document regarding their Indo-Pacific strategy. While the UK does not have a specific Indo-Pacific strategy, its shift in direction was made very clear in its "Integrated Review 2021", *Gov.uk*, available at: www.gov.uk.

88. "Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific", European External Action Service, September 16, 2021, available at: www.eeas.europa.eu; on France's role, see P. Morcos, "France: A Bridge Between Europe and the Indo-Pacific?", CSIS, April 1, 2021.

a more cross-cutting strategy in the Indo-Pacific region. The EU also has considerable expertise in areas such as the fight against piracy in the Horn of Africa and against various types of trafficking—including illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing—and in the surveillance and securing of shipping routes. The EU has also recently extended its security cooperation to the eastern Indian Ocean, including in Southeast Asia, through two projects: CRIMARIO II (2020–23),⁸⁹ and Enhancing Security Cooperation In and With Asia (ESIWA, 2020–24).⁹⁰

While coordination with France’s European partners is also a way to increase the visibility and scale of its deployments and activities, plans for an EU Coordinated Maritime Presence (CMP) have so far come to nothing. The implementation of the CMP in the Northwest Indian Ocean was agreed at the Ministerial Forum for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific held in Paris in February 2022,⁹¹ with the aim of giving interested member states new flexibility to establish a multinational naval presence for political signaling, maritime diplomacy, and information-gathering. The initiative is, however, more political than operational, and has not yet been “activated” by any member state.

Significant weaknesses remain

France’s approach to the Indo-Pacific is undermined by several factors: first, tensions related to its colonial past, nuclear testing, and the preservation of the identity of its overseas territories; second, the limitations of its military capabilities, which are required to intervene in a remote and increasingly unstable terrain; and finally, France’s sometimes confusing “balancing” stance between the US and China.

A complex historical legacy

Tensions over the past persist between metropolitan France and its overseas territories as a result of decolonization, nuclear testing in the Pacific, and ongoing territorial disputes.

In New Caledonia, these tensions revolve around the memory of the colonial past and the ongoing process of decolonization. The 1988 Matignon Accords led to three independence referendums (in 2018, 2020, and 2021) in which the New Caledonian people reaffirmed their desire to remain part of France. However, the last referendum in December 2021

89. M. Nishihara and C. Pajon, “East Asia Security in Flux. What Regional Order Ahead?”, *Études de l’Ifri*, Ifri, May 2020.

90. “Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia”, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), available at: www.giz.de.

91. Ministerial Forum for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, Paris, February 22, 2022, available at: www.diplomatie.gouv.fr.

took place under controversial circumstances, during the COVID-19 pandemic, and its legitimacy was compromised by a boycott by pro-independence parties. The latter have remained reluctant to take part in talks on the future status of the island, and this institutional paralysis is fueling political tensions and doubts about the willingness of French authorities to continue the decolonization process.⁹²

During his visit to New Caledonia in July 2023, Macron proposed a “path of forgiveness” through the creation of a truth and reconciliation commission to establish a unified memory of the past.⁹³ This initial step will need to be followed by strong symbolic gestures in order to put relations with the territory back on a solid footing. Although Macron acknowledged the existence of dissenting voices following the three independence referendums, and called for a consensus that would allow discussions on a new status for “le Caillou”—as the island is known—to move forward, his speech seemed too partisan for the members of the pro-independence party “Union calédonienne”, who refused to meet with him and want the International Court of Justice to rule on the legitimacy of the latest referendum.⁹⁴

In French Polynesia, the tensions over the past include the nuclear tests conducted by France in the region between 1966 and 1996, which have raised environmental, health, and social concerns, and led to demands for reparations and recognition of the victims. Discussions about the impact of the nuclear tests and appropriate compensation remain contentious,⁹⁵ although Macron acknowledged France’s “debt” to Polynesia and promised better compensation for victims during his visit to Papeete in July 2021.⁹⁶ The success of pro-independence parties in the 2023 local elections has also reignited the debate on greater autonomy for French Polynesia from mainland France.⁹⁷

These territories are part of sub-regional groups that assert the identity and independence of their members and help to challenge the legitimacy of the French presence. There are also growing concerns about China’s attempts to influence or gain economic and political footholds in France’s overseas territories, either through the diasporas historically present on

92. S. Mohamed-Gaillard, “Nouvelle-Calédonie, et maintenant ? Innover politiquement et mobiliser un acteur de l’Indo-Pacifique”, *Lettre du Centre Asie*, No. 95, Ifri, December 16, 2021.

93. “Discours du Président de la République”, Nouméa, July 26, 2023, available at: www.elysee.fr.

94. C. Nooten and N. Guibert, “Nouvelle-Calédonie : les indépendantistes plaident leur cause à l’ONU et jouent leur va-tout devant la Cour internationale de justice”, *Le Monde*, June 13, 2023.

95. S. Philippe and T. Stadius, *Toxique. Enquête sur les essais nucléaires français en Polynésie*, Paris: PUF, 2021.

96. “Essais nucléaires en Polynésie française : Emmanuel Macron reconnaît ‘une dette’ de la France”, *Le Monde*, July 28, 2021.

97. N. Guibert, “Polynésie : la victoire indépendantiste complique la stratégie de Paris dans l’Indo-Pacifique”, *Le Monde*, May 1, 2023.

certain islands (Réunion) or through independence movements⁹⁸ (New Caledonia and French Polynesia).

Elsewhere, the instability of certain territories such as Mayotte, linked to high levels of insecurity and the demographic, social, economic, and security impact of illegal immigration on the island's social cohesion, should also be noted.⁹⁹

Finally, there are numerous other disputes related to the French presence persist in the Indo-Pacific, such as Mauritius' claim to Tromelin, Madagascar's claim to the Scattered Islands in the Mozambique Channel, the Comoros' claim to Mayotte, Vanuatu's claim to the Matthew and Hunter Islands, and Mexico's claim to Clipperton.¹⁰⁰

Limited capabilities and huge distances

Despite its political rhetoric that the Indo-Pacific is a priority, France's assets in the region remain very limited. The region's vast distance from the French mainland means that deploying military assets requires considerable efforts and time—it takes almost three weeks to sail from Toulon to Singapore, for example.

The pre-positioned sovereign forces in Réunion, French Polynesia, and New Caledonia are already at full capacity with their territorial missions and essential law enforcement cooperation, humanitarian assistance, and military diplomacy activities with neighboring countries. According to the "Groupement des Industries de Construction et Activités Navales" (GICAN),¹⁰¹ the number of French Navy patrol boats provided to surveil its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) is "roughly equivalent to patrolling mainland France with two police cars".

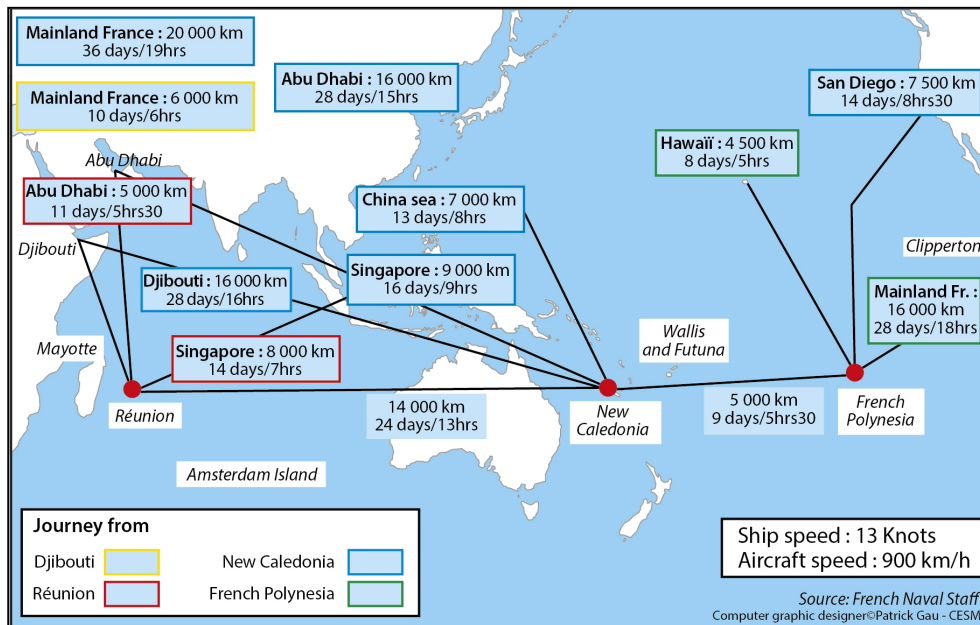
98. This may involve indirect support for separatist movements, or the use of diplomacy to influence local political debates. See B. Lassaue, "Chine : quelles sont ses influences en Nouvelle-Calédonie?", *Nouvelle Calédonie La Première*, October 23, 2021; H. Eudeline and J.-M. Hung, "L'influence de la République populaire de Chine dans les îles du Pacifique", *Rapport 26*, Institut Thomas More, July 2022.

99. In 2017, 48 percent of the Mayotte population were foreign nationals; in 2022, more than twenty-five thousand people were deported from the island; and 77 percent of the population lives below the poverty line. See R. Prudent, "Mayotte : précarité, immigration, violence... Cinq graphiques pour comprendre la situation 'hors norme' de l'archipel", *France Info*, April 24, 2023.

100. F. Floch, "Madagascar: la restitution des îles Éparses de retour au cœur de la diplomatie", *Réunion La Première*, January 14, 2022; B. Lassaue, "Retour en histoire sur les enjeux de Matthew et Hunter", *Nouvelle Calédonie La Première*, August 2, 2023.

101. M. Cabirol, "Surveillance de la zone ultramarine : la France patauge", *La Tribune*, January 2, 2017.

Map 3: The tyranny of distance in the Indo-Pacific



Source: French Naval Staff

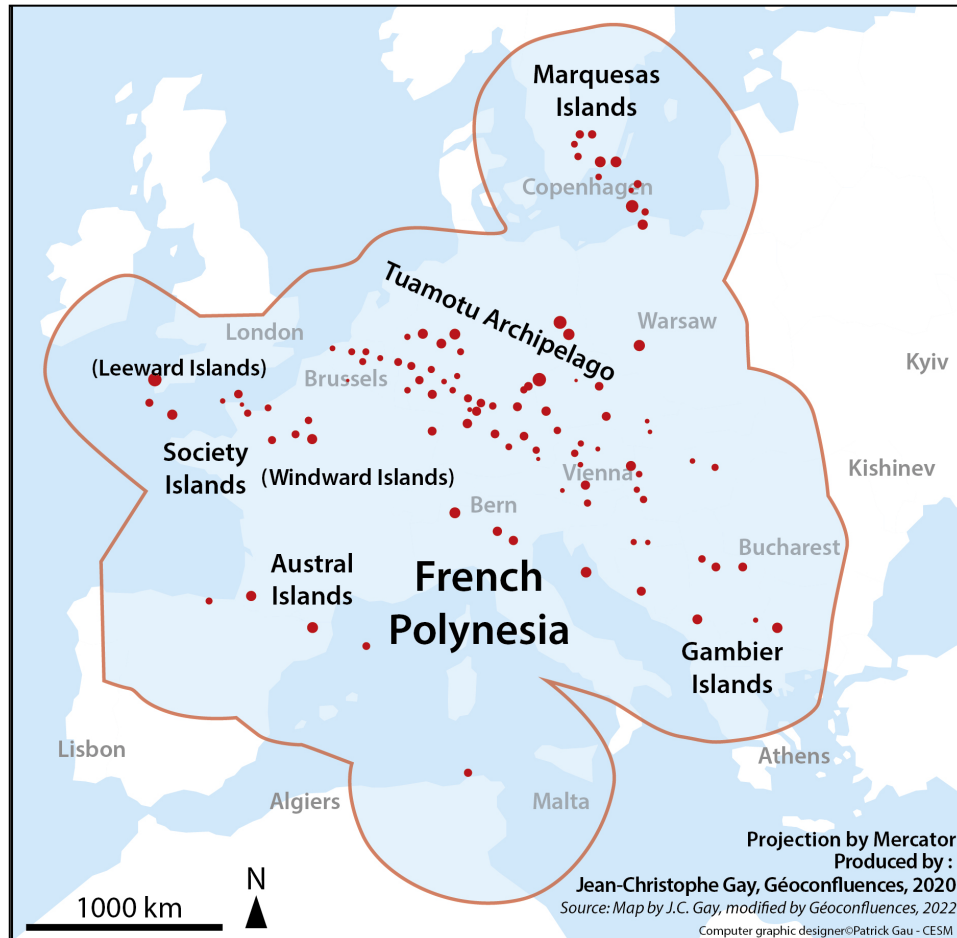
Similarly, the CN-235 (CASA 235) tactical transport aircraft stationed overseas have neither the range nor the transport capacity to support the operational cooperation activities of the regiments stationed in these territories conducted with distant partners in Hawaii or Japan.

In January 2023, when Macron announced an increase in the armed forces budget to a total of €413 billion between 2024 and 2030,¹⁰² priority was given to the sovereign forces in the overseas territories, which had been in steady decline since the end of the Cold War, both in terms of size and capabilities. In the beginning of the 2020s, the French Navy even had to cope with a temporary gap in provision between the withdrawal of the P400 patrol boats and the gradual delivery of the Auguste Bénébig-class overseas patrol ships (POM).¹⁰³

102. N. Barotte, “Défense : Emmanuel Macron promet 413 milliards d’euros aux armées”, *Le Figaro*, January 20, 2023.

103. The first of six new patrol ships that are set to be deployed in the Indian and Pacific Oceans arrived at its new home port of Nouméa in April 2023. Six patrol boats are planned for the Indo-Pacific by 2025 (two in French Polynesia, two on Réunion, and two in New Caledonia).

**Map 4: French Polynesia’s maritime domain,
an area the size of Europe**



Source: Map by J.C. Gay, modified by Géoconfluences, 2022¹⁰⁴

In qualitative terms, the new naval vessels—both the D’Entrecasteaux-class overseas support and assistance vessels, and the POM—are more lightly armed.¹⁰⁵ The increased tonnage of these programs does however mean they can remain at sea for longer and travel farther.

The Floréal class of frigates is also scheduled for replacement in the early 2030s, after almost forty years of service. The European Patrol Corvette program¹⁰⁶ was originally intended to replace these frigates, but this is now unlikely, given the uncertainty surrounding their onboard anti-

104. Available at: www.geoconfluences.ens-lyon.fr.

105. The POM are armed with a 20 mm remotely operated cannon, and two 12.7 mm and two 7.62 mm machine guns.

106. The European Patrol Corvette (EPC) project was part of a permanent structured cooperation program, with Portugal as an observer, involving Greece, Denmark, and Norway. It consisted of a partnership between Fincantieri, Naval Group, and Navantia, designed to develop a 3,000-ton vessel that would be “intelligent, innovative, affordable, sustainable, interoperable, and flexible”. Three versions were planned to meet the needs expressed by participating countries, but the anti-submarine capabilities were considered to fall short of French requirements.

submarine systems.¹⁰⁷ The Gowind-class corvette would be a credible alternative, as they are equally suited to expeditionary and anti-submarine missions, as well as SAS within the EEZ of overseas territories.¹⁰⁸ Whatever the final decision, the vessels replacing the Floréal frigates must be armed for self-defense, anti-aircraft, and anti-ship warfare, and above all anti-submarine warfare. This qualitative leap forward is essential to maintain the credibility of “sentinel” ships operating as close as possible to crisis zones in this region.

France’s overseas territories also lack amphibious capabilities, which are essential to respond to the growing need for HADR. Such capabilities would also enable the deployment of an infantry company wherever it is needed to prevent a challenge over a territory from a third country, and to bring food or medical supplies to remote islands. The draft military spending act (LPM) did not initially include this project, but now stipulates that “a BATRAL (light transport vessel) type force projection vessel program should be launched, to have four units stationed in France’s overseas territories within the next decade”,¹⁰⁹ including three in the Indo-Pacific (Polynesia, New Caledonia, and possibly Mayotte).

The overseas territories also lack air defense capabilities, which could prove particularly crucial in the event of a conflict spreading to the Pacific islands.¹¹⁰ This could mean that a Pégase-type air group (four Rafales and one Phénix),¹¹¹ or, failing that, a Horizon-class air defense frigate, would have to be deployed to defend these territories from the Chinese pursuit of strategic depth beyond the second island chain. A support base in New Caledonia would be needed to replenish weapons and ammunition, and to provide heavy maintenance for long-term operations.

In terms of maritime patrol aircraft, the Dassault Aviation Falcon 2000 Albatros (AVSIMAR program) will replace the Falcon 200 Guardian and is scheduled for delivery between 2025 and 2031. These new aircraft will represent a major technological leap forward in terms of onboard systems—notably optonics and combat management systems—and will also offer increased range for active participation in exercises and operations in the northern Indo-Pacific, greater autonomy, and the potential ability to drop

107. Interviews at the Ministry of the Armed Forces, conducted between January and April 2023.

108. The Gowind corvette is fitted with a helicopter hangar and a flight deck capable of refueling heavy helicopters. Its weapons system consists of a VL MICA surface-to-air system (sixteen missiles), eight Exocet MM40 Block 3 anti-ship missiles, a 76 mm turret, two 20 mm cannons, and torpedo tubes. It has a hull-mounted sonar and a towed array sonar, and a range of 3,700 nautical miles at a cruising speed of 15 knots.

109. Act No. 2023-703 of August 1, 2023 on the military budget for 2024 to 2030, section 2.2.3, available at: www.legifrance.gouv.fr.

110. T. Yoshihara, “Chinese Lessons from the Pacific War”, Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA), 2023, available at: www.csbaonline.org.

111. A Pégase-type air group (four Rafales and one A330) would be able to provide surveillance cover over an area of almost 1,700,000 km² (400 square nautical miles).

BAT-120LG lightweight air-to-surface munitions (produced by Thales). If necessary, these aircraft could also be equipped with AM39 Exocet Block 2 anti-ship missiles.

With regard to maritime surveillance, the development of a drone program seems essential. The fixed-wing Survey Copter Diane drone, which is launched by catapult and ends its flight by net recovery (the Mini-Drone Systems for the Navy program) is promising but is still insufficient because of its relative autonomy and the vast area of the waters to be surveilled. Investment in surface drones and large submarines seems particularly necessary.¹¹² Despite the undeniable costs involved (in both financial and human terms), an MQ-9B SkyGuardian, or equivalent, would represent a giant leap forward for France's overseas territories, owing to its specialization in maritime security and its anti-submarine capability. An increased role for balloons and aerostats in the surveillance of French EEZ in overseas territories could also be considered.

In addition to drones, other vectors must be mobilized to expand maritime surveillance resources. Satellites are essential, and companies that monitor illegal activities, such as UNSEENLABS,¹¹³ may be particularly useful in the EEZ of French overseas territories, alongside the Navy's Trimaran satellite surveillance system. Ultimately, specific linear antennas could be used to monitor specific zones. Information can also be gathered from communication cables using Distributed Acoustic Sensing (DAS)¹¹⁴ or hydrophones.

Sovereign forces do not have their own combat aircraft,¹¹⁵ and the number of transport aircraft is gradually being halved, which could reduce their responsiveness—and thus their credibility—in the event of a crisis or request for assistance from a neighboring country in the context of a disaster (such as a tsunami or typhoon). The gradual introduction of the A400M should bring about a qualitative improvement, but it is likely to remain insufficient in quantitative terms. There remains a great need for Caracal-type helicopters—or similar—to support transport, especially in the Pacific islands.

112. The US Navy is experimenting with several of these vehicles (Boeing's XLUUV demonstrator and Sea Hunter, which is operated from a mother ship), and Naval Group has designed an underwater drone demonstrator that will be capable of operating without a human crew for several weeks. In April 2023, the French military also launched an ocean-going drone program: see L. Lagneau, "Le ministère des Armées a lancé des études sur un drone sous-marin océanique armé", *Zone militaire*, June 4, 2023.

113. A space-based radio frequency detection system for detecting and characterizing a ship's passive electromagnetic signature in near-real time, whether or not it is transmitting an automatic identification system (AIS) signal.

114. The phenomenon of signal backscattering in a fiber optic cable, which is linked to imperfections in the fiber and varies based on the strain experienced, including acoustic pressure.

115. Although France does have a Rafale squadron stationed in Abu Dhabi and a 2000-5 squadron in Djibouti.

An ambiguous political stance

Since 2017, Macron has expressed his desire to restore France's global influence by championing its values and principles.¹¹⁶ To achieve this, he wants France to play the role of a balancing power.¹¹⁷

This rhetoric sometimes causes confusion, and France's position and its objectives in the Indo-Pacific often need to be clarified. Some partners, for example, identify the "third way" with a form of equidistance, although Macron has consistently rejected this idea.¹¹⁸ The English translation of *puissance d'équilibre(s)* as "balancing power" is also ripe for misunderstanding, as it suggests to many commentators the idea of non-alignment or multi-alignment, shifting as opportunities arise, and possibly changing partners, and thus distorting the perception of France's actual position.¹¹⁹ Other partners, such as Japan, are concerned that this stance could complicate, or disrupt, coordination with the US.¹²⁰

Further confusion has been shown by some of Macron's statements, for example regarding tensions in the Taiwan Strait: on his return from China in April 2023, he declared that "the worst thing we Europeans can do is think that we must be followers", and "take our cue from the US agenda and a Chinese overreaction".¹²¹ These remarks, which were strongly criticized by France's allies and partners,¹²² cast doubt on Paris's analysis of the strategic situation regarding Taiwan, and on the role France would play in the event of a conflict in the region. This attitude also gives Beijing an opportunity to try and divide its Western partners.

France's "balancing" approach in the Indo-Pacific is also difficult to sustain in relation to its historical allies, given the significant deterioration in the security environment in recent years. The radicalization of Xi Jinping's authoritarian regime, revelations about human rights abuses in Xinjiang, Beijing's handling of the pandemic, the repression of democracy in Hong Kong, and recurrent frictions in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea have all damaged China's image abroad. These events were partly responsible for Australia's decision to terminate its submarine contract with France and to pursue the AUKUS partnership with the UK and US to develop nuclear submarines, to strengthen its position in the face of the

116. Speech by President Emmanuel Macron - Ambassadors' Week 2017, Paris, August 29, 2017, available at: www.elysee.fr.

117. Macron *et al.*, "The Macron Doctrine".

118. Notably in the speeches to the conference of ambassadors in September 2022, available at: www.elysee.fr; and August 2023, available at: www.elysee.fr.

119. See, for example, L. Abboud and B. Hall, "The Week Macron's Grand Diplomatic Project Floundered", *Financial Times*, April 14, 2023.

120. Interviews with Japanese experts and officials, 2022 and 2023.

121. N. Barré, "Emmanuel Macron : 'L'autonomie stratégique doit être le combat de l'Europe'", *Les Echos*, April 9, 2023.

122. L. Abboud and B. Hall, "The Week Macron's Grand Diplomatic Project Floundered", *op. cit.*

Chinese threat. Considering these developments, France risks becoming politically isolated by continuing its current posture at a time of accelerating US-China rivalry. Criticism from some quarters of the “Europeanization” of the AUKUS crisis¹²³ also demonstrated the reluctance of certain European partners to align themselves with a French approach to the Indo-Pacific that favors strategic autonomy, at the expense of relations with Washington. These feelings have only deepened since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, which has underscored the fundamental importance of an enduring US security commitment to Europe. NATO's leading global partners in the Asia-Pacific region (Australia, South Korea, Japan, and New Zealand) have also strengthened their ties with the Atlantic Alliance to bolster their deterrence against China.¹²⁴

If France adopts an overly dogmatic approach to “strategic autonomy”, it could find itself marginalized. For example, while maintaining close and dynamic partnerships with the four Quad members, France has so far refused to be politically associated with the group, preferring to keep its options open and promote its own initiatives. Similarly, although it has been consulted by the US as part of its Partners in the Blue Pacific initiative¹²⁵—which aims to coordinate policies in Pacific island regions with like-minded partners—France has chosen not to formally join the group, arguing that it would send a negative signal to China.¹²⁶ Given that countries such as Germany and South Korea have joined the group, this seems somewhat illogical, and risks making France appear isolated rather than independent, especially since it has no credible alternative to offer.¹²⁷

France adopted its Indo-Pacific strategy with the aim of safeguarding its interests, while reducing the potential risks of instability in a geopolitically complex region. This approach relies on several assets, including its military and diplomatic presence, as well as its logistical resources and partnerships with key countries in the region. However, these assets remain largely inadequate in relation to the strategic stakes in this region, where major geopolitical rivalries and security challenges are taking shape, particularly with regard to territorial claims in the South China Sea, China's rise to power, and maritime security concerns. In order to play a significant role in the region's strategic developments, France must now strengthen its military and diplomatic capabilities. This will require significant effort to strengthen its resources and infrastructure, especially in

123. I. Vock, “Why EU Support for France Over Aukus Has Been Muted”, *New Statesman*, September 22, 2021.

124. J. Garrick, “Building Indo-Pacific Security at NATO's Vilnius Summit”, ASPI, July 7, 2023, available at: www.aspistrategist.org.au.

125. D. J. Kritenbrink and K. M. Campbell, “Readout of the Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP) Ministerial”, US Department of State, September 22, 2023, available at: www.state.gov.

126. Interviews at the Armed Forces General Staff, conducted between January and April 2023.

127. M. Droin *et al.*, “The United States and France: Partners for the Pacific Islands Region?”, CSIS, November 30, 2022.

its overseas territories. However, it is essential that France maintains a pragmatic and realistic approach, and crucial that ambitious talk of a “third way” does not compromise its effective stance in the region. In particular, France must stand resolutely alongside its Quad partners (the US, Japan, Australia, and India) and other regional actors who share similar concerns about China’s rise to power and the stability of the Indo-Pacific.

Potential crises and risk factors

The Indo-Pacific is the world's most economically productive region, generating 60 percent of global GDP.¹²⁸ It includes six members of the G20 and five of the expanded G7. Between 15 percent and 20 percent of international trade and a third of the world's crude oil passes through the Straits of Malacca and Singapore, and through the South China Sea.¹²⁹

Over the past two decades, even as its geo-economic centrality has been confirmed, the region has become an arena of major geopolitical tensions over the future of global strategic competition. Understanding these geographic zones has therefore become crucial for an effective defense posture, both for France and for Europe. Territorial and maritime tensions have the potential to escalate into military conflict, and these are exacerbated by the US-China rivalry, particularly in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea. Conflict on the Korean peninsula could also destabilize the entire region, possibly resulting in a nuclear exchange. Further west, any significant escalation in the Persian Gulf would have major implications for Europe, particularly on the energy sector. Finally, environmental challenges such as climate change, rising sea levels, degradation of marine ecosystems, and overexploitation of natural resources could also create crisis zones in the Indo-Pacific.

The following analysis examines what are the most significant risks and threats in the current geopolitical context of the Indo-Pacific. It first considers the risks of crisis and confrontation in the short term, and then explores the challenges posed by multi-faceted crises in the medium term. While the issues and challenges addressed in this section are clearly not the only ones that exist, they are the most likely to impact French interests in the short and medium term. As the table below illustrates, they determine the scale of French and European interests in terms of economic and energy security and connectivity.

128. C. Penot, "Indopacifique : 9 questions pour comprendre la stratégie de la France dans la région", Ambassade de France en Argentine, August 12, 2022, available at: www.ambafrance.org.

129. F. Nicolas, "Commerce mondial : les nouvelles routes maritimes", Ifri, April 24, 2020, available at: www.storymaps.arcgis.com.

Strategic challenges in the Indo-Pacific region, part 1

	Red Sea and Bab el-Mandeb	Persian Gulf and northwest Indian Ocean	Southwest Indian Ocean	Gulf of Bengal and east Indian Ocean	Straits of Malacca and Singapore
Dominant risk type (high-intensity - blockade - traffic – hybrid actions - cyber)	1. Traffic, 2. Hybrid actions	1. High-intensity, 2. Traffic, 3. Hybrid actions	1. Traffic, 2. Hybrid actions	1. Traffic, 2. Hybrid actions	1. Traffic and hybrid actions, 2. Blockade, 3. High-intensity if US/China conflict, 4. Cyber
Likely actors	Littoral states, Houthis	Iran, Gulf Monarchies, United States, Israel, China	Non-state actors, China, India	Non-state actors, China, India, Myanmar	Non-state actors, Littoral states, China, United-States, India
Short- and medium-term likelihood	Medium to high	High	Low to medium	Low to medium	Medium
Timeline for peak risk(s)	2023 onward	2023 onward, if JCPoA talks break down	Medium term	Long term	Medium term
Relevance to Europe	High	High	Medium	Medium	High
Relevance to France, including overseas territories	Medium	Medium	Medium to high for Réunion and Mayotte	Medium	Medium to high
Sector(s) most affected	Energy, Shipping	Energy, Shipping	International trade, Shipping	International trade, Shipping	International trade, Shipping
Threat to French interests	Medium to high threat	High short- to medium-term threat	Medium threat	Low to medium threat	Medium threat

Strategic challenges in the Indo-Pacific region, part 2

	South China Sea	Region around Taiwan	East China Sea, Gulf of Bohai, Sea of Japan	Southwest Pacific	Central and Eastern Pacific
Dominant risk type (high-intensity - blockade - traffic – hybrid actions - cyber)	1. High-intensity, 2. Hybrid actions, 3. Cyber	1. High-intensity, 2. Blockade, 3. Hybrid actions, 4. Cyber	1. High-intensity, 2. Blockade, 3. Hybrid actions, 4. Cyber	1. Traffic and hybrid actions, 2. High-intensity if US/China conflict	1. Traffic and hybrid actions, 2. High-intensity if US/China conflict
Likely actors	China, Littoral states, Proxies, United-States, Australia,	China, Taiwan, United-States, Japan, Australia,	North Korea, South Korea, China, Japan, United-States, Australia, Russia,	China, United-States, Australia, Japan,	China, United-States, Australia,
Short- and medium-term likelihood	Medium	High	Medium	Low to medium	Low
Timeline for peak risk(s)	Medium term	2023 onward (between 2023 and 2030, depending on projections)	2023 onward	Medium term	Medium term
Relevance to Europe	High	High	High	Low or none	Low or none
Relevance to France, including overseas territories	Medium to high	High	High	Medium/ high for New Caledonia and Wallis and Futuna	Medium/ high for French Polynesia
Sector(s) most affected	International trade, Shipping	International trade, Shipping, Finance, Industry	International trade, Shipping, Finance, Industry	Shipping, Fishing, Submarine cables, Strategic mineral supply	Shipping, Fishing, Submarine cables
Threat to French interests	Medium to high threat	High short- to medium-term threat	Medium to high threat	Medium threat	Medium threat

Principal high-intensity conflict risks

Across the Indo-Pacific region, there are four zones with a high risk of a “high-intensity” conflict that are of particular interest to France: the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea, the Korean Peninsula, and the northern Indian Ocean (in relation to Iran). Here, the term “high-intensity” refers to a type of engagement in which a high level of kinetic action is applied in a limited space and for a limited period of time, using technologically sophisticated equipment, and with a high level of lethality (the energy-technology-lethality triad).¹³⁰

The risk of conflict in the Taiwan Strait

Reunification with Taiwan is now a top priority for Beijing. Some US experts and officials believe that China may decide to exploit a window of opportunity, between the time it deems itself militarily ready (from 2027 onward, according to many experts) and the time the US and its allies ability to retaliate is judged to be too advanced to risk such a venture (around 2033 to 2035).¹³¹

The risks of a major crisis are now greater than ever: Xi Jinping’s determination to achieve unification, by force if necessary,¹³² is backed up by significant military capabilities. The sea and airspace around Taiwan are congested, and the risk of incidents escalating into armed conflict is high, especially in the absence of military channels of communication between Beijing and Washington. Taiwan is also of growing strategic importance: it is a key player in global high-tech supply chains, producing 70 percent of the world’s semiconductors, and it benefits from a key geographic location, as the “lock” of the “first island chain”. Gaining control over Taiwan would provide Beijing with a possible base for its nuclear-powered attack submarines, which could then quickly deploy into the Pacific, posing a threat to the US that the latter considers unacceptable. Capturing the island would also allow China to monitor, and even control, the strategic Luzon Strait, which connects the South China Sea to the Western Pacific.

China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has been preparing for kinetic action against Taiwan for seventy years, but there has been a marked increase in military maneuvers in the Taiwan Strait since 2020, during the presidency of Tsai Ing-wen, who was elected president of Taiwan in 2016

130. É. Tenenbaum, “Haute intensité : quels défis pour les armées françaises?”, *Notes de l’Ifri*, Ifri, July 2023.

131. K. Amonson and D. Egli, “The Ambitious Dragon: Beijing’s Calculus for Invading Taiwan by 2030”, *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, March–April 2023, available at: www.media.defense.gov; J. Seidel, “China is Readying Military for 2027 War with Taiwan, says US Think Tank”, *New Zealand Herald*, April 16, 2023.

132. Xi Jinping, “Full Text of the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China”, October 16, 2022, available at: www.fmprc.gov.cn.

and is a member of the Democratic Progressive Party. Following House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's controversial visit to Taiwan in August 2022, the PLA established "exclusion zones" around the archipelago and conducted live-fire drills—including eleven ballistic missiles in six zones surrounding the international waterways and airways between Taiwan and the southern islands of the Japanese archipelago.¹³³ The PLA is also attempting to keep the US and its allies at arm's length by pursuing an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategy, which is designed to temporarily or permanently neutralize US projection capabilities through long-range strikes and non-kinetic means (especially cyber and electronic warfare).

The US's strategy focuses on providing Taiwan with the means to defend itself in the first weeks of a confrontation with China, and it has recently increased both the quantity and quality of its arms shipments and military assistance and training. Washington also wants to maintain access to the theater in the face of Chinese interdiction capabilities. To achieve this, the US relies on a network of bases and support bases—either sovereign (Guam) or in conjunction with partners (South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines)—and on its carrier strike groups. President Biden has also stated on three occasions, in 2021 and 2022, that the US would defend Taiwan in the event of an attack, gradually reducing the strategic ambiguity that had previously prevailed, and confirming a solid bipartisan consensus between Democrats and Republicans on support for Taipei. This point was reaffirmed in the latest US National Security Strategy,¹³⁴ which also outlined the overall goal of winning the strategic competition with China.

There are several different scenarios by which China could secure unification by force, ranging from simple subversion to the gradual seizure of territorial footholds close to mainland China (notably the islands of Matsu and Kinmen), a temporary¹³⁵ or permanent naval blockade (purely of the Strait alone, or with encirclement), or a full military invasion.¹³⁶ It could also intensify the pressure on the Taiwanese authorities by increasing the intensity and volume of its attacks, such as cutting submarine cables, cyber-attacks on critical infrastructure, and massive deployment of fishing vessels and maritime militias in Taiwanese waters. An armed confrontation over Taiwan would quickly raise the prospect of crossing the nuclear threshold. Any of these scenarios could lead to escalating tensions and a possible regional or even global conflagration.

133. V. Robert, "Les exercices chinois sur Taiwan, une menace autant militaire qu'économique", *Les Echos*, August 4, 2022.

134. "The Biden-Harris Administration's National Security Strategy", The White House, October 12, 2022, available at: www.state.gov.

135. This would involve either cargo checks only or interdiction of all or part of the sea lanes, as previously implemented from April 8 to 10, 2023 during Tsai Ing-wen's meeting with Senator Mc Carthy in the US.

136. The invasion of the island could also take several forms, with varying degrees of intensity—from special operations on land to a largescale amphibious landing.

In the event of kinetic action, however, China could not afford to fail, for a military defeat would lead to major political destabilization, threatening the very survival of the Communist Party. If China won such a conflict, Beijing would be able to keep US forces in Okinawa and Guam within arms' reach and take control of the surrounding seas, while consolidating its dominance in Southeast Asia. By deploying military units in Taiwan, Beijing would also be well placed to prevent the US and its allies from maintaining a forward presence in the Pacific. This would give China greater freedom of action in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond, allowing it to pursue new ambitions.

However, the stakes are very high for Beijing, and current simulations, even based on the upper projections of the PLA's reinforcement capacities, indicate that such an operation would be risky, to say the least.¹³⁷ While military action does not appear to be China's preferred option, given its cost and uncertain outcome, Beijing is actively preparing for such a scenario and wants to keep its options open. Several factors could hasten the decision to use force. First, China's deteriorating economic and demographic situation, which is only now becoming apparent,¹³⁸ could inflame political tensions and lead Beijing to embark on a nationalist enterprise as a distraction from its domestic problems. Second, the perception that the balance of power with the US and its allies is likely to shift away from China could prompt Beijing to bring forward kinetic action in order to take advantage of a possible "window of superiority".

The shift in US attitudes and public opinion, as well as the position the EU would take in the event of a challenge to the status quo in the Taiwan Strait, also weigh heavily in Chinese calculations. In this regard, Beijing may have learned from the war in Ukraine, and from the West's display of a united front in response to the Russian invasion. That war also exposed Russia's military weaknesses, from joint combat to its overly rigid command structure, which could well also apply to the PLA. Finally, the Ukrainian resistance shows that no conflict is ever a foregone conclusion, even one that is highly asymmetrical in terms of resources.

Tensions in the South China Sea

The South China Sea (SCS) is the site of territorial and maritime disputes that are causing growing tensions among its littoral states. While it is a strategic line of communication, its semi-enclosed maritime configuration and the necessity to pass through straits (Malacca, Singapore, and Sunda) make it highly vulnerable to banditry, terrorism, cyber-maritime attacks,

137. M. F. Cancian, M. Cancian, and E. Heginbotham, "The First Battle of the Next War: Wargaming a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan", CSIS, January 9, 2023.

138. S. Leplâtre, "China's Unprecedented Economic Crisis Worries the Rest of the World", *Le Monde*, August 20, 2023.

and even a potential naval blockade. Tensions in the SCS are also driven by regional competition for access to energy (oil and gas) and fishing resources. Overfishing and illegal fishing have depleted fish stocks in certain areas such as the Yellow Sea and the Gulf of Tonkin, but the number of fishing boats continues to grow each year.¹³⁹

Beijing claims 85 percent of the SCS, within the “nine-dash line”, while Vietnam and the Philippines dispute China’s position and defend their own—conflicting—claims under UNCLOS. Malaysia and Brunei also claim part of the Spratly archipelago but take a more cautious approach to China. Taiwan’s claims are very similar to Beijing’s, further adding to the cacophony.¹⁴⁰ China’s claim based on “historical rights” was rejected by a 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague,¹⁴¹ but Beijing is gradually trying to impose its restrictive interpretation of the freedom of action of military vessels and aircraft, and of the right of innocent passage through its “territorial waters”.¹⁴² China’s “fait accompli” policy is based on coordinated action by the Chinese coast guard, maritime militia, research and survey vessels, and PLA Navy ships acting as a deterrent. This “salami-slicing” approach is designed to gradually take over islands, islets, and reefs¹⁴³ without creating a *casus bello*, but transforming the situation on the ground. Beijing uses its “fleets of fishing vessels as unofficial militias, and it subsidizes fishing in disputed—but often fish-poor—waters in order to support its claims”.¹⁴⁴

Beijing has gradually reclaimed from the sea and militarized some of these islands.¹⁴⁵ It has also increased its surveillance capabilities, especially over the major straits and narrows in the region, using all available means, from radars on militarized reefs to hydrophones, oceanographic sensors, and underwater drones. It also deploys a massive fleet of research and underwater exploration vessels and controls the laying of submarine cables and oil drilling. The combination of these factors is leading to a gradual appropriation of the SCS that, coupled increasing militarization, is raising the risk of conflict.

139. K. Harrington, “South China Sea May Run Out of Fish at this Rate of Overfishing”, *Channel News Asia*, February 5, 2022, available at: www.channelnewsasia.com. The number of Chinese fishing boats is estimated at between ten thousand and seventeen thousand: the exact figure remains difficult to establish and varies depending on the source.

140. If Taipei were to amend its demands, Beijing could view this as an act of separatism.

141. Permanent Court of Arbitration of the Hague, “The South China Sea Arbitration (The Republic of Philippines v. The People’s Republic of China)”, available at: www.pca-cpa.org.

142. C. Prazuck, “Mer de Chine et droit de la mer : le paradoxe chinois”, *Éditoriaux de l’Ifri*, Ifri, May 7, 2021.

143. R. Haddick, “America Has No Answer to China’s Salami-Slicing”, *War on the Rocks*, February 6, 2014, available at: www.warontherocks.com.

144. F. Grare, “Le contrôle des pêches dans l’Indo-Pacifique”, *Les carnets du CAPS*, CAPS, July 2020, pp. 181–93.

145. See the analyses and maps published by the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, part of the US think tank CSIS, available at: www.amti.csis.org/.

Beijing's construction of military facilities further intensifies the perceived threat in neighboring countries that are spending more on defense. China-ASEAN negotiations on a code of conduct¹⁴⁶ have made slow progress since 2019, although the two sides completed the second reading of the text and adopted a set of guidelines in 2023.¹⁴⁷ However, neither has been made public. Without explicitly saying so, Beijing initially wanted a veto over the naval activities of non-littoral states, raising serious concerns about maintaining freedom of movement in the region. Tensions in the region remain palpable, and the frequent air and naval incidents are a reminder of the risk of escalation, whether intended or not.

The threat from North Korea

Following its six nuclear tests between 2006 and 2017, North Korea is now considered a *de facto* nuclear state.¹⁴⁸ Moreover, it now appears to have made sufficient progress in miniaturizing warheads and developing sophisticated ballistic vectors to strike US territory with its strikes. Tensions eased very slightly at the end of the decade, but rose again in 2022, with Pyongyang firing over ninety missiles that year alone,¹⁴⁹ mostly in response to joint South Korea-US military exercises, but also to test new weapons and gauge reactions in the US and Asia. North Korea now has the capability to place nuclear warheads not only to ballistic missiles,¹⁵⁰ but also on cruise missiles¹⁵¹ and underwater drones.¹⁵² The number of North Korean nuclear warheads is expected to increase by around 75 percent between 2017 and 2022, with the country acquiring about six nuclear weapons per year.¹⁵³

146. This code of conduct, which has been under discussion since 2001, is intended to govern the activities of the littoral states of the South China Sea, to prevent conflict, build mutual trust, and promote freedom of movement in accordance with international law.

147. See I. Storey, "The Code of Conduct for the South China Sea: Movement in Lieu of Progress", *Fulcrum*, July 20, 2023, available at: www.fulcrum.sg.

148. V. Narang and A. Panda, "North Korea Is a Nuclear Power. Get Used to It", *The New York Times*, June 12, 2018.

149. G. Bernal, "North Korea Keeps Building More Powerful Weapons, With No End in Sight", Lowy Institute, April 4, 2023, available at: www.loyyinstitute.org.

150. "Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Guides Work for Mounting Nuclear Warheads on Ballistic Missiles", *Rodong Sinmun*, available at: www.rodong.rep.kp.

151. See M. Aldebert, "Missiles de croisière et missiles balistiques : cet arsenal que développe la Corée du Nord pour une 'contre-attaque nucléaire'", *Le Figaro*, October 13, 2022.

152. "La Corée du Nord affirme avoir testé un nouveau drone d'attaque nucléaire sous-marin, les experts sceptiques", *Le Monde*, March 24, 2023.

153. D. Albright, "North Korean Nuclear Weapons Arsenal: New Estimates of its Size and Configuration", Institute for Science and International Security, April 10, 2023, available at: www.isis-online.org.

In response, South Korea has increased its military cooperation with the US and paved the way for an unprecedented rapprochement with Japan,¹⁵⁴ with a “red phone” set up between Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo set for August 2023.¹⁵⁵ Since 2014, the US and South Korea have had an information-sharing agreement in place regarding North Korea’s nuclear planning, covering tests, missile launches, and other developments related to its weapons program. In 2023, for the first time in six years the USS *Nimitz* carrier strike group docked at the Busan naval base in South Korea, followed shortly afterward by two US nuclear attack submarines.¹⁵⁶

With Pyongyang stepping up its threats and hammering home its desire to strike its southern neighbor,¹⁵⁷ South Korean public opinion is increasingly in favor of acquiring nuclear capabilities,¹⁵⁸ despite South Korea’s non-nuclear status as a signatory to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

These dynamics make a return to the negotiating table unlikely in the medium term,¹⁵⁹ and raise fears that the situation could degenerate into conflict at any moment, with a significant risk of escalation.¹⁶⁰

The risk of tensions with Iran boiling over

Iran’s nuclear program,¹⁶¹ Tehran’s alleged support for non-state armed groups (such as Hamas, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Houthis in Yemen), and Tehran’s and Washington’s divergent strategic interests in the Middle East are fueling tensions that pose an ever-present risk of conflagration. Iran is also threatening the US with a blockade of its territorial waters in the Strait of Hormuz, a key sea line of communication linking Middle Eastern oil producers to North America, Europe, and Asia, akin to the blockade enforced during 1980-1988 Tanker War between Iran and Iraq.¹⁶² In 2019,

154. Japan is equally concerned by events as South Korea, and is developing a new series of AEGIS destroyers, as well as hypervelocity missile interception capabilities and hypervelocity missiles.

155. “La Corée du Sud, le Japon et les États-Unis resserrent leurs liens à Camp David face à la Chine”, *Ouest France*, August 18, 2023.

156. See H. Shin, “Second US Submarine Arrives in South Korea Amid North Korea Tensions”, Reuters, July 24, 2023.

157. R. Hémez, “La paix par la force. La modernisation de la défense sud-coréenne sous la présidence Moon Jae-in”, *Notes de l’Ifri*, Ifri, May 4, 2022.

158. See C.-C. Hun, “In a First, South Korea Declares Nuclear Weapons a Policy Option”, *The New York Times*, January 12, 2023.

159. The most recent discussions between the US and North Korean leaders were held at the Singapore summit in June 2018 and the Hanoi summit in February 2019.

160. Bernal, “North Korea Keeps Building More Powerful Weapons”, *op. cit.*

161. Iran has always maintained that its nuclear program is intended for peaceful purposes, including power generation and research activities, and that it has no plans to build a nuclear bomb.

162. “Strait of Hormuz”, International Crisis Group, August 21, 2023, available at: www.crisisgroup.org.

six ships were hit in targeted attacks near the Strait of Hormuz. Despite the resumption of nuclear talks since the Biden administration took office in 2021, seven new attacks were recorded between 2021 and 2023.

Iran's domestic situation remains volatile, and religious leaders and the Revolutionary Guard may seek for outlets for domestic pressure. Talks on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)¹⁶³ are likely to fail, potentially leading Iran to increase its nuclear enrichment capabilities. Iran has also drawn closer to Russia during the war in Ukraine, supplying it with drones and buying Russian fighter jets. The shadow war with Israel, fought through covert operations, threatens to escalate into a major crisis should Israel decide to take significant action against Iran and its nuclear program.

In the context of the US's reduced energy dependence on the Middle East, the redeployment of US forces to the Pacific is likely to shake things up, with key actors such as the Gulf monarchies forced to reassess their economic, political, and even military ties with Moscow and Beijing, through the BRICS group or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. This new "great game", with increasingly autonomous regional powers, is accompanied by a high risk of crises that would have a major impact on European interests.

The main risks of conflict in the medium term

The challenges of maritime security, environmental security, and management of the commons are already sources of major tension that increase the risk of conflict, threaten regional stability, and impact interstate relations. Finally, disinformation, power struggles, and the use of legal mechanisms (also known as "lawfare") are further blur the "gray area" between war and peace.¹⁶⁴

Multidimensional maritime security risks

The prospect of economic exploitation of the sea, and the increasing scarcity of fish, mineral, and energy resources, are leading an increasing number of Indo-Pacific states to assert maritime claims, sometimes by force. These claims fall into three main categories: sovereignty, and a state's desire to have its maritime domain recognized and its rights respected; economic, related to the exploitation of resources within the same

163. The JCPOA is an agreement on Iran's nuclear program reached in Vienna on July 14, 2015, between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the US), along with Germany (P5+1) and the EU.

164. A. Ferey, "Vers une guerre des normes ? Du *lawfare* aux opérations juridiques", *Focus stratégique*, n° 108, Ifri, avril 2022.

boundaries, and shipping; and military, related to the ability of naval air forces to move, operate, and refuel in the region.

UNCLOS is increasingly challenged in the SCS, exacerbating inter-state tensions. Pressure on fish stocks is a major source of friction between national actors. Ocean warming, illegal fishing, and overfishing have already had a dramatic impact, with the gradual depletion of traditional fishing grounds, particularly in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁶⁵ IUU fishing is typically the result of activities in disputed maritime zones (such as the India-Pakistan border, the SCS, and the area north of the Mozambique Channel), poaching of protected species (such as juvenile fish, toothfish, lobster, abalone, sea cucumbers, and sea turtles), or the activities of fishing fleets operated by organized crime networks.

There are no regional fisheries management organizations in the region, which means that without an enforced regulatory framework, coastal states are unable to agree on quotas or fishing zones. For example, Vietnam's waters in the SCS have become totally unproductive owing to a lack of responsible resource management over the past few decades, forcing fishermen to fish beyond their own EEZ, as far as Micronesia and possibly eventually into the waters of New Caledonia and French Polynesia.¹⁶⁶ The more relative depletion of fish stocks near China's coasts has also pushed the Chinese fishing fleet farther and farther away from its own EEZ, toward areas such as the Pacific Islands and the Mozambique Channel—prompting Chinese support for Madagascar's claims to the French-owned Scattered Islands.¹⁶⁷

In addition to displacing fishing to more productive waters, IUU fishing has a number of detrimental consequences, as the depletion of stocks leads to increased migration (internal or international), loss of income and, consequently, an increase in criminal activity at sea. In addition to these fisheries-related crimes, human rights violations (including forced labor, human trafficking, unpaid wages, and mistreatment), are common on fishing vessels,¹⁶⁸ particularly those run by Chinese shipowners.

Exploration and exploitation of the seabed is another major issue involving numerous environmental, legal, and geopolitical challenges. Access to these resources, made possible by technological advances,

165. T. Woody, "The Sea is Running Out of Fish, Despite Nations' Pledges to Stop It", *National Geographic*, October 8, 2019.

166. A. M. Song *et al.*, "'Blue Boats' and 'Reef Robbers': A New Maritime Security Threat for the Asia Pacific?", *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, Vol. 60, No. 3, December 2019.

167. F. Giovalucchi and J. Ramasy, "La Chine à Madagascar. Entre opportunisme politique discret et trafics intenses", *Notes de l'Ifri*, Ifri, November 2022.

168. "The Ever-Widening Net: Mapping the Scale, Nature and Corporate Structures of Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing by the Chinese Distant-Water Fleet", Environmental Justice Foundation, March 30, 2022, available at: www.ejfoundation.org.

requires maritime appropriation. These include marine resources, the extraction of hydrocarbons (oil, gas, and methane hydrate), and minerals (such as polymetallic nodules, hydrothermal sulfides, cobalt-rich crusts, and rare earth metals, which are in particularly high demand by the semiconductor, energy transition, and electric vehicle industries). However, there are still gaps in the regulatory framework for seabed mining, and the topography of the seabed is still poorly understood.¹⁶⁹ This situation perpetuates areas of uncertainty regarding the limits of exploitation rights, particularly in regions where maritime boundaries are disputed. For example, Chinese research vessels regularly explore oceanic ridges from the Bay of Bengal to the Pacific Ocean.

In the long term, these developments could lead to further regional tensions, as metal sources have been identified between Taiwan and Japan, as well as in the EEZs of the Pacific islands of New Caledonia and French Polynesia.¹⁷⁰

Regional destabilization linked to climate change

Global warming is causing ocean temperatures to rise, with multiple consequences: the expansion of the oceans, threats to biodiversity, and the intensification of extreme weather events. Sea levels are expected to rise between one and three meters by 2100, leading to numerous floods and migration.

New Caledonia and French Polynesia are expected to be among the most affected regions, while the current rate of sea levels rise in the island Pacific is 12 mm/year, four times the global average.¹⁷¹ Between 6 percent and 12 percent of France's 1,269 oceanic islands could be completely submerged by the end of the century.¹⁷² In the 2018 Boe declaration, Pacific island nations identified global warming as the number one threat to their security.¹⁷³

169. It is estimated that only 15–20 percent of the seabed has been explored. Y. Fouquet and D. Lacroix, “Les ressources minérales marines profondes – étude prospective à l’horizon 2030”, 2012, available at: www.quae.com.

170. The main economically valuable deposits are in the Pacific, some of them in areas under French jurisdiction in Polynesia. However, their exploitation will not begin any time soon, with the technical capacity to do so expected to be reached twenty to thirty years from now.

171. C. Bellard, C. Leclerc, and F. Courchamp, “Potential Impact of Sea Level Rise on French Islands Worldwide”, *Nature Conservation*, 2013, available at: www.natureconservation.pensoft.net.

172. C. Nunez and National Geographic staff, “Sea Levels are Rising at an Extraordinary Pace. Here’s What to Know”, *National Geographic*, April 2023.

173. On September 20, 2018, the leaders of the Pacific Islands Forum met in Nauru to approve the Boe Declaration (named after a place on the island). The Boe Declaration identifies priority areas for collective action in the region, including regional security, resilience to climate change and disasters, fishing, and ocean management and conservation.

The permanent submergence of small islands would also lead to the gradual disappearance of large areas of EEZ and territorial seas.¹⁷⁴ Some populations would be forced to either migrate or to artificially create land in order to remain, with complex legal issues surrounding the survival of a state whose territory is underwater.¹⁷⁵ In addition to the major human and economic impacts of coastal development—by 2030, 50 percent of the world’s population is expected to be living within 100 km of the coast¹⁷⁶—the encroachment of the sea on land will have irreversible environmental impacts, including the disappearance of mangroves, degradation of water tables, and soil infertility.

Rising temperatures and ocean acidification are also expected to have multiple impacts on fish stocks, including the gradual shifting of fishing grounds as tropical species migrate to colder seas. These effects will compound those of overfishing, increasing competition over already depleted resources.

The effects of sea level rise will also be combined with those of increasingly intense and frequent climate events, such as category 4 and 5 tropical storms and cyclones.¹⁷⁷ An increase in these risks will inevitably lead to an increase in the number of HADR missions, as seen in Operation Beryx in Sumatra in 2005, in Mozambique in 2019, and more recently in the South Pacific following the Tongan earthquake in January 2022, when the FRANZ arrangement between France, Australia, and New Zealand was implemented. Aware of these risks, France regularly organizes exercises with a humanitarian focus, such as IMEX 22 in the Indian Ocean, which brought together the nations of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium off the coast of Goa from March 28 to 30, and the Marara¹⁷⁸ and Croix du Sud¹⁷⁹ exercises organized alternately by French Polynesia and New Caledonia in the insular Pacific.

HADR may thus soon become an integral part of the operational mission of the armed forces, and navies may also be increasingly called upon for law enforcement missions—to combat illicit trafficking, IUU fishing, and marine pollution—as well as surveillance and reconnaissance

174. “Impacts du changement climatique : Littoral et milieu marin”, Ministère de la Transition écologique et de la Cohésion des territoires, September 29, 2022, available at: www.ecologie.gouv.fr.

175. G. Giraudeau, *Nations of Water*, Centre d’études en sciences sociales sur les mondes africains, américains et asiatiques, 2023, available at: www.cessma.org.

176. C. Small and R. J. Nicholls, “A Global Analysis of Human Settlement in Coastal Zones”, *Journal of Coastal Research*, Vol. 19, No. 3, pp. 584–99.

177. With winds in excess of 360 km/h and waves of eight to nine meters on the coast.

178. “Marara 2022 : Manœuvre logistique des forces armées en Polynésie française pour l’exercice multinational MARARA 2022”, Cols bleus, May 13, 2022, available at: www.colsbleus.fr.

179. “CROIX DU SUD 2023’ : Réagir en cas de catastrophe naturelle dans le Pacifique”, Armée de l’Air et de l’Espace, April 26, 2023, available at: www.air.defense.gouv.fr.

operations. The armed forces must therefore prepare themselves to anticipate the consequences of climate change.¹⁸⁰

Finally, further north, the gradual disappearance of the pack ice is opening up the Arctic space via the Northern Sea Route, an alternative to the Indo-Pacific straits linking Europe and Asia. This would reduce the travel time from Yokohama to Rotterdam by almost 40 percent.¹⁸¹ The opening up of this route would create a new geography of flows and a new race for access to resources: a prospect that prompted the publication in April 2022 of France's first polar strategy, entitled "Équilibrer les extrêmes" ("Balancing the Extremes").¹⁸²

Anticipating the effects of potential crises in the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific region plays a pivotal role in global trade, owing to its strategic geographic location and a network of Sea Line of Communications (SLOCs) that is vital to all global economies. However, geopolitical tensions and potential crises in this region may have a significant impact on shipping, energy supply, and digital flows.

Disruption to shipping

Potential crises in the Indo-Pacific pose a threat to the SLOCs that carry more than 80 percent of world trade, including intra-Asia-Pacific routes.¹⁸³

In particular, the Indo-Pacific zone contains several chokepoints that are vital to the security, economic development, trade, transportation, and energy security of France and Europe,¹⁸⁴ and are all the more critical owing to the lack of an alternative route. These routes are vulnerable to a range of risks and threats, such as piracy (Gulf of Aden and Somali Basin), brigandage (Singapore Strait, ports of Manila, Dumai, Belawan, Chattogram, Jakarta, etc.), and organized crime and terrorism¹⁸⁵ (in the Cabo Delgado Province of Mozambique, and in the Sulu and Celebes Seas in the Philippines).

180. M. Levallant, "Diplomatie de défense et sécurité environnementale : perspectives de coopération en Indo-Pacifique", Institut des hautes études de défense nationale (L'IHEDN), 2021, available at: www.ihedn.fr/.

181. "Arctique", Direction générale des relations internationales et de la stratégie, Ministère des Armées, available at: www.defense.gouv.fr.

182. O. Poivre d'Arvor, Ambassadeur pour les pôles et les enjeux maritimes, "Équilibrer les extrêmes, stratégie polaire de la France à horizon 2030", *op. cit.*

183. M. Yang and A. Fifić, "Emerging Geopolitical Challenges in the Indo-Pacific: Implications for Maritime Trade and Connectivity", *Journal of Marine Science and Engineering*, Vol. 9, 2021.

184. D. Roy and S. Das, "Maritime Security in the Indo-Pacific Region: Challenges and Responses", *Man and the Economy*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2020, pp. 91–106.

185. S. E. Lee, "Maritime Security Challenges in the Indo-Pacific Region: Implications for Korea", *Proceedings of the International Conference on Information Networking*, 2020, pp. 29–34.

The Taiwan Strait currently remains an important route for shipping companies, allowing Europe to serve Chinese ports, as well as those in Japan and South Korea. Kinetic action in the Taiwan Strait would set the region ablaze, resulting in a drastic reduction in volumes transported to and from China. Denial of access to China's coastline, with extensive no-go zones, would severely disrupt commercial shipping traffic, and military pressure in the SCS would endanger crews and vessels.

These numerous maritime security issues could lead to higher insurance costs and enhanced security measures, with a significant impact on commercial operations. A “high intensity” conflict could also lead to restrictions on the free movement of ships, blockades, or embargoes on certain ports or regions. It could also disrupt global supply chains, as shipowners take different routes to avoid risk zones, increasing transit times. This would also significantly increase logistics costs.

The reduction in volumes transported from China would also mean a drastic reduction in the number of trading vessels for European companies, as no country in the zone, individually or collectively, would be able to replace China, either in terms of volumes or diversification of production.¹⁸⁶

Disruption to energy supplies

The importance and security of energy links between Europe and Asia must be viewed in the context of the increased “decontinentalization” of energy flows following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.¹⁸⁷ The Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden have thus become important energy transit zones for Europe, with an increase in hydrocarbon supplies from the Gulf states.

India is also becoming a major supplier of refined petroleum products—increasing the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean and the Strait of Hormuz for European supplies. Any conflict in the northern Indian Ocean would have a major impact on the supply of hydrocarbons to Europe.¹⁸⁸

China, which is the world's second largest consumer of oil and gas after the US, is also experiencing significant growth in its demand for refined product imports, most of which arrive by sea.¹⁸⁹ China remains less exposed than other countries—particularly those in Europe—to threats to imported

186. Despite their industrial infrastructure, neither Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, or Malaysia would be in a position to take over from China.

187. “La décontinentalisation des flux énergétiques en Europe”, Centre d'études stratégiques de la Marine, Ministère des Armées, *Brèves Marines*, No. 274, available at: www.defense.gouv.fr.

188. V. Gallucci, “Geopolitics and Energy Security in the Asia-Pacific Region”, in B. K. Sovacool (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Energy Security*, London: Routledge, 2019, pp. 162–172.

189. Every year, China imports over \$150 billion of crude oil, \$99 billion of iron ore, \$36.6 billion of gasoline, and \$31.7 billion of refined copper. Most of these resources arrive by sea, *via* the Indian Ocean.

refined products,¹⁹⁰ but despite major investment, its storage issues still leave it highly exposed for at least another decade to any disruption in the flow of hydrocarbons, particularly gas, from the Indian Ocean.¹⁹¹ This situation complicates any attempt by China to blockade Taiwan's with kinetic action, given the potential impact of a naval blockade in the Straits of Malacca or Hormuz on energy supplies. The success of the dual Power of Siberia/Power of Siberia-2 gas pipeline will be critical in determining Beijing's ability to limit its exposure to maritime flows in the long term.¹⁹²

Disruption to digital data flows

Ninety-nine percent of online communication are carried by submarine cables, which provide data flow speeds nearly a thousand times faster than satellites.¹⁹³ Digital traffic is now essential not only to our daily lives, but also to financial and economic stability.

There are currently three million kilometers of submarine cables laid worldwide, with a total of 450 cables, including 44 in the South and East China Seas. There are over 8,000 data centers¹⁹⁴ around the world, with 867 in Asia alone (with 415 of which are in China, including 120 in Hong Kong).

Geographically, the Indo-Pacific region is characterized by shallow waters, rugged coastlines, and areas of seismic activity, which can make laying submarine cables difficult and increase the risk of damage from natural disasters. In 2022, for example, the island of Tonga was cut off from the rest of the world for several days following a tsunami. Geopolitics also plays an important role, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region, where the rivalry between the US and China and the desire to use these cables to monitor or disrupt competing communications is a major concern. For example, in 2021, the US, Australia, and Japan funded a submarine cable to connect the coastlines of the Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, and Kiribati, to prevent the installation of a cable funded by China.¹⁹⁵

190. China has significant domestic refining capacity. In 2022, it led the way in oil refining capacity, with 924 million tons, or 18.5 million barrels per day. This partial self-sufficiency reduces its vulnerability to fluctuations in international markets.

191. In 2021, China's storage capacity was equivalent to just 7 percent of its consumption, while that of France, in comparison, was over 30 percent of its consumption.

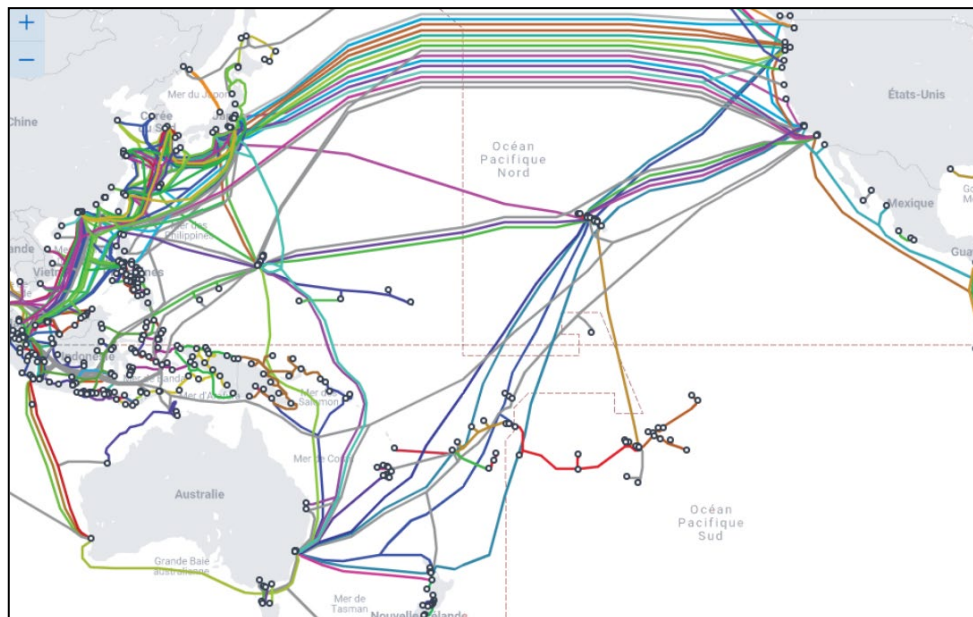
192. Eventually, Russia could theoretically inject nearly 90 billion cubic meters per year into China, equating to 24 percent of its current consumption.

193. This makes satellites mere secondary communication tools, or a limited alternative in the event of cable failure or malfunction.

194. C. Morel, *Les câbles sous-marins*, Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2023.

195. C. Morel, "Le Pacifique insulaire pris dans la toile mondiale ? Géopolitique des câbles sous-marins en Océanie", *Études de Ifri*, Ifri, September 2022.

Map 5: Submarine cables in the Asia-Pacific region



Source: <https://www.submarinecablemap.com/>.

In Asia, 90 percent of cables have historically been laid by three main companies: France’s Alcatel Submarine Networks, the US company SubCom, and Japan’s NEC. Over the past decade a fourth player has emerged: China’s Huawei Marine Networks, which was acquired by Hengtong in 2020. Since 2018, China has also banned foreign companies from laying new cables in the SCS. On average, two cables need to be replaced each year, and this work can now only be done by Chinese companies.¹⁹⁶ At this rate, by 2030, Hengtong will have installed all of the cables crossing the SCS. Since US companies are no longer allowed access Hong Kong, which is a major regional internet hub (two-thirds of China’s internet network passes through Hong Kong), plans for new cable infrastructure with a segment connecting Hong Kong have also come to a halt.

By blocking permits in this way, China not only secures a stranglehold over the region’s undersea communications infrastructure, but also ensures its control over the oceanographic, bathymetric, and geological data in the SCS.¹⁹⁷ “Smart cables” with sensors for dual scientific and military use are

196. In January 2022, at a meeting between Clément Beaune (French Secretary of State for European Affairs) and China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi, the latter confirmed the ban on laying new cables in the South China Sea, but authorized incumbent foreign companies to maintain existing cables.

197. Cable-laying companies have to carry out extremely precise bathymetric surveys along the trajectory of the cable-laying project.

also being developed and may enable control of submersible traffic, hence Beijing's desire to ban them in the SCS.¹⁹⁸

Developments in the geopolitical situation between China and Taiwan could also have a significant impact on submarine cables. In an effort to exert influence on the island, China has already been accused of using cyber-attacks to disrupt communications on the archipelago. According to Taiwanese military analysts, Taipei's submarine cables could also be cut by Chinese drones, and its land terminals attacked using rockets or special forces. "A Chinese invasion would undoubtedly attempt to change Taiwan's communication parameters", said Richard Hu, a retired general and military expert at National Chengchi University.¹⁹⁹ In the event of a conflict, North Korea might also try to disrupt the submarine cables that connect South Korea to the rest of the world. In short, in the event of a large-scale conflict, the submarine network could be directly threatened, affecting regional and even global connectivity.

Given the threats, areas of potential conflict, and major risk factors identified in this region, France must adapt its defense posture to strengthen both its legitimacy and its operational effectiveness. To achieve this, the armed forces must be able to respond to the challenges of competition at the lower end of the conflict spectrum, while also being able to prevent or manage potential violent interactions such as skirmishes, intentional or unintentional escalation, or a high-intensity conflict.

198. At the request of the Taiwanese, the cable project between southern Taiwan and the northern Philippines, in the Luzon Strait, will support five types of sensors. Officially, these will be used to anticipate the impact of earthquakes and tsunamis, but they will also be able to detect submarine movements.

199. "Taiwan Seeks Satellite Solutions After Cables Cut", *Taipei Times*, April 18, 2023, available at: www.taipeitimes.com.

Proposals for a pragmatic French defense posture

France could take a more pragmatic approach by pursuing new cooperative initiatives and attempting to shape the dynamics of certain multilateral cooperative ventures from within, rather than disengage from them, in light of the potential conflict zones and risk factors identified above. Similarly, the challenges of the Indo-Pacific require France, as a resident power, to strengthen its defense capabilities and adapt its military governance structure to increase its effectiveness and degree of influence.

The triptych of “competition-dispute-confrontation” identified in the 2021 *Strategic Vision of the Chief of Defense Staff*²⁰⁰ also requires France’s defense posture in the Indo-Pacific to be able to respond to the challenges of cooperation and competition, while being capable of handling a major high-intensity engagement. Without siding with a logic of even greater polarization between the US and China, France must adapt its command and control (C2) and logistics organizational structure, as well as its theatres and capabilities, to the reality of an increasingly uncertain context.

Cooperative and competitive actions

With more than seven thousand military personnel permanently stationed in the Indo-Pacific, France is the leading European power in terms of military human resources, far ahead of the United Kingdom in second place, which has only 1,650 military personnel permanently stationed. But to improve its physical footprint and regional influence, France’s armed forces can no longer ignore the need to review its command structure, support bases, partnerships, and the level (number/type) of capabilities deployed in the region.

200. “Strategic Vision of the Chief of Defense Staff”, Ministère des Armées, 2021, available at: www.defense.gouv.fr.

The need for a clearer political line in the context of the US-China rivalry

The current geostrategic context makes France's strategic ambition²⁰¹ to act as a "balancing power" in the Indo-Pacific difficult to achieve, as Paris has neither the capacity nor the diplomatic clout to play such a role.²⁰² This widening gap between rhetoric and action is also damaging the credibility of France's Indo-Pacific strategy and needs to be addressed. Paris should therefore adopt a more modest, realist stance, positioning itself as a "constructive actor in the Indo-Pacific" and making clear that, while it shares Washington's core values, it wants to retain room for maneuver in some of its choices.

This posture of clarity, rather than confusion, would allow France to join initiatives and groups from which it had previously distanced itself on the grounds that they were overly dominated by the US. This would also strengthen transatlantic coordination, notably through the EU-US high-level consultations on the Indo-Pacific, that began in the fall of 2021.

Many European partners also see NATO as an essential platform for addressing security and defense issues in the Indo-Pacific, something to which Paris regularly objects.²⁰³ Several Indo-Pacific partners are increasing their engagement with NATO, and see it as an appropriate forum for discussing security issues in the region with transatlantic partners.²⁰⁴ In addition, the main operational benefit of a closer relationship between NATO and the "AP4" countries (Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, and Japan) in the Indo-Pacific is to improve the interoperability of systems and procedures with regional allies and partners. Working with the US Seventh Fleet, however, is more difficult, as it does not operate under NATO standards.²⁰⁵

Coordination can also mean greater complementarity with the US. France and the EU have the opportunity to offer Indo-Pacific countries a strong, credible option: one that is focused on the needs of the region and on areas where they can add value, such as maritime security capacity building, establishing norms and standards, infrastructure finance, cyber

201. C. Pajon, "France: The Leading European Power in the Indo-Pacific", in J. Bowen (ed.), *Europe's Indo-Pacific Embrace: Global Partnerships For Regional Resilience*, Perth: US-Asia Center/Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, September 16, 2021, available at: www.perthusasia.edu.au; N. Barré, "Emmanuel Macron: 'L'autonomie stratégique'", *op. cit.*

202. C. Perrin *et al.*, "La stratégie française pour l'Indo-Pacifique : des ambitions à la réalité", *op. cit.*

203. Germany and the Netherlands refer to the role of NATO in their Indo-Pacific strategies, but France does not.

204. Y. Hayashi, "Japanese FM: It's Time to Deepen Cooperation", *Politico*, April 5, 2023, available at: www.politico.eu; H. Legarda, "China and Russia Bring NATO and the Indo-Pacific Together", *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, July 14, 2022, available at: www.ip-quarterly.com.

205. The Seventh Fleet works with regional partners that do not use NATO standard operating procedures.

governance, and supply chain resilience.²⁰⁶ In this way, France and the EU can complement the US approach, which is often overly focused on military aspects. This focus on country needs and functional cooperation between France and the US would also be facilitated by sub-regional strategies.²⁰⁷

To carry weight, the French strategy also must be part of a strengthened EU approach to the Indo-Pacific. The Union's ability to be present in the Indo-Pacific depends on its internal cohesion and its desire to act as a geopolitical power.²⁰⁸ Given the diversity of interests within the EU, the Indo-Pacific strategy needs to be more ambitiously led by a core group of proactive countries: France must play a greater role in this area, using its specific position as a leading European actor in the Indo-Pacific in order to act as a rallying power.

Finally, in the face of growing tensions in the Taiwan Strait, France must continue to consistently demonstrate its commitment to maintaining free access to common spaces, while regularly sending strategic signals²⁰⁹ that it would side with the US in the event of a Chinese attack on Taiwan or in the SCS. These messages should be understood as a way of maintaining the status quo and stability in the region, and of complicating China's strategic calculations.

Adjusting the joint forces governance structure and areas of responsibility

France's 2019 Indo-Pacific strategy has not been followed up by any adjustments to the command structures and chains of command in the region. Given the threats and risk factors identified above, the current organizational structure, particularly in the Pacific, lacks clarity, and is also difficult for France's partners and allies in the region to interpret and understand.²¹⁰ It must therefore be both adapted and simplified.

206. Z. Paikin *et al.*, "The South China Sea and Indo-Pacific in an Era of 'Multipolar' Competition: A More Targeted EU Response?", *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 14, CEPS, February 6, 2023, p. 25.

207. C. Perrin *et al.*, "La stratégie française pour l'Indo-Pacifique", *op. cit.*

208. D. Fiott and L. Simón, "Centre of Gravity: Security and Defence in the Indo-Pacific - What Role for the European Union?", *CSDS-In Depth*, December 2022, available at: www.brussels-school.be.

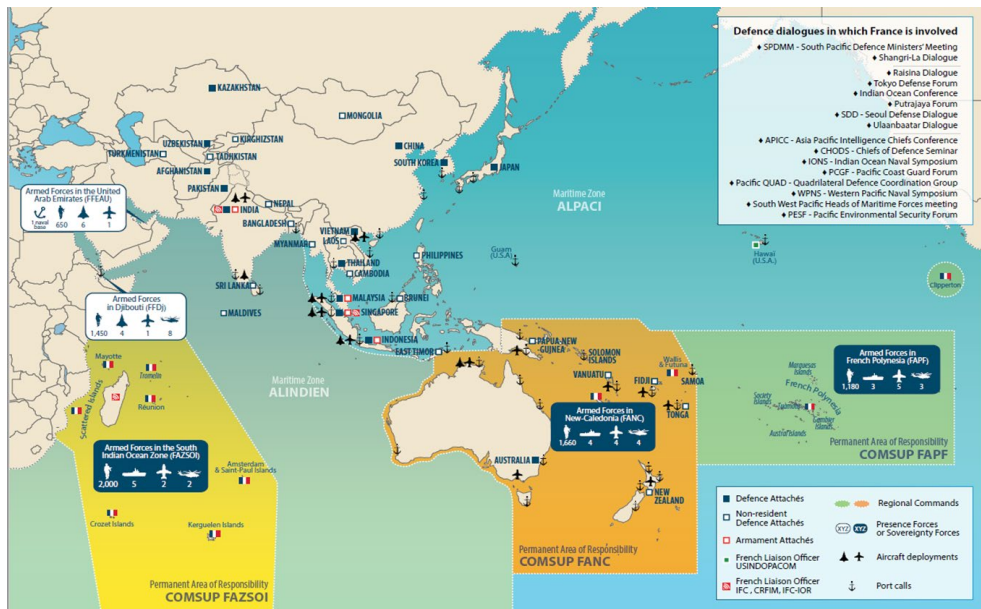
209. J. Bachelier, H. Fayet, A. Jonnekin, and F. Renaud, "Strategic Signaling: A Lever for France in the Competition Between Powers?", *Focus stratégique*, No. 114, Ifri, May 2023.

210. Interviews with the Armed Forces General Staff, conducted between January and April 2023.

The current structure of France's Indo-Pacific military command

France's current Indo-Pacific commands consist of three "sovereign forces" led by the Supreme Commands (COMSUP) of the Armed Forces of the South Indian Ocean (FAZSOI), the Armed Forces of New Caledonia (FANC), and the Armed Forces of French Polynesia (FAPF). France also has two "presence forces" stationed on foreign territory: the French Forces stationed in Djibouti (FFDJ), and the French Forces in the United Arab Emirates (FFEAU).

Map 6: Joint forces governance in the Indo-Pacific



Source: General Directorate for International Relations and Strategy (DGRIS), Ministry of Armed Forces.

Each COMSUP covers a large area of permanent responsibility (ZRP) that includes countries in the sub region. Finally, there are two major maritime zones, corresponding to the Indian and Pacific Oceans, commanded respectively by the COMSUP FFEAU, or Admiral for the Indian Ocean (ALINDIEN), and the COMSUP FAPF, or Admiral for the Pacific (ALPACI), with the Bay of Bengal serving as the geographic boundary between the two zones.

In the Pacific, ALPACI/COMSUP FAPF and COMSUP FANC have the same level of responsibility in their respective zones, considering that ALPACI in addition to the zone around Polynesia, is also responsible for the maritime zone covering the North Pacific from the Gulf of Bengal to the Pacific coast of America. ALPACI commands 1,200 military personnel (including 900 as part of FAPF), COMSUP FANC about 1,500, COMSUP FAZSOI about 1,700, and ALINDIEN about 1,000.

Operational command remains the prerogative of the Chief of Defense Staff, unlike INDOPACOM, which is based in Hawaii and reports directly to the political authority. Within their respective zones, however, these authorities are responsible for sovereignty missions, bilateral military relations, and operational control of military assets stationed or deployed there, regardless of their home base (such as mainland France, New Caledonia, or French Polynesia).

Inconsistencies in view of the strategic context

ALPACI, which is based in French Polynesia, is responsible for managing relations with most Asian nations, but it is located far from the US Seventh Fleet, which operates in Asia from Yokosuka, Japan—about 9,500 km. This distance makes operational and logistics interactions between ALPACI and the Seventh Fleet difficult. In addition to this geographical constraint, the time difference also poses a challenge for the ALPACI personnel.

COMSUP FANC, which is based in Nouméa, is responsible for operational relations with Australia, and has an area of responsibility that extends as far north as Papua New Guinea. From an Australian perspective, however, security issues are primarily maritime in nature and are concentrated not only in its immediate vicinity but also in the China Seas, an area covered by ALPACI rather than COMSUP FANC.

ALPACI is also responsible for operational relations with France's third strategic partner in the region, Japan, as well as with all the nations of Southeast Asia. Given the long distances involved, and the relative isolation of French Polynesia (it takes over thirty hours to fly from there to Southeast Asia on a commercial flight), ALPACI's physical meetings with counterparts in the region are few and far between, and mainly taking place mainly around port visits by French Navy vessels. This makes it difficult for France to establish a stable relationship of trust with its Asian partners, for whom face-to-face meetings are essential.²¹¹

The size of the staff in terms of human resources—a few dozen people—is also clearly inadequate, as it is largely focused on the protection of sovereign interests and the surveillance of French Polynesia's vast maritime domain. In addition, one third of ALPACI logistics resources are mobilized for permanent surveillance of the former Pacific Testing Center (CEP) on the Mururoa Atoll, from which more than 180 nuclear tests were conducted between 1966 and 1996.²¹²

211. Interviews with the Armed Forces General Staff, conducted between January and April 2023.

212. *Ibid.*

Proposed adjustments to the areas of responsibility

Given the above, the following recommendations are proposed.

First, to couple COMSUP FANC to a general officer responsible for Asia (hereinafter referred to as OGASIE [*officier général en charge de la zone Asie*]). The OGASIE staff would be located in New Caledonia and would cover an area of responsibility extending from the Bangladesh-India border to the island of Samoa. This reconfiguration would ensure coherent operational relations with France's main allies in the region, from Japan, Australia, and the US (via the US Seventh Fleet) to all the countries of Southeast Asia, while maintaining a physical presence in France's overseas territories—crucial given France's “core” interests in the region.

Second, to strengthen the French presence in Asia, OGASIE could create a staff seconded to Southeast Asia and headed by an admiral (hereinafter referred to as ALASE, for “admiral responsible for Southeast Asia” [*Amiral en charge de l'Asie du Sud-Est*]). OGASIE could delegate to ALASE regional responsibility for three aspects—influence, logistics, and maritime security—over an area stretching from the Bay of Bengal to eastern Japan. ALASE's presence in Southeast Asia, as a subordinate of OGASIE, would allow French views to be represented in the region on a more regular basis,²¹³ and French forces to be more consistently represented in the regional forums, exercises, and discussions to which France is invited. ALASE could also provide regional logistical support for military forces deployed in Asia and oversee a maritime security cell that would provide “voluntary naval cooperation”²¹⁴—centrally controlled by the Maritime Information Cooperation and Awareness (MICA) Center²¹⁵—in conjunction with French and European shipowners, operators, and charterers with economic interests in the region. ALASE could eventually also hold operational control of the assets deployed in this region, by delegation from OGASIE.

This decentralized staff would also be able to improve the coordination of any training and capacity-building²¹⁶ that France is called upon to provide to its regional partners, in cooperation with the UK, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the US, all of which are already active in this area. Its presence would also allow France to establish a personal, stable, and

213. According to interviews conducted at the Armed Forces General Staff between January and April 2023, French leaders change too frequently in a number of forums and discussion platforms, making it difficult to maintain a consistent French voice.

214. “Agreements Supporting the Action of the MICA Center”, Maritime Information Cooperation & Awareness Center, available at: www.mica-center.org.

215. “What is the MICA Center?”, Maritime Information Cooperation & Awareness Center, available at: www.mica-center.org.

216. Capacity-building for coast guards and navies involves helping them to improve the efficiency of capabilities, sailors, and governance to carry out SAS missions.

constructive relationship with the military authorities in partner countries, as well as with its traditional allies. This staff would also provide an opportunity to develop the communication and strategic signaling aspects in support of the Armed Forces General Staff, and, finally, could support the work of the Defense and OGASIE missions to develop the support points (see below) that the French Armed Forces currently lack in this region.

Ideally, ALASE and its staff would be based in Singapore. Given the many bonds of trust established between the French and Singaporean armed forces²¹⁷ in recent years, Singapore's airport facilities, and its strategic location at the entrance to the SCS, locating the reduced staff in this city-state would seem the most appropriate solution. Being headquartered at the Sembawang base²¹⁸ in northern Singapore would also offer the advantage of daily contact with British, American, New Zealand, and Australian officers, and facilitate logistical links with the Seventh Fleet, through the Commander Logistics Group Western Pacific (CLWP, Task Force 73²¹⁹). Facilities such as warehouses could also be used to store spare parts if required.

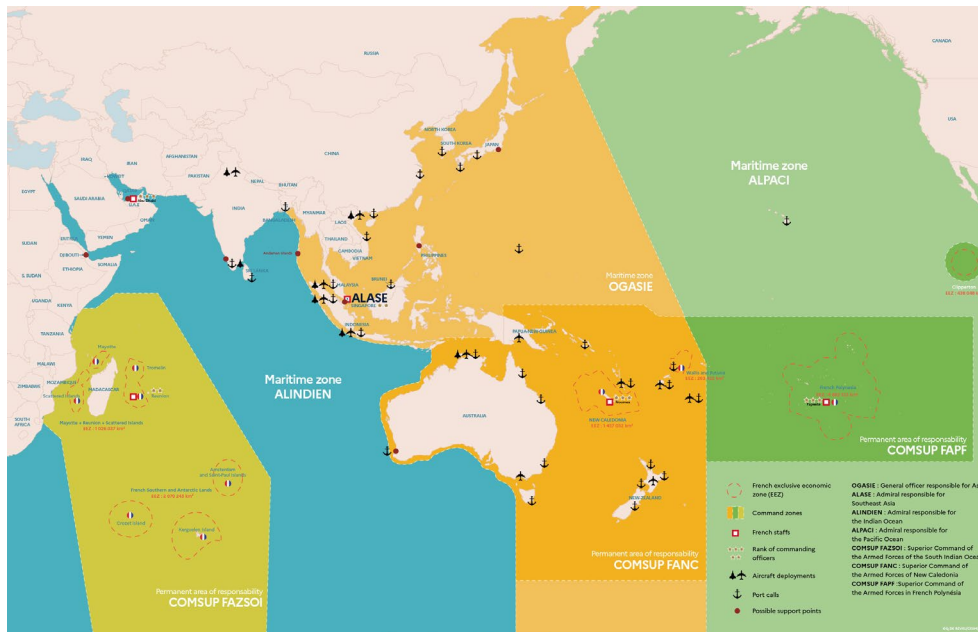
ALPACI would remain based in French Polynesia, but its area of responsibility would be more narrowly focused on the Central and Eastern Pacific. This would allow the staff to devote more attention to Latin American partners, which are often seen as a lower priority in ALPACI's current area of responsibility, but are central to French interests, including in relation to the Panama Canal, the preservation of French interests in the Clipperton EEZ, transpacific cocaine flows, and the fight against IUU fishing (mainly from South America) around the Polynesian EEZ.

217. "La stratégie de défense", La France à Singapour, Ambassade de France à Singapour, available at: www.sg.ambafrance.org.

218. The Sembawang naval base was built by the British government in the 1920s and 1930s and houses the repair, refueling, and resupply of ships from the Australian, British, and New Zealand navies, as well as those of other Commonwealth countries under the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA). Since a 1990 agreement between Singapore and the US, US military forces (mainly naval and air) have also used the facilities at the Sembawang base. Task Force 73 (and Commander Logistic Group Western Pacific), which is part of the US Seventh Fleet, has been headquartered at Sembawang since 1992.

219. Task Force 73/CLWP is the logistics provider for the US Seventh Fleet.

Map 7: Proposed organizational governance structure in the Indo-Pacific



Source: Original map produced by the CESM cartography department

It would also be advisable to elevate ALPACI, ALINDIEN, and OGASIE equally to the rank of three-star general officer (vice-admiral or Lieutenant General), to signal to both partners and competitors the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific region for France. Simply increasing the number and rank of key Area of Permanent Responsibility (ZRP) commanders would be seen as a strong signal. ALASE could then be promoted to Rear Admiral, allowing the person in this post to interact on an equal footing with the CLWP and many of their regional counterparts.

As the titles of the various commanders indicate, it would be desirable for ALPACI and ALASE to be admirals since most of the challenges and risk factors in their respective areas of responsibility are maritime in nature.

Another option, which this study has ruled out but could be considered, would be to place ALPACI (at the rank of rear admiral) under an OGASIE (at the rank of Vice-Admiral or lieutenant general), who would then have an area of responsibility stretching from the Bay of Bengal to the US coast. Both ALPACI and ALASE would then be subordinate to OGASIE. This would have the advantage of not splitting the US INDOPACOM²²⁰ area into two separate French commands, thus facilitating French and US operational relations in the event of a crisis or conflict, particularly with PACAF (Pacific Air Forces),²²¹ MarForPac (Marine Corps Forces Pacific),²²²

220. "Area of Responsibility", US INDOPACOM, March 2022, available at: www.pacom.mil.

221. PACAF is one of the major commands of the US Air Force (USAF) and is responsible for all air operations, security, and air defense in the Pacific region.

and USARPAC (United States Army Pacific).²²³ However, locating the supreme French military authority responsible for all military activities in the Asia-Pacific region in Nouméa would send a potentially negative signal to the government of French Polynesia, suggesting that New Caledonia is more important. It would also send an ambiguous signal to Latin American countries and potentially harm French interests in the Eastern Pacific region, particularly Clipperton.

Adjusting and strengthening support points and partnerships

Overseas support bases do not necessarily have to be a logistics base on the ground, as is the case in Djibouti or the UAE. They can also be established through agreement to obtain diplomatic authorization for access to infrastructure (a port or airfield) at short notice (two to four days), as opposed to ten to twelve days in the absence of a specific defense agreement. They can also include administrative facilities for entry into the zones, and possibly access to warehouses to store parts for maintenance purposes. Such flexibility would allow repairs, missile reloads, ammunition transfers, and improved regional logistics support.

These support points could be bases, ports, or facilities located near areas of strategic interest to France, where its armed forces could usefully resupply and maintain their equipment, given the frequency of their deployments. This type of logistical support is currently sorely lacking in the Indo-Pacific at present, depriving French forces of the agility required in an operational context.

A regular network of support bases would reduce transit times and increase the responsiveness of forces in the event of a need for rapid intervention, while geographic proximity to theatres would also maximize operational engagement time. These support points can be established through cooperation and defense agreements, and beyond their operational benefits, are means of strengthening trust, cooperation and coordination among the countries concerned.

Australia, India, Japan, the Philippines, and Singapore could be considered as preferential support bases for French deployments in the northern Indo-Pacific, right from the cooperation-competition phase.

Singapore has had a strategic partnership with France since 2012, and unlike other more reluctant regional partners, offers extensive stopover facilities, as evidenced both by the stopover of the *Charles de Gaulle* in 2019 as part of the Shangri-La Dialogue, and by the services provided during

222. MarForPac is part of the US Marine Corps (USMC) and is responsible for marine operations and missions in the Pacific region.

223. USARPAC is responsible for US Army land operations in the Indo-Pacific region.

COVID-.²²⁴ Its deep-water port at the Changi Naval Base in southeast Singapore can accommodate all French naval vessels.

In 2019, France also became the first country to assign a liaison officer to Singapore's Information Fusion Center, which focuses on regional maritime security.²²⁵ Singapore is also strategically located, at the crossroads between the Indian Ocean and Asia. The Sembawang base has hangars and numerous warehouses, and it may well be able to provide back-up storage for the maintenance of ships and aircraft deployed in this region, should the need arise. Singapore is likely to encourage the implementation of such diplomatic flexibility: France and Singapore are celebrating twenty-five years of strategic partnership this year, and are currently on excellent terms, most recently signing a mutual logistics support agreement (MLSA) on the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2022. However, in the event of a conflict in Asia, an exclusive support point in Singapore would entail a major risk dock saturation, and a small but not insignificant political risk of French assets being denied access owing to the Singaporean authorities' desire to remain neutral in the event of a crisis involving China.

France has also had a strategic partnership with India since 1998, and cooperation between the two countries has accelerated significantly since Macron's visit to India in March 2018. In addition to structural and capability cooperation, particularly in the aviation sector through the Rafale deal, operational and regional cooperation has been a key component in advancing this relationship. In 2006, the two countries signed a defense agreement on mutual access to military bases, thereby strengthening cooperation and interaction between the French and Indian armed forces.

This was followed by the signing of a "logistics cooperation agreement allowing Indian naval forces access to French naval bases in Réunion, in the United Arab Emirates, and Djibouti",²²⁶ which led to the deployment of an Indian P-8I Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft from Réunion in 2020. The strategic nature of the Andaman and Nicobar archipelagos,²²⁷ located at the western mouth of the Strait of Malacca, has led India to increase its military presence there since 2019, with the construction of a 3,000-meter runway to accommodate these same P-8I Poseidon maritime

224. Interviews at the Ministry of the Armed Forces, conducted between January and April 2023.

225. E. Tenenbaum, M. Paglia, and N. Ruffié, "Confettis d'empire ou points d'appui ? L'avenir de la stratégie française de présence et de souveraineté", *op. cit.*

226. L. Lagneau, "L'Inde va déployer un avion de patrouille maritime à la Réunion pour des 'missions de surveillance'", *Zone militaire*, October 30, 2019.

227. I. Saint-Mézard, "Les Andaman-et-Nicobar : la timide ouverture d'un archipel au cœur de l'Indo-Pacifique", *Hérodote*, No. 189, 2023.

patrol aircraft as well as combat aircraft (the Shibpur naval airbase in the north of the Andaman Islands).²²⁸

From a logistical point of view, apart than fuel and water, Port Blair currently provides only a limited service to support a major warship such as a frigate. However, there is room for improvement in the medium term, and France could work on this jointly with its Indian partner. The Nicobar Islands could also provide useful support for French and European aircraft (along with those of Japan, which will soon base its maritime patrol aircraft there in the near future once the airport work is completed²²⁹), and at the very least for maritime patrol aircraft. From this position, France would be able to play a more active role in securing maritime flows in the Bay of Bengal and the Strait of Malacca, while remaining outside the first island chain.

France already benefits from temporary access to Australian military facilities when conducting joint operations or military exercises with its forces, as well as for *L'Astrolabe* supply trips to the research base in Adélie Land. France was also considering establishing a support base in Darwin prior to the announcement of AUKUS.²³⁰ Now that political tensions have eased, this idea is worth revisiting with a view to provide solutions for “long and far” deployments, and even more so in a few years’ time when two nuclear naval bases (including Stirling, near Fremantle on the west coast) will be able to accommodate nuclear-powered ships. This infrastructure could prove particularly useful, or even strategic, for France, if it were to increase the deployment of its nuclear attack submarines or aircraft carriers in the Asia-Pacific region.

A support base in Japan would also be valuable in the Far East. Although it is not explicitly stated, the presence of UNC-R (United Nations Command-Rear)²³¹ in Sasebo and Yokosuka already offers an initial opening, since France is a signatory to the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), which permits it to conduct UN-mandated operations from UNC bases in Japan, and the legal framework is therefore already in place for it to operate from Sasebo or Yokosuka. In 2019, for example, the French frigate *Vendémiaire* made a stopover in Sasebo as part of the UNC, allowing it to benefit from customs facilities for logistics and personnel movements, as well as access to the US base, theoretically under UNC command. It also benefited from the support of the Sasebo base. Going forward, a reciprocal

228. India depends on the main Indo-Pacific straits for its trade, 95 percent of which is carried out by sea, and for its energy supplies.

229. Interviews with local researchers in Southeast Asia, April–May 2023.

230. Interviews with the Armed Forces General Staff, conducted between January and April 2023.

231. UNC-R was created in 1957 following the transfer of the UN Command from Japan to South Korea after the Korean War. In practice, it is a legal cover created to prevent expiration of the 1954 Status of Forces Agreement between the US (operating as the “Unified Command”) and Japan, which provides for its self-termination upon the withdrawal of UN forces from Japan.

access agreement should be supported diplomatically at all levels of government to facilitate and better structure this bilateral relationship, as Australia²³² and the UK²³³ have recently done. This would allow French ships to visit all Japanese ports at short notice, rather than solely UNC-R bases. The Yokosuka base, now capable of hosting US nuclear-powered warships, would be a valuable naval support base in the future.²³⁴ The Nyutabaru air base could also be used to support future air deployments, as was the case during the 2023 Pégase deployment.

Finally, the Philippines could be a key support base, particularly for naval air group operations in the Asia-Pacific region, given the naval aviation facilities offered by this territory, both in terms of the use of its airfields by Rafale aircraft, in case of need or emergency, and access to the Subic Bay naval base. However, France would need to station a defense attaché in the country to advance its defense relations and strengthen its partnership.

Stronger integration with local government

France must involve its overseas *départements*, regions, and authorities in the development of its Indo-Pacific approach.

In the Pacific, local governments are key strategic actors at the epicenter of France's core interests (citizens and territories). The strategy developed in Paris has hitherto been disseminated overseas without consultation, leading to confusion and misunderstanding.²³⁵ Local authorities now have significant powers over their EEZ (including environmental management and the creation of marine parks), and are actively involved in exercising them. France's Indo-Pacific strategy must be developed in close consultation with elected local authorities.

While local governments in the Pacific territories do not necessarily want a more visible military presence, greater involvement of local authorities in scientific and humanitarian activities carried out by the armed forces would undoubtedly be appreciated by elected representatives.²³⁶ Nevertheless, the Adapted Military Service program implemented by France through the Adapted Military Service Regiments (RSMA) of New Caledonia, Tahiti, Réunion, and Mayotte (GSMA-M) is a

232. "Accord d'accès réciproque (RAA) Japon-Australie", Ambassade du Japon en France, January 6, 2022, available at: www.fr.emb-japan.go.jp.

233. "Signing of Japan-UK Reciprocal Access Agreement", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, January 11, 2023, available at: www.mofa.go.jp.

234. Access to the US Seventh Fleet base at Yokosuka would also be valuable, as it was recently for the *Lorraine* frigate deployment in the Indo-Pacific.

235. See, in particular, "Rapport de la mission d'information portant sur l'impact des stratégies de la France dans l'espace indopacifique, sur les collectivités françaises du Pacifique", Assemblée de la Polynésie Française, March 2023, available at: www.assemblee.pf.

236. See "Rapport de la mission d'information", Assemblée de la Polynésie Française, *op. cit.*

military tool for integrating and involving local authorities and populations that has a proven track record, and could merit being developed further. Since it is currently exclusively land-based, it would benefit from being extended to the joint forces, to provide training adapted to local realities, thus reinforcing France's military posture of structural cooperation with its overseas territories.

The French government could also build on the momentum of the 1990s by promoting the regional integration of its local authorities.²³⁷ Throughout the French overseas territories, elected local authorities and their executives are gaining greater powers in various ways, in relation to regional and international cooperation. In New Caledonia, the local government has the power, under certain conditions, to negotiate and sign international agreements, to participate in regional organizations, and to appoint representatives to the French embassies of neighboring states.²³⁸ However, the ambiguity of the current arrangements may complicate cooperation with France's strategic partners in the region, so it is necessary to clarify and reconsider the way in which some overseas territories are represented and act, both in regional organizations and in dialogue and cooperation bodies set up by the countries concerned.

In July 2023, Macron took the unprecedented step of visiting Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea alongside the pro-independence leaders of New Caledonia and French Polynesia, engaging them in high-level bilateral meetings.²³⁹ He also publicly supported academic, digital, and industrial cooperation between New-Caledonia and the two independent nations. However, he did not specify the extent to which the overseas territories would be consulted before any changes or developments in France's Indo-Pacific strategy.

The government should “acclimatize”²⁴⁰ its Indo-Pacific strategy by taking into account the security concerns of its overseas territories—which are focused on climate change adaptation and mitigation rather than power rivalries—and adopt a joint management approach to this strategy with local authorities.²⁴¹ In particular, France needs to anticipate these risks and take measures to adapt to, or mitigate the now seemingly inevitable impacts of climate change.

237. C. Lechervy, “L'intégration régionale de la France dans le Pacifique océanien, une diplomatie multimodale”, *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, No. 140, January–June 2015.

238. S. Mohamed-Gaillard, “La Calédonie dépasse la Calédonie : ancrage régional et perspectives internationales d'un Outre-mer français”, *Asie.Visions*, No. 132, Ifri, December 2022.

239. J.-T. Faatau, “Accompagner le président Macron au Vanuatu et en Papouasie : une ‘reconnaissance’ et l'opportunité de ‘synergies’ pour Louis Mapou et Moetai Brotherson”, *Outremer 360*, July 28, 2023.

240. C. Perrin *et al.*, “La stratégie française pour l'Indo-Pacifique: des ambitions à la réalité”, *op. cit.*

241. B. Gicheru Kinyua, “For Indo-Pac Islands, Sea Level Matters More Than US-China Rivalry”, *The Maritime Executive*, April 2, 2023, available at: www.maritime-executive.com.

Finally, France must come to terms with its colonial history in the region with honesty and transparency, since its legitimacy as an actor and its credibility in the Indo-Pacific derive to a large extent from its overseas territories.²⁴² This would allow France to better assert its position in the Indo-Pacific and send a positive signal to the “Global South”, for which China and Russia’s anti-Western rhetoric has great appeal.²⁴³ In this respect, it should be noted that during his visit to New Caledonia and Vanuatu in July 2023, Macron expressed regret for France’s colonial past, referring to a “history of appropriating wealth and exploiting populations” and “a past of suffering and alienation”.²⁴⁴

Gray areas: responding to disputes over maritime spaces

Contributing to capacity-building in Southeast Asia

In the SCS, the French Navy has recognized expertise in maritime security and State Action at Sea (SAS). However, with the exception of Singapore, the resources and expertise of the navies and coast guards of the region’s littoral states are still clearly inadequate in relation to the scale of the challenges they face.

Their SAS governance tends to be unstructured and relatively haphazard, and their human resources are insufficiently trained and qualified, given the increasing complexity of the vessels used and the diversity of their missions. France could provide these nations with command and leadership training, in particular via the French Navy (which has both a global naval remit and plays a major role in France’s “coast guard function”), to help them conduct activities at both the lower end of the spectrum (such as maritime security, combating illegal fishing, and pollution control) and the higher end (including anti-surface, anti-submarine, anti-aircraft, and mine warfare).

The permanent presence of a French naval vessel in this region, following the example of the UK, whose warships HMS *Tamar* and HMS *Spey* have been permanently deployed in the Asia-Pacific region since 2021,²⁴⁵ would allow France to conduct outreach and influence activities, as

242. H. Kundnani, “Le passé impensé : pour un récit critique européen”, *Le Grand Continent*, October 26, 2021.

243. D. Sim, “China Backs Argentina’s Falklands Claim, Calls for End to ‘Colonial Thinking’”, *South China Morning Post*, June 21, 2023.

244. “Discours du Président de la République”, Port Vila, July 27, 2023, available at: www.elysee.fr.

245. “Patrol Ships Bid Farewell to Portsmouth as They Begin Indo-Pacific Deployment”, Royal Navy, September 7, 2021, available at: www.mod.uk.

well as to participate in capacity-building²⁴⁶ and training (and even searider agreements,²⁴⁷ following the example of the US and UK, if France's legal framework were changed to allow this²⁴⁸) with the navies and coast guards of Southeast Asian and Pacific Island countries (including Fiji). The vessel deployed in such an area would need to be modern, versatile, and of a size commensurate with the naval capabilities of the region's navies and coast guards. A Gowind-class corvette would be ideally suited to the area and the actors involved, would showcase French industrial and operational expertise, and could play a role in anti-submarine warfare, all without raising tensions with China. The permanent presence of an amphibious helicopter carrier is often proposed as an option, but this could raise the level of tension and be considered disproportionate, if not somewhat out of step with the needs of Southeast Asian countries, which primarily involve SAS in the waters under their jurisdiction. While it would provide a prepositioned asset that could be used to evacuate French citizens, such a vessel could also be deployed on alert in the region at the first sign of a crisis or conflict.

France should also consider offering Taiwan, as well as SCS littoral states such as the Philippines, discrete resilience capacity-building assistance, notably through civil-military training. In the case of Taiwan, specific discrete training could also be provided to strengthen its resilience in the event of kinetic action (in terms of medical and connectivity resilience, and food and energy stocks), as well as support in command, control, intelligence, and surveillance (C4ISR), particularly in cyber and satellite technology, and urban combat.

Developing a regional maritime security hub in Asia

The security of SLOCs in the Indo-Pacific is essential to the economic resilience of France and the EU as described above. Transnational criminal threats, which also affect French territories in the region, can only be contained through international cooperation in maritime information sharing.

246. Capacity-building consists of work to improve the skills, resources, infrastructure, and knowledge of an organization, such as a navy or coast guard, to enable them to conduct their missions and responsibilities more effectively with regard to maritime security, coastal surveillance, rescue at sea, and other operations linked to the protection of their territorial waters.

247. Under searider agreements, partners improve the training and experience of host nation onboard personnel, enhancing cooperation, coordination, and interoperability.

248. There is a strong expectation from Pacific Island countries and certain Southeast Asian countries of being able to have personnel from their respective countries onboard fisheries policing missions in their waters. Under French domestic law, constitutional provisions prohibit any transfer of sovereignty to the authorities of another state (Constitutional Council decision of July 25, 1991, which recalls that foreign agents do not have the right to arrest on French territory).

Since 2016, the Maritime Information Cooperation and Awareness (MICA) Center, which comes under the functional authority of the Deputy Chief of Naval Staff, who is responsible for operations, has provided the French Navy with a center of expertise dedicated to maritime security. It contributes directly to the support of the crews of ships and their owners, operators, and charterers, within the framework of the “voluntary naval cooperation” agreements signed with the French Navy.²⁴⁹ The MICA Center shares maritime information with the Information Fusion Centers around the world, notably in Singapore, India, Madagascar, and Peru. French liaison officers stationed in these international bodies provide information to the maritime zone commanders (MZC), who in turn send their analyses to the MICA Center.

The MZC, including ALPACI and ALINDIEN, are the maritime security experts in their respective areas of responsibility. As such, they maintain local relationships with private maritime actors, and are responsible for updating the security assessments for their area of responsibility that are used by the MICA Center and its clients. To support their work, the MZCs have set up dedicated units and make use of relay actors for local coordination of maritime cooperation, such as the MARSEC (Maritime Security Cell) set up by ALINDIEN in Abu Dhabi, or the officers embedded in the Information Fusion Centers. These arrangements do not replace the MICA Center, but rather provide it with information and support its work with local knowledge of the maritime world.

The establishment of regional branches of the MICA Center in the Indian Ocean based in Abu Dhabi, and in Southeast Asia based in Singapore, would strengthen “voluntary naval cooperation” by being closer to the ground, and would reinforce France’s role in terms of influence and regional coordination with its partners and allies. It would also enhance France’s credibility as an observer (a status held since 2022) in the “Maritime Security” Working Group of the expanded ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting (ADMM-Plus)²⁵⁰ and support the EU’s CRIMARIO II project.²⁵¹ These units would come under the responsibility of ALINDIEN and ALASE, as part of the new governance structure.

249. The French Navy has signed “voluntary naval cooperation” agreements with several maritime actors, to collaborate on maritime security issues.

250. See “About the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus”, ADMM, January 10, 2023, available at: www.admm.asean.org.

251. The project is designed to promote cooperation, coordination, and interoperability between the various maritime actors in the region, by running joint events, training, and capacity-building exercises.

Participating in regional or minilateral maritime security forums

France's desire to avoid being part of US initiatives that could be perceived as anti-Chinese risks marginalizing it in the Indo-Pacific. To avoid this, it should consider ad hoc, flexible association with certain regional projects, as long as they are not overtly anti-China and contribute to one of its own strategic objectives.

France, for example, has chosen not to formally join the Partners in the Blue Pacific—an initiative designed to coordinate policies in the insular Pacific—on the grounds that it would send the wrong strategic signal to China, preferring instead to participate solely as an observer. But countries such as Germany, Canada, and South Korea have joined the project without provoking any reaction or criticism from Beijing. By not joining such projects, France runs the risk of appearing isolated, especially since there are no real credible alternatives in the region.²⁵²

In May 2022, the Quad also launched the Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) program,²⁵³ which aims to create a “common operational picture” to enable near-real-time monitoring of maritime activities. To achieve this objective, IPMDA draws on the four existing regional Information Fusion Centers: the IFC-IOR in India, the IFC in Singapore, the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency in the Solomon Islands, and the Pacific Fusion Centre in Vanuatu. The IPMDA is designed to build trust among stakeholders and to provide its SeaVision platform as the connective tissue between both regional and national maritime surveillance centers. In order to share maritime information on a common platform, the information exchanged is unclassified. The primary goal is to foster a democratic information-sharing culture in the Indo-Pacific that operates on a “need to share” rather than a “need to know” basis, which is critical to ensuring exchanges between countries.²⁵⁴ While Paris should certainly not rush into this initiative, the changing nature of the Quad, and its expanding areas of cooperation offer opportunities for France (and the EU, notably through the CRIMARIO II project) to cooperate on an ad hoc basis, particularly in the areas of maritime security and climate change.²⁵⁵ Given France's expertise in this sector, it should be able to fit easily into this initiative with support from the MZC and the MICA Center.²⁵⁶

252. Droin *et al.*, “The United States and France: Partners for the Pacific Islands Region?”, *op. cit.*

253. “FACT SHEET: Quad Leaders’ Tokyo Summit 2022”, White House, May 23, 2022, available at: www.whitehouse.gov.

254. A. Stenek, “PacNet #28 - A Principled Approach to Maritime Domain Awareness in the Indo-Pacific”, Pacific Forum, available at: www.pacforum.org.

255. M. Abensour, “Indopacifique : un même concept, des approches différenciées”, *Revue Internationale et Stratégique*, Vol. 1, No. 129, 2023, p. 146.

256. “FACT SHEET: Quad Leaders’ Tokyo Summit 2022”, White House, *op. cit.*

Supporting allies in "knowledge and anticipation"

Without waiting for a conflict to break out, France needs to strengthen its strategic autonomy in terms of intelligence, or—in the absence of adequate capacities or enough human resources—initiate intelligence-sharing arrangements with allies and partners in the region, to diversify its sources and avoid exclusive reliance on the US. Partners such as Japan, Singapore, and the Philippines are likely to be able to provide complementary contributions that will diversify France's sources of information. The "E3 (France, Germany, UK) + Japan + Italy" intelligence-sharing format could well prove valuable, given the relationships of trust among all the actors involved.

As seen with the 2021 Marianne deployment,²⁵⁷ France could also consider increasing the frequency of its nuclear attack submarine deployments in the Indo-Pacific. An increasing presence of these vessels, which are by nature discreet but have strong strategic signaling value, would allow France to maintain a high level of knowledge of submarine operations in the region, and be able to integrate rapidly into a joint air-sea force should the need arise. Such an initiative would also demonstrate France's genuine investment at the high end of the conflict spectrum, establish a solid strategic link with the US as well as Australia, Japan, and India, and support the French defense industrial base, with a long-term view to using nuclear ports on Australian soil.

Anticipating conflict scenarios

While deterrence and a military response to any Chinese kinetic action in the Taiwan Strait, or to the outbreak of a security crisis in North Korea, the SCS, or the Pacific Islands, is currently dependent primarily on the US, Europe, France cannot afford to ignore the prospect of conflict in the Indo-Pacific.

The imperative of sovereignty: Strengthening rear bases in the overseas territories

In the event of conflict between the US and China, given the risk of China seeking strategic depth in the Pacific,²⁵⁸ France must be able to assume the protection of its territories and citizens in the region, possibly alone.

²⁵⁷. The 2021 Marianne mission, which involved the *Émeraude* nuclear attack submarine, was designed to demonstrate France's ability to send advanced assets far from the mainland, its capabilities in acquiring greater autonomy, and to promote French expertise to key allies and partners in the region.

²⁵⁸. Yoshihara, "Chinese Lessons from the Pacific War", *op. cit.*

The 2024–2030 LPM provides for investment in infrastructure. Of the €13 billion allocated to the overseas territories over the next budget period, €800 million will be dedicated to infrastructure, excluding housing and accommodation, with priority given to repairing or replacing facilities where the safety of personnel or the integrity of the equipment is no longer secure, accommodating new air-sea capabilities, modernizing training, support, and operational maintenance capabilities in units (regiments, naval bases, and air bases) and improving the protection of military sites.²⁵⁹

However, the capabilities of sovereign forces will be critical in the event of a conflict extending to the Pacific islands. Strengthening their anti-submarine warfare capabilities is essential, given the likely deployment of Chinese submarines near the Australian coast. The current lack of air defense capabilities on both land and at sea would be costly in the event of conflict. In the absence of air defense capabilities on land or at sea, the reinforcement of the onboard systems of the vessels that will replace the surveillance frigates in the overseas territories would be essential in peacetime. In the event of a confrontation, France would undoubtedly have to deploy more than just its sovereign forces to protect its overseas territories.

The current port and air infrastructure in the French overseas territories, particularly in the Pacific, would also need to be upgraded to serve as a rear bases in the event of a conflict in East Asia. As was seen in the war in the Pacific Theatre during World War II, French Polynesia and New Caledonia could be extremely valuable support bases for regional partners, primarily the US Navy, but also for the French assets that would be deployed under such circumstances. The current port and air infrastructure is not capable of sustaining large-scale assets for an extended period and providing logistical support to regional allies. At the very least, it needs to be upgraded to reflect the realities of a potential conflict on the doorstep of the Pacific islands, including by strengthening their defense and surveillance assets (the Tontouta air base on New Caledonia, for example, has no air surveillance radar), reinforcing effectors (with deployable coastal Future Cruise/Anti-Ship weapon batteries), and developing port infrastructure in Nouméa and Papeete (such as cranes, quays, and dredging).

259. More specifically, this funding is primarily devoted to repairing or replacing facilities where the safety of personnel or the integrity of the equipment is no longer secure, continuing infrastructure projects begun under the previous LPM, accommodating new equipment (the replacement and introduction of new naval aviation capabilities), modernizing the stationing, training, support, and operational maintenance capabilities in units (regiments, naval bases, air bases), and improving the protection of military sites from both threats and natural hazards.

Considering the realistic commitments of France and the EU in the event of conflict

Any kinetic action by China against Taiwan would trigger a European response with varying degrees of coordination in the diplomatic, economic (sanctions), cyber, information (fight against disinformation), and space domains. However, the military role that Europe could play in the event of a high-intensity conflict in the Taiwan Strait or the SCS remains unclear.²⁶⁰ In addition to limited capabilities and significant distances, the deployment of European forces in a remote region would pose complex logistical challenges and require a high degree of dependence on the US and its allies. However, the US reinforcements that would be deployed to Asia in the event of a conflict in the Taiwan Strait and/or the China Seas would consume most of the available dock space (in Hawaii, Japan, Guam, Singapore, and possibly the Philippines), likely leaving little availability for any European assets.

Given these limitations, it is necessary to reflect on the degree of involvement and the potential role of both French and European armed forces and to define a range of realistic strategic options. Given its interests and military presence in the area, France should take the lead in this strategic thinking and be a potential rallying force for coordinating a collective response from the European countries with sufficient political will and naval aviation capabilities. French and then European strategic options could thus be put on the table, making it possible to coherently manage any conflict scenario. Initiating discussions within the E3 format, possibly extended to include Italy and the Netherlands, would provide a starting point for discussions with US, Indian, Japanese, and Australian partners. These discussions should consider the fact that, since 2018, the US has abandoned its ambition to fight “two simultaneous wars”, leaving Europe to manage its immediate neighborhood and redeploy its capabilities to the Indo-Pacific theater, which is considered to be a political and strategic priority. One option to be considered at the European level would therefore be to ensure the security of SLOCs in an area stretching from the Suez Canal to the Bay of Bengal.

260. H. Boyd *et al.*, “Taiwan, Cross-Strait Stability and European Security: Implications and Response Options”, IISS, March 2022.

Protecting sea lines of communication

At the very least, Europe would have to ensure the security and control of maritime flows and monitor the “rear bases” between Suez and Malacca in the event of a conflict in Asia.

Its purpose would be to deter any opportunistic movement that might take advantage of a shift of forces from the US Fifth and Sixth Fleets toward the east to destabilize the area or create a diversion.²⁶¹ In the event of conflict, China’s heavy dependence on SLOCs for its hydrocarbon and mineral imports would also represent a critical vulnerability for its war effort, and more broadly, its economic and therefore political stability. European navies operating in the area from the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait to the mouth of the Strait of Malacca in the Bay of Bengal could thus put pressure on Beijing’s strategic supplies while safeguarding European energy interests, without committing themselves too far east. At the very least, this option would require the continuous deployment of European carrier strike groups, centered around French, British, and Italian aircraft carriers, in order to ensure greater control of flows, or even a blockade of chokepoints, at the mouth of the Strait of Malacca between Indonesia and Malaysia, in the Arabian Sea at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, or in the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait.

Given the respective energy and economic interests in this part of the northern Indian Ocean, such a permanent presence of aircraft carriers was already discussed at the last Franco-British summit,²⁶² and confirmed by the UK in the *Integrated Review Refresh 2023*.²⁶³ The inclusion of the Italian aircraft carrier could further bolster the Franco-British partnership. A number of other European countries could also contribute escort vessels, including Germany and the Netherlands, but more broadly all European countries wanting to play a role in securing their economic and energy interests in the region.

It is also important not to rule out the possibility of a conflict breaking out on the periphery, rather than at the center, of the Indo-Pacific region. Such a deployment could therefore also be seen as a preventive measure,

261. In the Western Indian Ocean, the French Navy is already active in providing maritime security and is integrated with the US Navy via the Fifth Fleet. FLF and FREMM frigates are regularly deployed from mainland France, providing a quasi-permanent presence for the ATALANTA, HERACLES/MER, and AGENOR operations and Task Force 150.

262. “UK-France Joint Leaders’ Declaration”, Prime Minister’s Office, 10 Downing Street, March 10, 2023, available at: www.elysee.fr.

263. “Through the March 2023 UK-France Summit we have strengthened our cooperation with France in the Indo-Pacific, including by establishing the basis of a permanent European maritime presence in the region through coordinated carrier deployments”: “Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a More Contested and Volatile World”, *Gov.uk*, May 16, 2023, available at: www.gov.uk.

sending a strategic signal²⁶⁴ to both partners and competitors, and mitigating the (relative) absence of US forces in the region. The permanent presence of a carrier strike group in “peacetime” would also allow for regular cooperation with regional partners such as India.

The volume of French naval air forces deployed in the Indo-Pacific has increased in recent years, particularly in 2021.²⁶⁵ The high degree of interoperability between France and the US and its allies in the region has also been regularly demonstrated, most recently in June 2023, when *Lorraine* was integrated into the *Reagan* carrier strike group,²⁶⁶ and there is no doubt about the operational added value that French naval aviation capabilities could bring to the US in the event of a future conflict.

While such support would necessarily remain limited in scope, given the distances involved and the current constraints on French forces, it is politically difficult to imagine France not supporting the US and its allies in Asia at all in the event of a US-China conflict in the China Seas or Taiwan Strait.

264. J. Bachelier *et al.*, “Strategic Signaling: A Lever for France in the Competition Between Powers? ”, *Focus stratégique*, No. 114, Ifri, May 2023.

265. In addition to the carrier strike group, in 2021 France deployed a nuclear attack submarine for seven months (Marianne deployment), an amphibious group, and seven other combat vessels.

266. “Japan, France, Canada, USA Flex Partnership While Operating in the Western Pacific”, *Naval News*, June 12, 2023.

Conclusion

As it has been defined since 2018, France's Indo-Pacific strategy aims to protect its sovereign interests, reduce the risks of instability, and influence the strategic balance of the region. While France has numerous assets—its island and maritime territories, its prepositioned forces, and multi-purpose military deployments, as well as many local partners—it is unable to play a major role in the zone. This is owing to several key challenges: clarifying its ambiguous diplomatic stance, which traps it between the US and China; aligning its ambitions with its resources, which are still inadequate in view of its missions and the size of the region; and strengthening its regional foothold, by clarifying and revitalizing relations with its overseas territories.

The deteriorating security environment in the Indo-Pacific poses a significant threat to French and European interests. There are four particularly high-risk zones for open conflict: the Taiwan Strait, the SCS, the Korean Peninsula, and the northern Indian Ocean (in relation to Iran). The challenges of maritime security, environmental security, and management of the commons (the oceans and space) are factors of conflict in the medium term. These potential crises in the Indo-Pacific have a major implication on shipping, energy supplies, and digital flows.

Given the strategic challenges and risk factors identified, France must adopt a more pragmatic strategic approach. This posture of clarity would allow France to participate in relevant and effective initiatives and groups. France must also systematically involve its overseas territories in defining and implementing its approach to the Indo-Pacific.

France's defense posture should also be reviewed, based on an increase in capabilities, reform of command—particularly in the Asia-Pacific region, where the current organizational structure lacks clarity and is not aligned with the challenges and risk factors identified in this study—and a denser network of support points, all of which are essential to France's credibility in the region. Finally, France must consider the role it would play in the event of a high-intensity conflict in the region.

Given the wide range of political positions in Europe, a conflict in the Indo-Pacific could well put European unity to the test, especially if nothing has been anticipated at the EU level. To be effective, the French strategy must operate within the framework of, and in support of, a strengthened EU approach to the Indo-Pacific. France and the EU can offer the countries of the Indo-Pacific a solid, credible option that focuses on the needs of the

countries of the region and on areas where they can bring real added value, particularly in terms of maritime and environmental security.²⁶⁷ Such a focus on country needs and functional cooperation would also be facilitated by sub-regional strategies.²⁶⁸

France must also be able to work in coordination with the US, without necessarily simply following its lead, or otherwise run the risk of missing out on information, opportunities, and developments relevant to its interests, such as some of the Quad (IPMDA) or Partners in the Blue Pacific projects.

However, Macron's Pacific tour in July 2023 seemed to signal a slight shift in France's Indo-Pacific strategy. Unlike in the past, Macron did not visit France's major partners in the region, opting instead to meet with more minor players—the very ones who do not want to align themselves with either the US or China. Macron also appeared to refocus the Indo-Pacific strategy around two key areas—security and defense cooperation, and climate change—where France's experience and expertise give it particular legitimacy.

During this tour, for example, Macron chose to build on the expertise of the French armed forces in maritime surveillance and in HADR. He announced the creation of a military academy in Nouméa to train non-commissioned officers from the Pacific region, and an enhanced rescue coordination center, in cooperation with the Red Cross. With two hundred additional soldiers and an investment of €150 million, the Nouméa military base will be able to play a greater role in the development of regional capabilities, in line with the objectives of the 2021 Coast Guard Seminar.

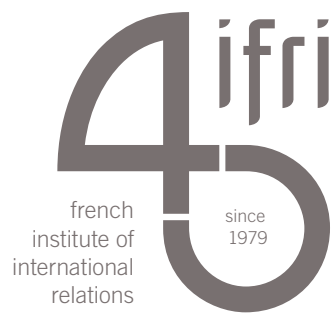
France's diplomatic strengths also include combating and adapting to climate change. Macron has launched a joint call for climate action with Vanuatu, building on the 2015 Paris Agreement and the Paris Agenda for People and the Planet published in June 2023. In doing so, he has positioned France as a key supporter of Vanuatu and other Pacific Island nations in their quest for climate justice.²⁶⁹

These steps have the merit of reconciling sovereignty and power interests, positioning France as a “constructive” actor in the Indo-Pacific. Macron's change of direction thus has the potential to restore credibility to a French Indo-Pacific strategy that still lacks development and coherence.

267. Z. Paikin *et al.*, “The South China Sea and Indo-Pacific in an Era of ‘Multipolar’ Competition: A More Targeted EU Response?”, *op. cit.*

268. C. Perrin *et al.*, “La stratégie française pour l’Indo-Pacifique: des ambitions à la réalité”, *op. cit.*

269. The Agence française de développement has pledged to allocate €200 million to the Pacific by 2027, five times more than the previous five-year plan (but still a modest sum compared to funding from Australia and the US). Building on the success of the Kiwa Initiative, launched by France and the EU in 2017 to build resilience to climate change in the Pacific, this newly allocated regional aid will promote climate change adaptation by blending local traditional knowledge with global scientific techniques. Macron has also promised that Paris will implement the country package for forests, nature, and climate dedicated to Papua New Guinea as part of the EU's Global Gateway strategy.



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