

France's "Indo-Pacific" strategy: regional power projection

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Introduction

This article seeks to analyze the character, explain the motives and evaluate the coherence of France's Indo-Pacific strategy. In recent years the term "Indo-Pacific" has been adopted among analysts, politicians and service figures in Australia, India, Indonesia, Japan and the US with regard to viewing the Indian and Pacific oceans, linked by the South China Sea, as one strategic space for states to operate in militarily, diplomatically and economically. A little noticed feature is how this "Indo-Pacific" mode of thinking has been growing in French strategic discourse and policy directions.¹ There has been a three-step Indo-Pacific progression during 2018–2019, as strategic discourse around government has given way to strategy within government and with it tangible policies and initiatives from government. France's President Macron led from the top with his talk in New Caledonia of France's "Indo-Pacific strategy" (*une stratégie indo-pacifique*), defined by him as seeking an "Indo-Pacific axis" (*l'axe Indo-Pacifique*) amongst China-concerned states. The Ministry of Defence released its paper entitled *La*

¹ Jérémy Bachelier, "Vers une région Indo-Pacifique," *Tribune* (Comité d'études de défense nationale), 977, 23 February 2018, pp. 1–8.

France et la Sécurité en Indo-Pacifique in June 2018 (updated in May 2019); which was reinforced later in May 2019 by the issuing of another formal paper entitled *France's Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific*.² In turn, at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, July 2018 witnessed the setting up of an Asia-Oceania section within France's Ministry of European and Foreign Affairs; which was followed a month later by a formal paper entitled *2030 France in Asia-Oceania. Towards an Inclusive Indo-Pacific Region*.³

France considers the Indo-Pacific to be of importance to France. At the start of 2017 the French Ministry of Defence was explicit that French policy was "to rebalance its strategic centre of gravity towards the Indo-Pacific."⁴ A year later, and the 2018 Defence Ministry briefing document *La France et la sécurité en Indo-Pacifique* explained that "France pays particular attention to the Indo-Pacific zone," given its "security responsibilities as a riparian power of the Indo-Pacific."⁵ The then Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian echoed this "increasing importance that France intends to accord to the Indo-Pacific region."⁶ As Foreign Minister, Le Drian was arguing in January 2019 that "the Indo-Pacific region is essential for us."⁷ Last, but not least, is President Macron's rationale that "France, as a nation with territories in the region, attached great importance to the Indo-Pacific."⁸ The state of affairs in the Indo-Pacific affect France precisely because France is a resident actor there, with strategic interests to maintain and if need be defend.

France also considers it has an important role in the Indo-Pacific. Macron has a clear sense that "France is a great power (*une grande puissance*) of the Indo-Pacific"; i.e.

² *La France et la Sécurité en Indo-Pacifique* (Paris: Ministère des Armées, 2018); *France's Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific* (Paris: Ministère des Armées, 2019).

³ *2030 France in Asia-Oceania. Towards an Inclusive Indo-Pacific Region* (Paris: 2018).

⁴ Ministry of Armed Forces, "France Unveils its Defence Policy in the Asia-Pacific," 3 January 2017, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/english/dgris/international-action/regional-issues/france-unveils-its-defence-policy-in-the-asia-pacific..>

⁵ *La France et la Sécurité en Indo-Pacifique*, preface (Parly), p. 2.

⁶ Jean-Yves Le Drian, "Statement to the Press," 18 June 2018, <https://uk.ambafrance.org/Minister-praises-excellence-and-vitality-of-India-partnership>.

⁷ Interview, "Parly-Le Drian: leur vision des dossiers chauds," *Le Telegramme*, 10 January 2019, <https://www.letelegramme.fr/france/diplomatie-la-region-indo-pacifique-est-essentielle-pour-nous-10-01-2019-12179826.php>.

⁸ "Rencontre bilatérale entre le Premier Ministre Abe et le Président Macron," 31 May, 2018, https://www.fr.emb-japan.go.jp/itpr_fr/180525-abe-macron.html.

not just as an external power coming into the region but also as a resident power within the region.⁹ As the then Defence Minister, Le Drian asserted in September 2016 that “France confirms here that it is a credible actor of the Indo-Pacific zone, where – as I have been saying ceaselessly we have a prominent role to play.”¹⁰ Elsewhere at the Ministry of Armed Forces, Nicolas Regaud the Special Representative to the Indo-Pacific asserted in December 2016 that concerning France’s “strategic role in the Indo-Pacific region,” France “considers it to be significant and appropriate and would like it to be better known. Its key defence partners in the region know what France does and appreciate its contribution, even if that can’t be said for the media and academia.”¹¹ This raises the question of who France’s “key defence partners” are in the Indo-Pacific. Two years later and as Foreign Minister Le Drian, accompanying Macron on his visit to New Caledonia, noted the “desire of France to become, from India to the Pacific, a major player in the region.”¹² The Defence Ministry’s 2019 paper *France’s Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific* started with the assertion that France was “a sovereign power of the Indo-Pacific region, where it brings a significant contribution to peace and security” with “a significant and permanent military presence.”¹³

This article is an empirically-driven piece of foreign policy analysis (FPA). Nevertheless certain theories and concepts are useful for explaining the characteristics and drivers behind this French assertion of its Indo-Pacific role. Firstly, French strategy involves using its possessions in the Indian Ocean and Pacific Oceans to identify itself as a resident and democratic Indo-Pacific power, from which ensues a drive for gaining acceptance and involvement in regional structures. Strategic narrative theory (SNT) is

⁹ Emmanuel Macron, “Discours du Président de la République, Emmanuel Macron, sur la Nouvelle-Calédonie à Nouméa,” 3 May 2018, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2018/05/05/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-emmanuel-macron-sur-la-nouvelle-caledonie-a-noumea>

¹⁰ Le Drian, “Speech” (Signing of the Agreement on the Purchase of 36 Rafale Aircraft),” 23 September 2016, <https://in.ambafrance.org/Rafale-agreement-Speech-of-Jean-Yves-Le-Drian>.

¹¹ Nicolas Regaud, “France and Security in the Asia-Pacific,” *Strategic Insights* (ASPI), 112: December (2016), pp. 11. Also Regaud, “A French Strategic Vision of the Indo-Pacific Region,” Conference (*Approaching the Indo-Pacific*, IFRII), 25 September 2018.

¹² “La Nouvelle-Calédonie base avancée de la France dans le Pacifique,” 4 May 2018, <https://gouv.nc/actualites/04-05-2018/la-nouvelle-caledonie-base-avancee-de-la-france-dans-le-pacifique>.

¹³ *France’s Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific* (Paris: Ministère des Armées, 2019), pp. 1,4.

of relevance, given its concerns with strategic discourse and identity projection.¹⁴ IR “social constructivism” theory would also have some bearing, particularly in its “social interactionism” strand, as France seeks regional legitimacy so as to change the perceptions by others of France as an illegitimate and outdated European colonial power.¹⁵ This Indo-Pacific anchoring by France also reflects France’s own self-identification as a power that is more than being just in Europe, a “global power” (*puissance mondiale*) in other words.

Secondly, geopolitics is involved in two senses. Firstly, in terms of traditional geopolitics (*position* as location) it is noticeable with regard to maritime security, how France is using its existing position in the southern reaches of the Indo-Pacific and the Mediterranean to project into the Northern Indian Ocean, South China Sea and Western Pacific.¹⁶ Secondly, in terms of “critical geopolitics” (*position* as aspirations, hopes and fears) French aspirations and hopes are to play an active Indo-Pacific role, to demonstrate ongoing maritime power credibility, and to be accepted as a legitimate regional actor. French fears involve China destabilization and coercion in the wider region and ultimately detrimental to French possessions in the southern Indo-Pacific region. Consequently, in theory terms, from France “the realist face of the Indo-Pacific is a ‘balancing strategy’ against China”.¹⁷ Balancing imperatives operate for France in the Indo-Pacific region, precisely because France is an Indo-Pacific state; with territory and population, territorial waters and exclusive economic zones to defend in the region.

In order to reconstruct this French Indo-Pacific strategy, there is a deliberate focus on the discussion, pronouncements and policies with regard to the Indo-Pacific by French politicians, service figures and commentators in the wider French strategic

¹⁴ Laura Roselle, Alister Miskimmon and Ben O’Loughlin, “Strategic Narrative: A New Means to Understand Soft Power,” *Media, War and Conflict*, 7:1 (2014), pp. 70–84.

¹⁵ Sorpong Peou, “Constructivism in Security Studies on Pacific Asia,” *Pacific Focus*, 17:2 (2002), pp. 177–211.

¹⁶ Basil Germond, “The geopolitical dimension of maritime security,” *Marine Policy*, 54: April (2015), pp. 137–142; “Indo-Pacific: A French Maritime Outlook on Current Geopolitical Issues. A Conversation with Admiral Christophe Prazuck,” *IJSS Event*, 16 May, <https://www.csis.org/events/north-atlantic-indo-pacific-french-maritime-outlook-current-geopolitical-issues>.

¹⁷ Kai He, “Three Faces of the Indo-Pacific: Understanding the ‘Indo-Pacific’ from an IR Theory Perspective,” *East Asia*, 35:2 (2018), pp. 149–150. Also Joseph Grieco, “Theories of International Balancing, the Rise of China, and Political Alignments in the Asia Pacific,” *Korean Journal of International Studies*, 12: May (2014), pp. 15–48

community. The article follows a “back to basics narrative” approach in international relations with regard to where, when and why this Indo-Pacific strategic discourse has circulated in France, and from that how far it has been applied by the government.¹⁸ The structure first looks at French actorness, in terms of French possessions (and their associated Exclusive Economic Zones, or EEZs), French membership of regional structures, and French naval deployments. It then analyses French diplomacy across the Indo-Pacific, with particular individual regard to bilateral relations with India, Australia, Vietnam, Japan and the US. The conclusion looks at future issues and considers China-related ambiguities in France’s Indo-Pacific strategy.

Actor-ness

French actor-ness in the Indo-Pacific has a two-fold nature; whereby “France is both a regional state, at least on behalf of its islands, and an external great power significantly involved in the region.”¹⁹ Since the Indo-Pacific is primarily a maritime region, French actor-ness in the Indo-Pacific can be considered with regard to French possessions (and their associated Exclusive Economic Zones, or EEZs), French membership of regional structures, and French naval deployments. This multifaceted presence is why Le Drian commented in December 2018 that “we endorse the concept of the Indo-Pacific. France is present in this entire region.”²⁰ Similarly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs argued that “for France, the Indo-Pacific concept refers to a geographic reality due to the presence of our overseas territorial communities in both oceans”.²¹

¹⁸ Hidemi Suganami, “Narrative Explanation and International Relations: Back to Basics,” *Millennium. Journal of International Relations*, 37:2 (2008), pp. 327–356.

¹⁹ Christian Bouchard and William Crumlin, “Two Faces of France: “France of the Indian Ocean”/“France in the Indian Ocean”,” *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 7:2 (2011), pp. 161–182. Also Denise Fisher, “France: ‘In’ or ‘Of’ the South Pacific Region?,” *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, 135 (2012), pp. 185–200.

²⁰ Le Drian, “Interview”, *Times of India*, 14 December 2018, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/choice-of-indian-partner-solely-dassaults-french-foreign-minister/articleshow/67084339.cms>.

²¹ 2030 French Strategy in Asia-Oceania. *Towards an Inclusive Asian Indo-Pacific Region*, p. 3.

French possessions

French possessions in the Indo-Pacific are considered as French “sovereign territories” (*terres de souveraineté*), that demonstrate the extended “territorial continuity” (*continuité territoriale*) in terms of what constitutes “France.” French strategy is simple, to maintain its sovereign position there in the 21st century. Geopolitically these possessions, and geo-economically their associated EEZs, underpin assertions of France’s global role as a “middle sized world power” (*puissance mondiale moyenne*).²² Around 93 percent of France’s EEZs are located in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. France is distinctive in claiming that its national boundaries and the French nation extend outside Europe into the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean; through its various “overseas departments” (*départements d’outre-mer*), “overseas collectives” (*collectivités d’outre-mer*) and “overseas territories” (*territoires d’outre-mer*), which are considered integral parts of France. Hence Macron’s assertion in May 2018 that France “is a great power of the Indo-Pacific across all these territories, New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, French Polynesia but also Mayotte and Reunion and the Southern and Antarctic Lands.”²³ With territory come people; again from Macron “we are an Indo-Pacific Power [*une puissance indo-pacifique*] with over eight thousand men [serving military] in the region and more than a million of our fellow citizens.”²⁴ Paris uses the fact that Reunion and Mayotte in the Indian Ocean and New Caledonia and Polynesia elect representatives to the National Assembly and Senate, as well as enjoying devolved governments, to argue that France is not a colonial power operating from outside the region, but is instead a democratic legitimate resident power in the Indo-Pacific.

With regard to the Indian Ocean, France is a “significant” player through its control of various islands and associated waters.²⁵ It is worth noting that France actually

²² Jean Chesneaux, “The Function of the Pacific in the French Fifth Republic’s ‘Grand Design’: Theory and Practice of the ‘Puissance Mondiale Moyenne’,” *Journal of Pacific History*, 26.2 (1991), pp. 256–272.

²³ Macron, “Discours du Président de la République, Emmanuel Macron, sur la Nouvelle-Calédonie à Nouméa,” 3 May 2018.

²⁴ Macron, “Discours du Président de la République à la conférence des ambassadeurs,” 27 August, 2018, <https://www.elysee.fr/declarations/article/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-a-la-conference-des-ambassadeurs/>.

²⁵ Bouchard and Crumplin, “France as a Pertinent and Significant Indian Ocean Player,” *Foreign Policy Research Centre Journal*, 14:2 (2013), pp. 88–100. Also Isabelle Saint-Mézard, “The French Strategic Vision of the Indian Ocean,” *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 9:13 (2013), pp. 53–68.

controls more maritime territory in the Indian Ocean region than any other country there, given that its Exclusive Economic Zone encompasses 2,650,013 km² based on all the scattered islands in the Indian Ocean which are under French control.

France's most important possession in the Indian Ocean is Reunion, a French possession since 1642, situated in the southwest quadrant of the ocean with a population of around 840,000.²⁶ Permanent naval forces are stationed there. Since 1946, Reunion has been considered as an "overseas department" (*département d'outre-mer*).²⁷ Politically their French status is reasonably secure, with a population roughly one quarter white and one quarter Indian, with the rest predominantly of mixed race.²⁸

Elsewhere in that southwest quadrant of the Indian Ocean is Mayotte, geopolitically significant through its position at the head of the Mozambique Channel, and with a population of around 227,000.²⁹ It voted in 2009 to become a fully-fledged *département d'outre-mer* ("overseas department") of France. This has left the Republic of Comoros with ongoing claims against France over Mayotte, and able to put pressure through the Africa Union and UN General Assembly.

Across the southern quadrant of the Indian Ocean is the TAF, the *Terres Australes Françaises* ("French Southern Lands") organized since 2007 as an "overseas territory" (*territoire d'outre-mer*) administered from Reunion. In the southwest the TAF includes the *Îles éparses de l'océan Indien* ("Scattered Islands of the Indian Ocean"), found to the west (Juan de Nova, Europa, and Bassas da India) and east (Tromelin, the Glorioso Islands) of Madagascar. In the central-southern part of the Indian Ocean, the TAF

²⁶ Population figures used in this study are generated from *World Population Prospects: The 2015 Revision* (New York: United Nations, 2015), released by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs' Population Division.

²⁷ Jean Houbert, "[Réunion: II: The politics of départementalization](#)," *Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 18:3 (1980), pp. 325–347; Albert Ramassamy, *La Réunion, décolonization et integration* (St. Denis: AGM, 1987).

²⁸ Manuel Marchal, "La Réunion dans l'axe Indo-Pacifique, qu'en pensent les Réunionnais?," *Temoignages*, 29 October 2018, <https://www.temoignages.re/politique/actualites/la-reunion-dans-l-axe-indo-pacifique-qu-en-pensent-les-reunionnais,94247>.

²⁹ Gérard-François Dumont, "Mayotte, une exception géopolitique mondiale," *Outre-Terre. Revue Européenne de géopolitique*, 2 (2005), pp. 515-527; Sophie Moreau and Aurélian Marszek, "Géopolitiques mahoraise et réunionnaise: de la crise actuelle à un état des lieux régional," *Hérodote*, 145 (2012), pp. 150-160.

includes Crozet, St. Paul and Amsterdam, and the Kerguelen Islands – again uninhabited, but with significant EEZs, each of over half a million km². The biggest island Kerguelen is more than triple the size of Mauritius, and houses rotational groups of scientists, a satellite tracking station run by the French Space Agency at its main settlement Port-aux-Français, technical installations, and rumours of weapons stockpiles.³⁰ It is significant that these waters of the south-eastern Indian Ocean have been the subject of joint French-Australian operational agreements.

With regard to the Pacific Ocean, France also has significant islands, and associated EEZs, “archipelagos of power”, which involves permanent French military forces.³¹ Going west to east across the Pacific, French possessions are New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, French Polynesia and the uninhabited atoll Clipperton Island. They revolve around New Caledonia and French Polynesia.

In the south-west Pacific, the main French possession is New Caledonia, with a population of around 263,000, split according to the 2014 census between an indigenous Kanak 40 percent share and a European 29 percent share. New Caledonia has geo-economics and geopolitical significance for France. The former is illustrated by the fact that New Caledonia holds around 20–25 percent of the world’s nickel reserves. The latter is shown by how geopolitically, New Caledonia, complete with interception unit at the naval airbase at Tontouta, serves as the link between French possessions in the Indian Ocean and French Polynesia. One French initiative is the biennial *Croix du sud* (“Southern Cross”) exercise organized since 2006 by French forces at New Caledonia. It now involves France, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, the US and smaller Pacific island states in training in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. This geopolitical location significance was why in May 2018 Macron described it as the “heart of the

³⁰ Robert Genty, “Le rôle stratégique de l’Île Kerguelen,” *Revue défense nationale*, 128: August-September (1955), pp. 166–175.

³¹ Sarah Mohamed-Gaillard, *L’archipel de la puissance ? : la politique de la France dans le Pacifique Sud de 1946 à 1998* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2010). Also Helene Goiran, “The Role of the French Military on Key Issues for Oceania,” *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, 416/26 March 2018; Georges Ordonnaud, “La France et le Pacifique sud. enjeux politiques, économiques et stratégiques,” *Politique étrangère*, 52:1 (1987), pp. 35–46; Bruno Mignot, “Réalité géostratégique du Pacifique et avenir de la présence Française,” *Défense Nationale*, 11/November (1999), pp. 66–78; Eugene Berg, “France: l’horizon Pacifique,” *Géoéconomie*, 64/March-April (2013), pp. 209–220.

Indo-Pacific" (*cœur de l'Indo-Pacifique*), i.e. of France's Indo-Pacific.³² Paris' decision to push devolution, economic support and the participation of the New Caledonia in regional Pacific structures represents a deliberate strategy to sustain New Caledonia's longer-term links with France, and France's wider legitimacy within the Pacific.³³ The key referendum vote on 4 November 2018 brought in a reasonably large vote on a very high turnout of around 80 percent that decided 56.4 percent in favour of staying with France as a *collectivité sui generis* against 43.6 percent in favour of independence. Regional elections in May 2019 also saw the narrow overall victory of anti-independence parties.

Most of the south-east quadrant of the Pacific is occupied by French Polynesia, with a population of around 272,000. This includes 118 islands such as Tahiti; with an extremely large total EEZ of 4,767,242 km². The ethnic breakdown of French Polynesia is fairly simple; roughly 78 percent Polynesian, 12 percent Chinese and 10 percent French in the 2014 census. From 1946 to 2003 French Polynesia was designated a *territoire d'outre-mer* ("overseas territory"). Within that period, French Polynesia was strategically important as the site for 193 nuclear tests from 1962 to 1996 in the Moruroa and [Fangataufa](#) atolls; although such testing distanced France from neighbouring states, and strengthened self-determination sentiments in French Polynesia.³⁴ In 2003 French Polynesia was formally designated a *collectivité d'outre-mer* ("overseas collective") which included some administrative devolution, but France continues to face pressure for independence from Oscar Temaru's *Tavini Huirrtira* ("People's Servant Party).

³² Macron, "L'ambition pour la Nouvelle-Calédonie: en faire un territoire exportateur, au cœur de l'Indo-Pacifique," *Twitter*, 5 May 2018, <https://twitter.com/EmmanuelMacron/status/992716251859480576>. Also B. Hubert, "La Nouvelle-Calédonie dans l'axe Indo-Pacifique voulu par Macron," *Caledosphere*, May 5, 2018, <https://caledosphere.com/2018/05/05/la-nouvelle-caledonie-dans-laxe-indo-pacifique-voulu-par-macron/>.

³³ Paul Soyez, "France and New Caledonia: Reinventing 'Common Destiny'," *The Strategist* (ASPI), 13 December 2016, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/france-new-caledonia-reinventing-common-destiny/>.

³⁴ Bengi Danielsson and Marie-Thérèse Danielsson, *Moruroa Mon Amour. The French Nuclear Tests in the Pacific* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977).

Regional structure

With regard to regional structures, in the Indian Ocean, French strategy has been to take the initiative in setting up French centered mechanisms, and join established regional structure.

French-centered mechanisms are present in the *Conseil maritime ultramarin du bassin sud océan Indien* (“Maritime Council of the South Indian Ocean Basin”) set up in March 2016 which brings together all the French possessions and non-governmental agencies relating to the Indian Ocean. France has also run the annual *Conférence de coopération régionale de l’océan Indien* (“Conference for Indian Ocean Regional Cooperation”) since 2012, which brings together officials from Reunion, Mayotte and the TAAF, as well as the French ambassadors to Mauritius, Madagascar, Comoros, Seychelles, South Africa, Mozambique, Tanzania and Kenya. France has set up its own functional structure, the *France-Oceanic Summit* (FOS), which met in 2003, 2006, 2009 and 2015. This French initiative brings France together with the various Pacific Basin states.³⁵

As to established regional structures in the Indian Ocean, France is a founding member of the *Indian Ocean Commission* (IOC) established in 1982, which brings together the French department of Reunion with other independent island states of Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius and the Seychelles. Here it is also worth mentioning the defence agreement signed between France and Mauritius in April 2017. France was also a founding member of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) established in 2008, thus taking part in the IONS *International Maritime Search and Rescue Exercise* (IMSAREX) held in the Bay of Bengal in November 2017. France continues to seek full membership of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), but remains at Dialogue Partner status gained in 2001.³⁶

As to established regional structures in the Pacific, France was a founding member of the South Pacific Commission (SPC) set up in 1947, with its headquarters

³⁵ Fisher, “France Claims its Place in the South Pacific,” *The Interpreter* (Lowy Institute), 1 December 2015, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/france-claims-its-place-south-pacific>.

³⁶ Indrani Bagchi, “France’s Colonial Past hits Bid to Join Indian Ocean Group”, *Times of India*, 29 January, 2019 <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/frances-colonial-link-hits-bid-to-join-indian-ocean-group/articleshow/67735530.cms>

moving from Australia to French Caledonia in 1995. When the SPC was renamed as the Pacific Community (PC) in February 1998, its members were designated as including France, French Polynesia, New Caledonia, and Wallis and Futuna – with headquarters remaining at Noumea in New Caledonia. France has also been a member of the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) from 1988 onwards; and a member of the South Pacific Defence Ministers mechanism from 2013 onwards. France is also an associate member of the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC), set up in 1990, through its French Pacific Territories Committee for Pacific Economic Cooperation (FPT-PEC). As a sign of regional soft power credentials, France also joined the Joint Pacific Initiative for Biodiversity, Climate Change and Resilience (JPIBCCR) in August 2018.

A creative aspect of French strategy has been to seek entry to regional forums through its continuing presence (and implied legitimacy) in New Caledonia and French Polynesia. With regard to the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), after the signing of the *Nouméa Accord* in 1998, New Caledonia obtained observer status in 1999, as did French Polynesia in 2004. Both New Caledonia obtained observer status in 1999, as did French Polynesia; with both French territories given associate member status in 2006, and with Wallis and Futuna also then being given observer status. New Caledonia and French Polynesia were admitted as full members in September 2016.³⁷ Wallis and Futuna was given associate membership in September 2018. France remains a separate dialogue partner of the PIF in addition. In a similar vein New Caledonia and French Polynesia attended Japan's Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM) meeting in May 2018. In preparing to attend the PALM meeting, the pro-French local administration in New Caledonia announced "the total support of New Caledonia for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific axis"" – a formulation echoing the U.S. and Japan's approach to a rules-based

³⁷ Soyez, "French Presence in the Pacific Reinforced by the PIF," *The Strategist* (ASPI), 28 September 2016, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/french-presence-pacific-reinforced-pif/>. For lead up see Rudy Bessard and Nathalie Mrgudovic, "Regional Horizons and Oceania Variations in French Overseas Territories", *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, 140:1 (2015), pp. 6–20; Fisher, "Rhétorique et réalité : les collectivités Françaises et leurs voisins du Pacifique Sud," *Journal de la Société des Océanistes* 140.1 (2015), pp. 39–40; Christian Lechervy, "L'intégration régionale de la France dans le Pacifique océanien, une diplomatie multimodale," *Journal de la Société des Océanistes* 140.1 (2015), pp. 105–121.

order in the Indo-Pacific, and Macron's talk of an "Indo-Pacific axis" between France, India and Australia.³⁸

Naval deployments

France's military presence in the Indo-Pacific is made up of ongoing "sovereign forces" stationed at the French possessions in the Indian Ocean (Reunion) and Pacific Ocean (New Caledonia), together with "pre-positioned forces" in Djibouti and the United Arab Emirates.³⁹ This is supplemented by naval ships regularly deployed from metropolitan France into the region. Hence the emphasis by the Defence Minister Sylvie Goulard at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2017 that "France's action in the Indo-Pacific region is characterized and will continue to be characterized by the regularity of its naval presence."⁴⁰ These have revolved around aircraft carrier *Task Force 473* aircraft carrier group centred on the *Charles de Gaulle* nuclear aircraft carrier, and the *Jeanne d'Arc* helicopter carrier deployment force. What is noticeable is that initial French naval deployments from 2010 onwards into the Indian Ocean subsequently expanded eastwards from 2014 onwards into the South China Sea, and from 2015 onwards into the Western Pacific.

With regard to naval deployments, the present century was kicked off with the deployment of the *Charles de Gaulle* aircraft carrier to the Indian Ocean in support of *Operation Enduring Freedom* against Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. The annual *Varuna* exercises with India, initiated in 2001, alternating between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, frequently involved the *Charles de Gaulle*, and its associated support

³⁸ Gouvernement de la Nouvelle Calédonie, "L'axe Indo-Pacifique s'invite au Japon," 17 May 2018, <https://gouv.nc/actualites/17-05-2018/laxe-indo-pacifique-sinvite-au-japon>. Also "La Nouvelle-Calédonie va défendre au Japon "l'axe Indo-Pacifique," *Outremers 360°*, 18 May 2018, <http://outremers360.com/politique/la-nouvelle-caledonie-va-defendre-au-japon-laxe-indo-pacifique/>.

³⁹ Marie Tyl, *Presence militaire française et stratégie de défense dans l'ouest de l'Océan Indien* (Paris: Centre d'études supérieures de la Marine, 2013).

⁴⁰ Sylvie Goulard, "Upholding the Rules-based Regional Order" (Shangri-La Dialogue), 3 June 2017, <https://www.iiss.org/en/events/shangri-la-dialogue/archive/shangri-la-dialogue-2017-4f77/plenary-2-faad/goulard-7854>. Also Sophie de Rocher, "Sécurité en Asie: la France au Dialogue Shangri-La, une carte stratégique à jouer," *Asialyst*, 3 June 2017, <https://asialyst.com/fr/2017/06/03/securite-asie-france-dialogue-shangri-la-carte-strategique-a-jouer/>.

group *Task Force 473*, as in 2015. Following its 18-month refit in 2017-2018, the *Charles De Gaulle* (accompanied by the multi-missions frigates FS *Provence* and FS *Languedoc*, and air defence frigate FS *Forbin*, the supply vessel FS *Marne* and the nuclear attack submarine FS *Rubis*, and joined in the Indian Ocean by the anti-submarine frigate FS *Latouche-Tréville*), CHECK led the *Task Force 473* carrier group in its *Operation Clemenceau* across the Indian Ocean during Spring 2019. The Ministry of Defence announced its purpose was to demonstrate and augment France's "influence" (*rayonnement*) and "maritime power" (*puissance maritime*) in the region.⁴¹ Macron's Indo-Pacific axis was exemplified during April to May as the carrier group conducted in turn exercises with the US navy (including their aircraft carrier) in the Red Sea, exercising with the Canadian and Australian navies in the Gulf of Aden, the biggest ever live fire and anti-submarine *Varuna* exercises with the Indian navy (including their aircraft carrier) in the Arabian Sea, and similar live fire and anti-submarine *Operation Perouse* quadrilateral exercises with the Australian, Japanese (including their helicopter carrier) and US navies in the Bay of Bengal. On arriving at Singapore at the end of May, and further bilateral exercises with the Singaporean navy, the *Charles de Gaulle* was visited by Defence Minister Florence Parly; who in her speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue described the carrier as "this mighty instrument of power projection", reflecting an "Indo-Pacific strategic axis."⁴² FS *Forbin* carried out a week-long deployment to Vietnam.

French naval strategy has also involved *Jeanne d'Arc* missions since 2013. Indian Ocean missions were the focus of the 2014 and 2019 missions. The 2013, 2015 and 2016 mission expanded the previous 2012 outreach to the Gulf of Aden right across the northern Indian Ocean and into the South China Sea and Western Pacific. The 2017 *Jeanne d'Arc* deployment to the Indian and Pacific Ocean was considered by the Ministry of Defense as "illustrating the French capability of projection in the Indo-Pacific region" in the "Indo-Pacific regions, which is certainly remote from Europe but

⁴¹ "Nouvelle mission opérationnelle pour le Charles de Gaulle," 5 March 2019, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/english/actualites/articles/nouvelle-mission-operationnelle-pour-le-charles-de-gaulle>.

⁴² Florence Parly, "Speech" (Shangri-La Dialogue), 1 June 2019, https://www.defense.gouv.fr/salle-de-presse/discours/discours-de-florence-parly/discours-de-florence-parly-ministre-des-armees_allocation-au-shangri-la-dialogue.

not from the French territories.”⁴³ This included extension to Japan, and significant trilateral exercises carried out by France with Japanese and US naval forces in the Western Pacific. The 2018 *Jeanne D’Arc* five-month deployment involved the explanation was that “the deployment took place in the Indo-Pacific region, a crucial area for France and its strategic interests.”⁴⁴ The mission involved a particularly extended stay in South China Sea waters during June 2018, carrying out Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOP) near the Spratly Islands, and being tailed there by Chinese vessels. It concluded by calling in at New Caledonia and French Polynesia. The 2019 *Jeanne d’Arc* mission travelled along the entire African littoral, from Djibouti to Cape Town.

In the north-west sector of the Indian Ocean, France has been involved since 2009 in ongoing anti-piracy operations in the EU-organized *Atalanta* operation in the Gulf of Aden, with France able to project military power from its base at Djibouti. Previously headquartered in the UK at Northwood, *Atalanta’s* Maritime Security Centre Horn of Africa (MSCHOA) section was moved to Brest in France in Spring 2019. The amphibious assault ship FS *Tonnerre* and the air defence destroyer FS *Chevalier* was dispatched from the Mediterranean to conduct exercise drills in December 2017-January 2018 with the US Navy in the Gulf of Aden as part of the *Bois Belleau 100* mission.

In the south-west sector of the Indian Ocean, the *Oxide* operation brings together the French and South African navies (joined by Mozambique in 2011). These operated in 2011 and 2013 in the Mozambique Channel, in 2015 off Natal, and in 2017 off Reunion. *Varuna* exercises between France and India were also held off Reunion in 2018. The 2019 *Jeanne d’Arc* mission deployed all the way down the African littoral, from Djibouti through Mozambique down to South Africa. In this south-west quadrant, an Inter-Governmental Agreement between France and South Africa on cooperation for the surveillance of the South African (Marion and Prince Edward’s Islands) and French (Crozet and Kerguelen Islands) territories in the Southern Indian Ocean was signed in

⁴³ “France and Japan, converging strategic interests. ‘Jeanne d’Arc’ port call in Sasebo,” 12 May, 2017, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/english/dgris/dgris/evenements-archives/france-and-japan-converging-strategic-interests>; “Military Cooperation Campaign ‘Jeanne d’Arc 2017’,” 31 March 2017, <https://my.ambafrance.org/Military-cooperation-campaign-Jeanne-d-Arc-2017>.

⁴⁴ “Mission Jeanne d’Arc 2018,” <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/english/marine/actu-marine/mission-jeanne-d-arc-2018>, 8 June 2018

July 2016. This agreement allows monitoring and intervening in each other country's sovereign waters around these distant islands particularly to face the problem of illegal fishing as well as enhancing scientific research of these areas.

France has regularly deployed into the South China Sea since 2014. In part this has been through the frigate FS *Vendémiaire* in 2014 (Australia-Indonesia-Vietnam), 2015, 2016 and 2018 (Brunei-Philippines). Included in the South China Sea role played by the *Vendémiaire* were drills with US frigates in November 2014, PASSEX naval drills in November 2015 with Australian frigates, and Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOP) in March 2018. In part this was through the deployment there of the *Jeanne d'Arc* group in 2017 and 2018. French Defence Ministers have raised the South China Sea as a security concern for France necessitating regular ongoing freedom of navigation deployments at successive Shangri La Dialogues; Le Drian in 2016, Sylvie Goulard in 2017 and Florence Parly in 2018 and 2019. In early April 2019, when going from Japan to the Philippines, FS *Vendémiaire* attracted Chinese ire with its transit through the Taiwan Strait, leading Beijing to dis-invite France from its naval review taking place at Qingdao later on in the month.

The French navy is also a regular participant alongside other Indo-Pacific forces in multilateral regional exercises; notably the *Komodo* multilateral exercise organized by Indonesia, the biannual *Kakadu* exercises hosted by Australia, the biannual *Southern Katipo* exercises hosted by New Zealand, and the *Rimpac* exercises hosted at Hawaii by the US. This is supplemented by France's own *Croix du sud* ("Southern Cross") humanitarian relief exercises organized since 2006 by French forces at New Caledonia.

Diplomacy

The *French Defense and National Security Strategic Review*, released in November 2017 outlined France's current Indo-Pacific diplomacy as a strategy in which "France is

forging bonds that will help enhance maritime security in the Indo-Pacific” through “strengthening its relations with the major democracies in the region.”⁴⁵

Macron’s listing in 2018 was similar, “to work with Japan, Australia, New Zealand and India on an Indo-Pacific strategy to build the ways and means of this freedom of our sovereignty in the Indo-Pacific space together.”⁴⁶ At the 2016 Shangri-La Dialogue the then Defence Minister Le Drian pinpointing regional security cooperation arrangements with “our partners, in particular India, Australia, the United States, Singapore, Malaysia and Japan.”⁴⁷ China’s absence from Le Drian’s listing of “partners” was noticeable. Macron’s Joint Statement with the Australian Prime Minister in May 2018 brought their common hopes that they “agreed to involve other strategic partners more broadly in the growing cooperation between France and Australia in the Indo-Pacific, when and where appropriate, and are open to forming trilateral and other high-level dialogues” with countries like India, Japan and the US.⁴⁸ Parly had similar thoughts at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2018 about “Indo-Pacific partnership” between France and “our fantastic relationships with Australia and India,” as well as with “Japan, with whom our strategic interest are aligned and we share an exceptional bond” and the “remarkable cooperation with Australia and New Zealand in the South Pacific, in relation to the United States and the Quadrilateral Defense Coordination Group,” and Southeast Asian countries like Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam.⁴⁹ China’s absence from such listings of Indo-Pacific partners is noticeable and recurring.

⁴⁵ *French Defense and National Security Strategic Review* (Paris: Ministère des Armées, 2017), pp. 44, 62. See also David Scott, “French maritime thought on the Indo-Pacific,” *Center for International Maritime Security* (CIMSEC), 31 March 2017, <http://cimsec.org/french-maritime-strategic-thought-on-the-indo-pacific/31742>.

⁴⁶ Macron, “Transcription du discours du Président de la République, Emmanuel Macron, à l’expoforum forum économique international,” 28 May, 2018, <http://www.elysee.fr/declarations/article/transcription-du-discours-du-president-de-la-republique-emmanuel-macron-a-l-expoforum-forum-economique-international/>.

⁴⁷ Le Drian, “Speech” (Shangri-La Dialogue), 5 June 2016, <https://in.ambafrance.org/15th-Shangri-la-Dialogue-Speech-by-the-French-Defence-Minister>.

⁴⁸ Macron and John Turnbull, “Vision Statement on the Australia-France Relationship,” 2 May, 2018, <https://www.pm.gov.au/sites/default/files/media/australia-france-vision-statement.pdf>

⁴⁹ Parly, “Speech” (Shangri la Dialogue), 3 June 2018, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/fre/actualites/communaute-defense/florence-parly-shangri-la-dialogue>.

This focus on regional partners across the Indo-Pacific has led into what the Ministry of Defence considers is how “France has developed an ambitious strategy centered on the concept of an ‘Indo-Pacific axis’ (*l’axe indopacifique*).”⁵⁰ This was announced by Macron in May 2018 as he toured Australia and the South Pacific. In New Caledonia he had announced that “I believe in the Indo-Pacific axis” as an expression of “geopolitical ambition.”⁵¹ Immediately before in Sydney he had fleshed out its participants; a “new Paris-Delhi-Canberra axis is absolutely key for the region and our joint objectives in the Indo-Pacific region.”⁵² The driver for this axis was indicated by what Véronique Roger-Lacan, the French Permanent Representative to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), described as “the growing power of China’s Navy and its growing deployment in the Indo-Pacific area.”⁵³ This led the *French Defense and National Security Strategic Review* to argue that “China’s growing naval presence represents a new strategic challenge [...] in a maritime area extending from the South China Sea to the whole Indian Ocean.”⁵⁴ France sees itself as one of several concerned partners. Defence Minister Florence Parly warned in September 2017 of “aggressive policies that challenge our interests and those of our allies. China, in the South China Sea [...] demonstrates power and intimidation.”⁵⁵ Hence government summation in September 2018 that “we are building a real Indo-Pacific axis”, because of widespread concerns over China “in which freedom of navigation is brought into question in the South China Sea.”⁵⁶

⁵⁰ “La France présente sa politique de défense en Indo-Pacifique,” 8 June 2018, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/dgris/action-internationale/enjeux-regionaux/la-france-presente-sa-politique-de-defense-en-indo-pacifique>.

⁵¹ Macron, “Discours du Président de la République, Emmanuel Macron, sur la Nouvelle-Calédonie à Nouméa,” 3 May 2018.

⁵² Macron, “Discours à Garden Island, base navale de Sydney,” 3 May 2018, <http://www.elysee.fr/videos/new-video-281/>. Denunciations in “Macron’s opportunistic show in Indo-Pacific,” *Global Times*, 3 May, 2018, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1100663.shtml>.

⁵³ Véronique Roger-Lacan, “On the Indo-Pacific Security Dynamic,” 7 July 2017, <https://osce.delegfrance.org/Groupe-de-contact-asiatique>.

⁵⁴ *French Defense and National Security Strategic Review*, p. 44.

⁵⁵ Parly, “Discours de clôture de Florence Parly,” 5 September 2017, <http://www.defense.gouv.fr/salle-de-presse/tout-discours/discours-de-cloture-de-florence-parly-universite-d-ete-de-la-defense-2017>.

⁵⁶ “Entretien de M. Jean-Baptiste Lemoyne, secrétaire d’Etat auprès du ministre de l’Europe et des affaires étrangères, avec Radio J,” 22 September 2018, https://basedoc.diplomatie.gouv.fr/exl-php/util/documents/accede_document.php?1541548688572.

With regard to India, a formal “strategic partnership” was established in 1998.⁵⁷ This has involved significant military supplies from France to India. French naval cooperation with India has been well established in the Indian Ocean through the annual *Varuna* exercises that were initiated in 2001, and which have been conducted in the Indian Ocean every couple of years. France’s involvement has deepened with the involvement of the *Charles de Gaulle* aircraft carrier since 2006. The 2018 *Varuna* exercise, involving the frigate FS *Jean de Vienne* and the nuclear submarine FS *Perle*, was divided into three phases; one off Goa in the Arabian Sea, one off Chennai in the northern Indian Ocean, and one off Reunion in the south-west Indian Ocean. The 2019 *Varuna* itineration, with biggest ever contributions from both sides saw India’s aircraft carrier group exercising with the *Charles De Gaulle* carrier group (*Task Force 473, in Operation Clemenceau*) in the Arabian Sea in early May.

The *Joint Statement* issued following Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to France in April 2015 moved beyond previous globalist sentiments to emphasise maritime cooperation “particularly” in the Indian Ocean, “stressed” the importance of their *Varuna* joint exercises, and with India welcoming closer engagement of France in the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).⁵⁸ Modi’s trip to France also brought agreement for the sharing of radar facilities enjoyed by India in Sri Lanka, Maldives, Seychelles and Mauritius, and by France in Mayotte, Reunion, and Djibouti. Consequently, an annual *Dialogue on Maritime Cooperation* was set up in January 2016, where both countries have growing concerns on the growing Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean.⁵⁹

French links with India have taken on an explicit Indo-Pacific anchoring since 2017. France’s strengthening links with India were again on show in January 2017 at their second *Dialogue on Maritime Cooperation*, which included a *White Shipping* agreement on further information (maritime traffic and maritime domain awareness)

⁵⁷ Yves-Marie Rault, “France and India: Decoding the Strategic Partnership,” *Special Report* (ICPS), 147: November (2013). Also Méliissa Levailant, ‘La politique indo-pacifique de New Delhi, partenaire stratégique de la France’, *Les Champs de Mars*, 30, 2018, pp. 243-251.

⁵⁸ “India-France Joint Statement,” 10 April 2015, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/25053/>. Also Saint-Mézard, “The French Strategy in the Indian Ocean and the Potential for Indo-French Cooperation,” *Policy Report* (RSIS), March 2015.

⁵⁹ “Pourquoi l’Inde a besoin de la France face à la Chine?,” *Le Journal du dimanche*, 11 March 2018, <https://www.lejdd.fr/international/asie/pourquoi-linde-a-besoin-de-la-france-face-a-la-chine-3596228>.

sharing in the Indian Ocean. However, significantly, it forecast that “it will be accompanied by a significant strengthening of cooperation between our respective Navies for security and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.”⁶⁰ In turn, Macron’s visit to India in March 2018 included him noting that “we are with India for freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific.”⁶¹ Strong reaffirmation of close maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean was encapsulated in the *Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region*, which was facilitated by the *Reciprocal Logistics Support* agreement between their two military forces opening the way for increased French use of Indian bases in the Indian Ocean.⁶² This logistics support agreement was operationalized with the arrival of the anti-aircraft destroyer FS *Cassard* at Mumbai in January 2019. Le Drian’s talks with his Indian counterpart in June 2018 were set up by France to “focus in particular [...] on the establishment of an Indo-Pacific space that respects the principles of international law.”⁶³ This thrust was aimed at China and the South China Sea; as were cordial navy discussions held by Admiral Prazuck with his Indian counterpart in January 2019.⁶⁴

France has also re-entered Southeast Asia and South China Sea dynamics with “strategic partnerships” signed with Indonesia in 2011 and Singapore in 2012. In March 2016 the French frigate FS *Provence*, having come across the Indian Ocean, conducted anti-submarine warfare (ASW) exercises with the Malaysian Navy in the South China Sea, which was repeated in those same waters by the similarly dispatched French frigate FS *Auvergne* in October 2017. Anti-submarine capability is primarily China-

⁶⁰ “Indo-French Dialogue on Maritime Coop & Signing of White Shipping Agreement,” *News* (French Embassy in Delhi), 19 January 2017, <https://in.ambafrance.org/Indo-French-Dialogue-on-Maritime-Coop-signing-of-White-Shipping-Agreement>.

⁶¹ Macron, “Press Statement,” 10 March 2018, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/emmanuel-macron-india-visit-live-updates-french-president-pm-modi-hold-talks-today-1822032>. Also François-Xavier Le Quintrec, “Visite d’état en Inde : l’allié Indien et la stratégie française dans la zone Indopacifique,” *Nemrod*, March, <https://nemrod-ecds.com/?p=1341>.

⁶² “India, France security deal has China in mind,” *France 24*, 10 March 2018, www.france24.com/en/20180310-india-france-security-deal-has-china-mind.

⁶³ “India- Meeting between Jean-Yves Le Drian and his Counterpart,” 18 June 2018, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/india/events/article/india-meeting-between-jean-yves-le-drian-and-his-counterpart-paris-18-06-18>.

⁶⁴ Dipanjan Chaudhury, ‘India, France to widen Indo-Pacific partnership to balance China’s ambitions’, *Economic Times*, 8 January 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-france-to-widen-indo-pacific-partnership-to-balance-chinas-ambitions/articleshow/67438172.cms>

centric. The friendly port call to Manila by the frigate FS *Guépratte* in May 2016 was followed later in the month by the formal *Defence Cooperation Agreement* (DCA) signed with the Philippines. Similarly, March 2018 witnessed the first meeting of the joint France-Philippines defence cooperation committee, with discussions on maritime security, as well as the friendly port call of the frigate FS *Vendémiaire*.

French ties with its ex-colony of Vietnam have re-emerged with some vigour. A *Framework Agreement on Defence Cooperation* was signed in 1997, an annually held Vietnam-France *Joint Committee on Defence Cooperation* has run since 2010, and a “strategic partnership” was announced in 2013. The first Vietnam-France *Defence Policy Dialogue* held in November 2016 was followed by the second one in January 2018. This outreach to Vietnam was of particular maritime significance given docking facilities at Cam Ranh Bay on the South China littoral; with France’s amphibious assault ship FS *Tonnerre* paying an extended port call there in May 2016 to carry out joint military exercises with the Vietnamese navy.⁶⁵ Such Franco-Vietnamese links were reiterated in the port call by the *Jeanne d’Arc* 2018 battle group. Defence discussions in September 2018 were followed by a new *Joint Vision* statement for 2018–2028 stressing maritime cooperation and calls (tacitly aimed at China) for open sea lanes and adherence to international law. Prime Ministerial discussions with Vietnam in October 2018 included Vietnam being described by France as “a key partner for our interests in South-east Asia and in the Indo-Pacific region.”⁶⁶ As already noted, the anti-aircraft frigate FS *Forbin* carried out a week-long deployment to Vietnam from May-June 2019.

Australia is France’s neighbour both in the Indian Ocean and Pacific Oceans. France-Australia diplomatic relations were decidedly cool in the 1980s due to the French nuclear testing program and general (colonially-perceived) presence in the South Pacific. However, relations improved following the ending of nuclear testing in French Polynesia in 1996 and the signing of the *Nouméa Accord* for New Caledonia in

⁶⁵ Quoc-Thanh Nguyen, “Vietnam: A ‘Pivot to Asia’ for France?,” *The Diplomat*, 7 September 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/09/vietnam-a-pivot-to-asia-for-france/>. Also Karina Piser, “As Ties with Vietnam Grow, France must Tread Carefully with China,” *World Politics Review*, 9 September 2016, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/trend-lines/19874/as-ties-with-vietnam-grow-france-must-tread-carefully-with-china>.

⁶⁶ “Déplacement de M. Édouard Philippe, Premier ministre, au Vietnam,” 22 October 2018, <https://www.gouvernement.fr/partage/10594-deplacement-du-premier-ministre-edouard-philippe-au-vietnam>.

1998. Regional cooperation in the southern Indian Ocean was evident in the *Treaty on Cooperation in the Maritime Areas Adjacent to the French Southern and Antarctic Territories (TAAF), Heard Island and the McDonald Islands* signed in November 2003. Defence convergence was evident in the *Defence Cooperation and Status of Forces Agreement* signed in December 2006.⁶⁷ This was followed up in 2011 with a *Cooperative Enforcement Agreement* allowing joint Australian and French patrols to enforce each other's fishing laws in their respective Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) and territorial seas in the southern Indian Ocean. A formal "strategic partnership" between France and Australia was announced in 2012, in which "the two Governments reassert the importance of their cooperation in the Pacific and Indian Ocean region," and "support the growing integration of French territories into their regional environment."⁶⁸

A naval cooperation agreement was drawn up between France and Australia in July 2016. Franco-Australian naval cooperation has been a feature of *Jeanne d'Arc* deployments in 2015, 2017, 2018. French *Pegase 2018* air force units flew across the Indian Ocean in June 2018, participate in the biennial *Pitch Black* exercise being held in Northern Australia; which the Ministry of Defence considered was "to reinforce France's presence in the Indo-Pacific strategic zone of interest and deepen our relations with our main partner countries."⁶⁹

Indo-Pacific terminology has now become the pattern in France-Australia relations. In March 2017, their *Joint Statement* proclaiming an "enhanced strategic partnership," emphasized defence and maritime security cooperation, bilaterally and with third countries "particularly in the Indo-Pacific region."⁷⁰ Macron's visit to

⁶⁷ Nic Maclellan, "The Australia-France Defence Co-operation Agreement: Implications for France in the South Pacific," *Austral Policy Forum* (Nautilus Institute), 2 November 2009, <https://nautilus.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Australia-France-Agreement.pdf>.

⁶⁸ "Joint Statement of Strategic Partnership between France and Australia," 16 January 2012, https://au.ambafrance.org/IMG/pdf/Strategic_Partnership_-_MAEE_-_English_16_01_12x.pdf.

⁶⁹ *Point de Presse* (Ministère des Armées), 7 June 2018, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/english/salle-de-presse/point-presse/note-aux-redactions/point-de-presse-du-ministere-des-armees-du-jeudi-07-juin-2018>. Also Helen Chachaty, "Opération séduction dans la zone Indo-Pacifique," *Journal de l'Aviation*, 12 June 2018, <https://www.journal-aviation.com/actualites/40677-operation-seduction-dans-la-zone-indo-pacifique>.

⁷⁰ "Joint Statement of Enhanced Strategic Partnership between Australia and France," 3 March 2017, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/australia/events/article/joint-statement-of-enhanced-strategic-partnership-between-australia-and-france>.

Australia in May 2018 included direct Indo-Pacific references. The *Vision Statement* signed with the Australian Prime Minister included a specific section on “Indo-Pacific cooperation” which involved “undertaking cooperative maritime activities in the Indo-Pacific in the years to come,” including for 2019 “passage exercise opportunities with the Charles de Gaulle Carrier Group and Australian participation in Jeanne d’Arc Mission future deployments in the Indo-Pacific region.”⁷¹

Similar convergence has taken place with New Zealand, where relations were decidedly cool in the wake of the Rainbow warrior sinking in 1985, and friction over French presence in Polynesia and New Caledonia. Bilateral convergence between France and New Zealand was demonstrated in May 2014 with a *Status of Forces Agreement* to enable further defence cooperation in the Pacific. Macron went on to include New Zealand in April 2018 as part of “the declination of the Indo-Pacific axis for our foreign policy,” so as to “preserve our interests in the region, but also to guarantee the full [...] equilibrium of the Indo-Pacific.”⁷²

French links with Japan have been a recent development, with “the Indo-Pacific as a springboard for a strategic partnership” between them.⁷³ The *Road Map for French-Japanese Cooperation 2013-2018*, agreed at their summit in June 2013, pinpointed strengthened cooperation in the Pacific due to them both being “Pacific nations.”⁷⁴ Their 2 + 2 *Foreign and Defence Ministers* mechanism was initiated in 2014, complete with talk of strengthened anti-piracy cooperation in the Indian Ocean, and concerns over the East China Sea. The third 2 + 2 meeting, held in January 2017, noted France’s military

⁷¹ Macron and John Turnbull, “Vision Statement on the Australia-France Relationship,” 2 May 2018, <https://www.pm.gov.au/sites/default/files/media/australia-france-vision-statement.pdf>

⁷² Macron, “Conférence de presse conjointe du Président de la République et de la Première ministre de Nouvelle-Zélande,” 17 April 2018, <http://www.elysee.fr/declarations/article/conference-de-presse-conjointe-du-president-de-la-republique-et-de-la-premiere-ministre-de-nouvelle-zelande/>.

⁷³ Céline Pajon, “France and Japan: the Indo-Pacific as a Springboard for a Strategic Partnership,” in Luis Simón and Ulrich Speck (eds.), *Natural Partners? Europe, Japan and Security in the Indo-Pacific* (Madrid: Real Instituto Elcano, 2018), pp. 11–14.

⁷⁴ “Feuille de route pour la coopération franco-japonaise 2013-2018,” 7 June 2013, www.fr.emb-japan.go.jp/.../pdf/Feuille_de_route_France_Japon.pdf.

presence in both oceans, emphasized cooperation in both oceans, and expressed concerns over (Chinese) militarization in the South China Sea.⁷⁵

Common Indo-Pacific language became explicit in French-Japanese discussions in 2018, Parly attended the 2 + 2 meeting in January 2018 with the view that “Japan is the natural partner of France. We fully identify ourselves in the [Japanese] strategy for a free and open Indo-Pacific space”.⁷⁶ The following month FS *Vendémiaire* carried out VINEX 18 exercising with the Japanese navy. An Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) signed in July 2018 opening up logistics cooperation between the two Armed Forces of the two countries was explained by France as being “for the promotion of an international order based on law and multilateralism, in the Indo-Pacific region.”⁷⁷ A maritime dialogue mechanism between the two countries was also agreed in July 2018, followed by an accord on cooperation between the French Navy and the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force signed in September 2018. Macron’s meeting with Shinzo Abe in October 2018 was simple, “the President of the Republic also emphasized the importance of the Indo-Pacific for the two partners, France and Japan.”⁷⁸ France-Japan cooperation is further manifested in Japan inviting New Caledonia and French Polynesia to attend the Pacific Island Leaders Meeting (PALM) held in May 2018 between Japan and Pacific island governments, with New Caledonia’s pro-French leader re-affirming support for Macron’s “Indo-Pacific axis.”⁷⁹

Their 2 + 2 Foreign and Defence Minister’s Dialogue in January 2019 reaffirmed “the numerous points of convergence between the French and Japanese visions of the

⁷⁵ Laurent Lagneau, “Face aux ambitions territoriales chinoises, la France et le Japon vont intensifier leur coopération navale,” *Zone Militaire*, 27 January 2018, <https://www.opex360.com/2018/01/27/face-aux-ambitions-territoriales-chinoises-france-japon-intensifier-cooperation-navale/>.

⁷⁶ Parly, “Déclaration à la presse (Tokyo),” 27 January 2018, https://www.defense.gouv.fr/fre/salle-de-presse/discours/discours-de-florence-parly/discours_tokyo_27-01-18-declaration-a-la-presse.

⁷⁷ “La ministre des armées Florence Parly et le ministre des affaires étrangères Japonais M. Taro Kono ont signé à l’Hôtel de Brienne un accord bilatéral de défense,” <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/salle-de-presse/communiqués/communiqués-de-florence-parly/la-ministre-des-armées-florence-parly-et-le-ministre-des-affaires-étrangères-japonais-m.-taro-kono-ont-signé-a-l-hôtel-de-brienne-un-accord-bilatéral-de-défense>.

⁷⁸ “Déclaration d’Emmanuel Macron et de Shinzo Abe,” 17 October 2018, <https://jp.ambafrance.org/Declaration-d-Emmanuel-Macron-et-de-Shinzo-Abe-Premier-ministre-du-Japon>.

⁷⁹ “L’axe Indo-Pacifique s’invite au Japon,” 17 May 2018, <https://lemagdugouv.nc/2018/05/17/laxe-indo-pacifique-sinvite-japon/>.

Indo-Pacific,” welcomed their joint naval exercises “in the Indo-Pacific region,” recorded their “preoccupation” with ensuring that freedom of navigation and the rule of law were maintained in the South China Sea, noted that both countries were “Pacific nations, and welcomed the participation of New Caledonia and French Polynesia at the PALM meeting in May 2018.⁸⁰ French foreign ministry summation was succinct, cooperation “particularly in the Indo-Pacific.”⁸¹

With regard to the US, French links have also taken on an Indo-Pacific maritime focus. Laurent Lebreton, the APLACI commander took the opportunity of attendance at the US Indo-Pacific Command’s Chief of Defence Conference (CHOD) in September 2018 to hold bilateral discussions with his US counterparts on “securing a Free and Open Indo-Pacific.”⁸² *Bois Bellaeau* exercises brought the French and US navies together in the Arabian Sea in December 2013-2014; these same waters seeing the French frigate FS *Provence* embedded into the US carrier *Truman* Carrier Strike Group in December 2015 before sailing further eastwards across the Indian Ocean. France-US *Bois Belleau* exercises in the Gulf of Aden from December 2017-January 2018 involved France’s amphibious assault ship FS *Tonnerre* and the air defence frigate FS *Chevalier*. As already noted France’s carrier group force carried out passing exercises with the US navy in the Red Sea and then anti-submarine exercises in the Bay of Bengal during April and May 2019. Further east, Rear Admiral Cullerre, the Commander of the French Polynesian and Pacific Maritime Zones (ALPACI) signed a formal agreement in 2014 with the US Indo-Pacific Command (USIPCOM), then the Pacific Command, setting up formal annual bilateral talks. French naval liaison officers are also stationed at the US Indo-Pacific Command. During 2016 the frigate FS *Vendémiaire* conducted PASSEX exercises

⁸⁰ “Communiqué conjoint des ministres des Affaires étrangères et de la Défense de la République française et du Japon,” 11 January 2019, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/japon/evenements/article/france-japon-5e-session-du-dialogue-politico-militaire-11-01-2019>.

⁸¹ “France-Japon: 5e session du dialogue politico-militaire,” 11 January 2019, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/japon/evenements/article/france-japon-5e-session-du-dialogue-politico-militaire-11-01-2019>. Also Ankit Panda, “France, Japan Look to Increase Indo-Pacific Maritime Cooperation,” *The Diplomat*, 15 January 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/france-japan-look-to-increase-indo-pacific-maritime-cooperation/>.

⁸² “Participation de l’amiral ALPACI au CHOD: “Securing a Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” 3 October 2018, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/actualites/operations/participation-de-l-amiral-alpaci-au-chod-securing-a-free-and-open-indo-pacific>.

with the US carrier *John C. Stennis* in the South China Sea, and in Spring 2018 more exercises with USS *Michael Murphy* in the South China Sea and Western Pacific.

French bilateral links with India, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, the UK and the US have generated trilateral and quadrilateral permutations in the Indo-Pacific. In the Indian Ocean, Vice Admiral Louis-Michel Guillaume, commander of the French Submarine and Strategic Oceanic Forces (ALFOST) signed an anti-submarine cooperation agreement in March 2017 with the UK to cooperate with the US 5th Fleet in the Gulf, the Arabian Sea and Gulf of Aden. Ship Anti-Submarine Warfare Readiness and Evaluation Measurement (SHAREM) 195 exercises were carried out in the Arabian Sea between France (*FS Cassard*), Australia and the US in December 2018. As already noted, quadrilateral live fire exercises were carried out by France's aircraft carrier group in Operation *La Perouse* with the US, Japanese and Australian navies in the Bay of Bengal in May 2019. France has pursued trilateral cooperation in the Pacific with Australia and New Zealand for some time, as already noted via the *FRANZ* mechanism for disaster relief operations operating since 1992, but also in trilateral war games witnessed in 2001 when France joined Australia and New Zealand in their bilateral *Tasmanex* naval exercises. An official Maritime Surveillance Trilateral Seminar was also held in New Caledonia in October 2015 with Australia and New Zealand. A further Indo-Pacific trilateral was on show with the naval exercises between French, Japanese and US forces in the Western Pacific around Tinian and Guam in May 2017, led by France's helicopter carrier *FS Mistral*. The frigate *FS Vendémiaire* worked with US and Japanese naval units on enforcing sanctions against Korea in the East China Sea during April 2019.

Conclusions

France has been successful using its possessions in the Indian Ocean and Pacific Oceans to foster identification of itself as a resident and democratic Indo-Pacific power, and thereby be involved in regional structures in its own right and through Reunion, New Caledonia and Polynesia. Significant success for French strategy was represented

in winning the New Caledonia referendum in November 2018.⁸³ With regard to projecting its maritime power back into the Indo-Pacific via naval deployments from metropolitan France (as well as up from its Indo-Pacific possessions), France has in one sense been successful. Anti-piracy deployments have been maintained since 2009, and piracy attacks have significantly declined in the north-west Indian Ocean. French deployments into the South China Sea have been maintained and indeed extended.

However, French calls for EU navies to deploy there have only been echoed by UK deployments in 2018 at a time of impending UK exit from the EU. Other EU members have shown no signs of deploying their own ships, amid general EU “indifference,” although notional EU observers were attached to the *Jeanne d’Arc* deployment.⁸⁴ On the one hand there is vagueness about where exactly French units deploy in the South China Sea, and as such they do not necessarily challenge Chinese extension of 12-mile territorial waters from its artificial islands. French deployments have had no impact on Chinese militarization of its possessions in the South China Sea, nor do they reverse China’s refusal to accept the PCA ruling against it in July 2016, but this is not particularly their objective in the first place. On the other hand, such French deployments into the South China Sea demonstrate general French support for rules which China is breaking. This was behind Florence Parly’s assertion at the Singapore Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2019 that “we will preserve, with our partners, free and open access to maritime lines of communication. What is at stake goes beyond the prosperity of Europe and the preservation of trade lanes that are vital to the world. This is a question of principle”.⁸⁵ French deployments do show China a wider readiness by outside powers to operate in these waters, do strengthen the readiness of US (and indeed UK) to deploy into these waters for freedom of navigation operations, and do demonstrate France’s latent support for countries on the short end of Chinese activities in South China Sea. Moving from principles to policy, Parly was consequently keen to emphasize at the 2019 Shangri-La Dialogue that “we will continue to sail more than

⁸³ Scott, “New Caledonia Votes to Retain French Links and France Retains its Indo-Pacific Geo-strategic Position,” *Asia-Pacific Bulletin* (East-West Center), 14 November 2018.

⁸⁴ Valérie Niquet, “Securite maritime en Asie: l’impossible indifference de l’Europe,” *Note* (Fondation pour la recherche strategique), 1/January 2017.

⁸⁵ Parly, “Speech” (Shangri-La Dialogue), 1 June 2019.

twice a year in the South China Sea. There will be objections, there will be dubious manoeuvres at sea, but we will not be intimidated" by China.⁸⁶

With regard to France shaping security partnerships with a range of Indo-Pacific countries, there has been particularly clear success in developing security partnerships with India, Australia and Japan – and with it the “Indo-Pacific axis” that France has mooted. Their naval cooperation is especially marked, for example the trilateral France-Japan-US drills in the Western Pacific in 2017, and the France-Australia-Japan-US quadrilateral drills in the Bay of Bengal in 2019. Security cooperation with the US has been complicated by frictions emanating from Trump’s abrasive comments and criticisms of European countries’ funding levels for NATO. Nevertheless, service cooperation between the French and US navies has been strengthening. It remains to be seen whether there is a political formalization of the Indo-Pacific “axis” mooted by Macron between France, Australia, India and Japan; or indeed the Indo-Pacific “strategy” mooted by Macron between them with the further addition of New Zealand. A final development would be France moving towards involvement in the Quad grouping between Australia, India, Japan and the US that were reset up in late 2017. This arrangement was already on show at the Raisina Dialogue in 2018 and again in January 2019 where Admiral Christophe Prazuck, joined his Indian, Australian, Japanese and American counterparts on the panel “Indo-Pacific: Ancient Waters and Emerging Geometries”, noting that “we are observing and monitoring the change in the strategic landscape of the oceans. The Chinese Navy is growing rapidly”.⁸⁷

Prazuck’s comments brings this article back to a considering the question of coherence in France’s Indo-Pacific strategy concerning China. Although there have been tangible successes for France, through its deployments and diplomacy in constructing Indo-Pacific axes of variable strategic geometry and in projecting French maritime power, French strategy faces three ongoing problems vis-à-vis China. Firstly, French advocacy of global multipolarity, globalization and trade multilateralism to some extent chimes in with similar Chinese calls vis-à-vis the United States, and has been the subject of joint Franco-Chinese Joint Declarations in 2018 and 2019. However, this is cut across

⁸⁶ Parly, “Speech” (Shangri-La Dialogue), 1 June 2019.

⁸⁷ Prazuck in ‘Indo-Pacific: Ancient waters and emerging geometries’ (Raisina Dialogue), 9 January 2019, <https://twitter.com/raisinadialogue/status/1082942376006475779>

by French calls for a multipolar Indo-Pacific vis-à-vis the threat of Chinese regional hegemonism. Secondly, it remains to be seen whether France throw its support behind the China's Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiative on show in April 2019, or whether it moves behind the EU-Canada-US infrastructure pact signed in April 2019. On the one hand, Macron's misgivings on the MSR were apparent at the Ambassador's Conference in August 2018 when he argued that the MSR was "a hegemonic system", which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs argued reflected "hegemonic tendencies" on the part of China.⁸⁸ On the other hand, French attendance and rhetoric at the Belt and Road Forums in 2017 and 2019 (which India and the US boycotted) suggests that France is unwilling for the moment to directly reject the MSR. Thirdly, French hopes for economic cooperation on trade and investment with China cuts across French readiness to take robust actions in the South China Sea. In this light, the Foreign Ministry's goal to "continue strengthening and constructively rebalancing its comprehensive strategic partnership with China" in an "inclusive Indo-Pacific" perhaps represents strategic unclarity or unrealistic wishful thinking?⁸⁹

A final general point to make is that French defense activism across the Indo-Pacific, focussed through its naval deployments and naval diplomacy, may be difficult to maintain in the face of financial constraints on defence budgets, and shipbuilding programmes. Lee Cordner's comments from 2015 remain pertinent that naval cuts mean that it was "not clear that France can make fully operational defence commitments in the Indo-Pacific despite its perceived interests."⁹⁰ In particular, aircraft carrier constraints have left France with reduced power projection capabilities. A second aircraft carrier was mooted in 2008 but cancelled in 2013, leaving France dependent on one aircraft carrier, the nuclear powered aircraft carrier the *Charles De Gaulle*, the centre of French Indo-Pacific power projection in 2019.

⁸⁸ Macron, "Speech" (Ambassador's Conference), 27 August 2018, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/the-ministry-and-its-network/events/ambassadors-week/ambassadors-week-edition-2018/article/speech-by-president-emmanuel-macron-ambassadors-conference-2018>; *2030 France in Asia-Oceania. Towards an Inclusive Indo-Pacific Region*, p. 3.

⁸⁹ *2030 France in Asia-Oceania. Towards an Inclusive Indo-Pacific Region*, p. 4.

⁹⁰ Lee Cordner, "The impact of the US re-balancing to Asia on French strategic thinking," in Greg Kennedy and Harsh Pant (eds.), *Assessing Maritime Power in the Asia-Pacific* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p. 54.