Journal of Liberty and International Affairs | Volume 9 · Number 3 · 2023 | eISSN 1857-9760
Published online by the Institute for Research and European Studies at www.e-jlia.com

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(*) Corresponding author
Peer review method: Double-blind
Review article
DOI: https://doi.org/10.47305/JLIA2393533tn
Received: 15.09.2023 · Revised: 21.09.2023 · Accepted: 24.09.2023 · Published: 26.12.2023

FRANCE'S INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY AND THE ROLE OF VIETNAM

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Abstract: *The Indo-Pacific has partially replaced the term Asia-Pacific and emerged as a geo-economic and geostrategic concept over the last decade, with Japan, Australia, the United States, and India launching their respective plans. As a resident power and a long-time partner, France seized the opportunity. In May 2018, the French Indo-Pacific strategy was initiated during President Macron's state visit to Australia and released as an official document a year later, making France the first European power to adopt such a strategy. To unveil the driving forces behind French policies and the roles of France in the region, this article employs major theories in international relations (realism, liberalism, and constructivism). In particular, the authors analyze France's tactical actions concerning like-minded partners and a rising China, addressing how France can protect its interests and amplify its leverage in the region amid Sino-American tensions. The paper specifies several differences between the French approach and other major countries. Last but not least, given the importance of the Franco-ASEAN links mentioned in Section Three of the official strategy, the article also clarifies recent developments in their relationship, focusing on the role of Vietnam in France's overall scheme.*

Keywords: *France; Indo-Pacific, Strategy; Vietnam; Franco-Vietnam Links; Naval Deployment*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the term "Indo-Pacific" has gained significant attention among columnists, scholars, and politicians in the United States, France, Australia, India, Japan, and Indonesia. This term refers to a vast expanse that combines the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the Western Pacific Region (WP), interconnected by the South China Sea. It is seen as a strategic space for countries to pursue their military, diplomatic, and economic objectives. Although Australians have been using the term "Indo-Pacific" earlier, it is formally introduced and explained in an academic paper entitled "Security of Sea Lines: Prospects for India-Japan Cooperation", published in the January 2007 edition of Strategic Analyses journal of the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi. The Indo-Pacific idea was then used in Prime Minister Abe's remark addressed to the Indian Parliament, speaking of the "Confluence of the Two Seas" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2007).

The label "Indo-Pacific" replaces Asia-Pacific as a US-centric framework for regional order. In the contest to define Asia conceptually, the geographical expansion has strategic objectives: managing China's rise while also engaging the US's allies in an inclusive region. In particular, China's increasing assertiveness and the "String of Pearls" strategy launched in 2005 for its growing naval presence has concerned many regional countries, particularly the US, India, Japan, and ASEAN states. The term came to the fore under Trump's presidency in the US administration initially extended the "Asia-Pacific" to the "Indo-Asia Pacific", encompassing the Indian and Pacific oceans, especially

incorporating New Delhi - an opponent of China into the region-wide security architecture (Khurana 2017).

As the Indo-Pacific has become more strategically and economically important, countries worldwide are developing new plans to justify their intervention. In contrast, regional countries try to manage the new dynamics.

France was involved early on in the Indo-Pacific. Since the 1990s, France has engaged in high-level bilateral and multilateral dialogues such as the South Pacific Defense Ministers' Meeting or the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium and developed military partnerships via joint maritime exercises. Paris' strategic partnerships with New Delhi and Canberra represent the fruitful outcome of its longstanding diplomatic efforts.

During the Cold War, France sought to provide India with arms sales options (e.g., fighter aircraft and submarines) to reduce India's military reliance on the Soviet Union. After the Cold War, Paris became a major defense partner of New Delhi and subsequently promoted a strategic relationship between the two. France was also one of the very few supporters of India's nuclear weapons program, as President Jacques Chirac "described India's exclusion from the global nuclear order as an anomaly that needed to be rectified" (Sood 2019).

As a result of steady moves, Paris ultimately officially embraced the "Indo-Pacific" concept in 2018, making France the first EU country to adopt this notion (Morcos 2021a). Launched by "President Macron during his Garden Island speech in Sydney in May 2018, France's strategy for the Indo-Pacific has become one of its priorities for international action" (Ambassade de France en Australie 2021).

Although France's interest in Indo-Pacific strategy is not new, it reflects a more comprehensive vision of the Indo-Pacific rather than a mere change in terminology. For some researchers, it is considered part of the so-called French pivot to Asia or France's return to its past grandeur. Firstly, the French strategy used its possessions and historical insights in the Indian Ocean and Pacific Oceans to identify itself as a legitimate resident and democratic power rather than an outdated colonial power. Secondly, geopolitics enables France to project its naval force into the Northern Indian Ocean, South China Sea, and Western Pacific, thereby defending French interests and assets (territory and population, territorial waters, and exclusive economic zones), reaffirming freedom of navigation and multipolar order, and gaining credibility. Also, from another realist view, what triggered the change in terminology and added weight to France's interest in the Indo-Pacific region is undoubtedly China's arrogance, which is perceived as a threat to multilateralism and the international rules-based order. In order to implement the strategy, the French have strengthened bilateral and multilateral partnerships, especially in terms of security and defense, and given way for naval deployment.

Following Macron's visit to Australia, the former director of the Australian Office of National Assessments, Allan Gyngell, argued that "the Indo-Pacific does not exist. Like Asia-Pacific or Asia itself, the Indo-Pacific is simply a way for governments to define an international environment suited to their policy objectives in particular circumstances" (Grare 2020). In other words, the Indo-Pacific is not a predefined geographical area "in which the national strategies fit". Instead, it is the states' strategies that define and make use of the Indo-Pacific (Grare 2020). Therefore, the article seeks to unveil France's policy motives and roles in the region, adopting major theories in international relations (realism, liberalism, and constructivism). The article then elucidates France's strategic implications and practical applications by employing foreign policy analysis.

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The article also highlights the distinctions of the French approach to the Indo-Pacific compared with other European members and the United States. Moreover, including Vietnam as an increasingly important partner for France and recent positive developments in their relationships will be a notable part of the research.

DRIVERS AND ROLES OF THE FRENCH INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY

Realism Approach: A Realpolitik Move

A Legitimate Resident Power: Protecting National Interests and Exerting Influence

Under Macron's administration, France's Indo-Pacific policy has been built on shared geography and longstanding bilateral partnerships in the region, emphasizing "French interests".Given the geographical features, France already considers itself a "resident power" in the region and works to promote its interest. Unlike other European Member States, France is the only country that still had territories in the region, "spanning the eastern coast of Africa (Mayotte, Scattered Island and La Réunion) to the French Southern and Antarctic territories and the South Pacific (Vanuatu, New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna and French Polynesia) to the Clipperton islands off the coast of Central America" (Wacker 2021, 3). For the French Ministry for the Armed Forces, the Indo-Pacific has a geostrategic coherence inherited from a long history. Important maritime routes run from Indonesia to Madagascar, Oman to Singapore, Japan to Australia, and China to Polynesia, connecting the largest demographic and economic bodies of the twenty-first century (Ministère des Armées, n.d). Besides, it is also home to 1.6 million French citizens. Over 90% of France's EEZ is located in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, making up the second-largest worldwide (Wacker 2021, 3).

Notably, France maintains a robust military presence in the Indo-Pacific, including 7,000 personnel, 15 warships, and 38 aircraft - more extensive than the other 26 EU Member States combined (Rej 2021; Le Corre 2021). According to the official strategy, France already managed "a network of 18 defense missions led by defense attachés, accredited in 33 countries, and about 15 liaison and cooperation officers" to "ensure geographical coverage that can monitor protection and security for French citizens and French territories" (Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères 2021). In recent years, the French Navy's operations have escalated with frequent patrols and joint drills, amplifying France's ambition to be a real and committed player in the region.

France claims its national boundaries and assets beyond Europe, the extent to both oceans through overseas departments *(département et région d'outre-mer)*, overseas collectives *(collectivité d'outre-mer),* and overseas territories *(territoire d'outre-mer)*. This is reiterated in the remark by President Macron 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" (Élysée 2018). Also, Paris cited that its overseas departments (Réunion, Mayotte, New Caledonia, Polynesia) elect representatives to the National Assembly and Senate - to show that France is not a colonial power but a democratic, legitimate power in the Indo-Pacific.

A Delicate "Équilibre des puissances" (Balance of Power)

It is also argued that one of the reasons for France's increased commitment is China's rise. Instead of an inflexible position on China, France opts for a "balanced approach" using its military and diplomatic prominence.

France shares the US's worry about China's growing military capacity and unilateralism that may threaten French interests in the long term. Many official documents and remarks published or delivered since Macron's presidential inauguration have warned against the hegemonic ambition of Beijing. During his first state visit to China in 2018, he made clear that the Belt and Road project "cannot be those of a new hegemony, which would transform those that they cross into vassals" (Rose 2018), suggesting Europe should be cautious about its trade relations with China. In return, Chinese commentators criticized the launch of France's Indo-Pacific strategy for "following US footsteps to contain China" (Nicolas 2019). However, France does not intentionally seek any hostility that may discourage China from negotiations in the region and Europe. Unlike the US strategy, which tends to be both confrontational and overly militarized, the French perspective is neither to antagonize nor contain China. France leans towards a stable, rule-based multipolar order, supporting the free movement of people and goods, a stance shared by most countries in the region (Nicolas 2019). Amidst the height of Sino-American competition, France demonstrated prudence by avoiding deep involvement in the systematic rivalry between Beijing and Washington and steering clear of any potential marginalization in the shift towards the region.

It was not until the turbulence and death tolls caused by the Covid-19 pandemic that Macron spoke against China. In April 2020, he raised concerns about China's handling and transparency over the pandemic. In July 2020, Paris resumed its calls for an independent, international investigation into China's treatment of the Uyghur minority. In August 2020, France banned Huawei from supplying 5G equipment, promising to completely remove Huawei tech from French telecom networks by 2028 (Swanström, Duggal, and Panda 2020).

Boosting military collaboration also served as part of France's efforts to challenge China's sweeping unilateral maritime claims in the region and reassert the freedom of navigation. At the 2016 Shangri-La Dialogue, Defense Minister Le Drian mentioned security arrangements with "our partners, in particular India, Australia, the United States, Singapore, Malaysia, and Japan" (Jean-Yves Le Drian in Singapore for the 15th Shangri-La Dialogue 2016, 7). The absence of China from Le Drian's listing of "partners" was apparent. Speaking at the 2019 Shangri-La Dialogue, Defense Minister Florence Parly stressed France's willingness to protect its sovereign interests in the region and to ensure stability against competition from great powers by using its military assets and multilateral mechanisms. However, she also firmly opposed China's South China Sea militarisation, noting that the French Navy would continue to navigate more than twice a year in the sea. The decision to moor the Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier in Singapore during the 2019 Shangri-La Dialogue also emphasizes the military component in France's strategy (Ministre des Armées 2019).

Besides, France values security cooperation with key allies and is willing to share the burden in security matters. It continues its regular naval operations via joint military exercises, training, and submarine patrols. For example, the 2018 Jeanne D'Arc five-month mission - "the deployment took place in the Indo-Pacific region, a crucial area for France and its strategic interests" (Ministre des Armées 2018), 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 (Scott 2019). In recent years, the French Navy's deployment has been particularly intense in the Indo-Pacific. Noteworthy annual events are the La Pérouse exercise in the Gulf of Bengal, the Croix du Sud exercise in New Caledonia, and French armed forces regularly participating in bilateral and multilateral exercises (the Varuna exercise with India, and the Pitch Black exercise organized by Australia).

Following the foundation of the Quad in 2018, Macron revealed his vision of a "Paris - Delhi - Canberra Axis" - a new grouping that balanced China's aggressiveness. Macron unveiled France's Indo-Pacific strategy during his speech at the Garden Island base in Sydney, signaling that Australia would become one of France's key partners in its endeavor. (Pajon 2021)Meanwhile, India is the world's second-largest market for international arms exports. Furthermore, Macron has even previously expressed his desire to replace the United Kingdom as India's "gateway" to Europe (Swanström, Duggal, and Panda 2020). Later, on September 09, 2020, India, France, and Australia inaugurated a trilateral dialogue to ensure a "peaceful, secure, prosperous and rules-based Indo-Pacific" (Ministry of External Affairs 2020).

The cooperation will bring economic benefits, such as reducing reliance on the Chinese market and creating three-way economic synergies among the partners. Also, the defense will be the trilateral's central focus for promoting stability and maritime freedom in the region where the Chinese naval presence has grown in recent years. China has also established a naval base in Djibouti (a French-speaking country) and regularly sends warships, submarines, and intelligence-gathering vessels to the Indian Ocean. In response to the security risks, France continues to organize or take part in significant exercises with the Indian and Australian Navy, including the biggest ever live fire and anti-submarine Varuna exercises with India (including their aircraft carrier, held off Reunion in 2018) in the Arabian Sea; another live fire and anti-submarine Operation Perouse quadrilateral exercises with the Australian, Japanese; or the biannual Kakadu exercises hosted by Australia (Scott 2019). In addition, the trilateral framework accelerates their links in technology (radar systems and armed vehicles) and intelligence-sharing. For India and Australia, a greater French engagement will help ease the pressure and improve the combat readiness for their forces. Although the political grouping led by France is still in progress to align its strategic vision, it seems trustworthy and attractive to small and middle Asian states in the region as they all aim to diversify their partnerships beyond the US-China competition. Undoubtedly, France has employed its offshore resources and measures to fully resume its role as a regional power and protect its sovereign interests, ensure the security of its citizens, and actively contribute to maritime stability.

Liberalism: Strengthen Partnerships and Institutional Setting

A Credible Partner

Since the Covid-19 outbreak, France has found little chance to reinforce important alliances as other countries choose between Beijing and Washington-led groupings. However, it strives to bolster strategic partnerships rather than withdraw from the region. France "may not be able to engage as widely, but it is likely to engage more deeply" (Paskal 2021, 26).

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Regarding economic connectivity, about 18% of French imports came from the Indo-Pacific, and about 14% of French exports went to that region in 2019. Trade with the Indo-Pacific represents more than a third of French trade in goods outside the EU and is dynamic (Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères 2021).

Regarding defense, the French strategy is based on strategic partnerships and arms agreements with countries with similar values and interests, such as Australia, India, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, New Zealand, and Singapore. France's military collaboration is characterized by arms cooperation, enhanced information sharing, or joint maritime drills. Recent important arms deals include India's decision to purchase 36 Rafale jet fighters or Australia's contract with French shipbuilder Naval Group to manufacture 12 submarines (Morcos 2021a).

It can be seen that France's areas of cooperation are diverse. Section four of the official strategy states four pillars: security and defense; economy, connectivity, research, and innovation; multilateralism and the rule of law; climate change, biodiversity, and sustainable management of oceans, many of which overlap with its partners and allies. However, the insistence on environmental protection on the regional agenda partially distinguishes the French approach from that of its partners. It covers not only climate change and biodiversity out of moral conviction and preserve the success of the Paris Agreement but also handling of maritime environmental threats, for example, "redrawing maps, displacing populations, creating new hotbeds of tension, and affecting critical infrastructure" (Grare 2020).

A Proponent of Multilateral Frameworks and Multipolar Order

Paris is a strong advocate of multilateralism as a pillar for the stability of the Indo-Pacific. French-centered mechanisms have contributed to regional architecture. France has run the annual Conference for Indian Ocean Regional Cooperation (Conférence de coopération régionale de l'océan Indien) since 2012, which gathers officials from Reunion, Mayotte and other pro-France territories. France established its functional framework, the France-Oceanic Summit (FOS), which held meetings in 2003, 2006, 2009 and 2015. It is also a founding member of the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), established in 1982, which brings together independent Indian Ocean states. Notably, the so-called "Paris-Delhi-Canberra Axis", initiated by President Macron in 2018, held its first trilateral dialogue virtually in September 2020 (Scott 2019, 17).

A creative aspect of French policy has been to seek entry to regional dialogues through its accepted presence and legitimacy. It joined many regional forums such as the South Pacific Defense Ministers' Meeting, the Indian Ocean Rim Association, Japan's Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM), and Shangri-La Dialogues. France actively supports the increased power of the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), especially during the 2021/2022 French presidency. Since obtaining a full membership of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), it has developed joint projects with India, Australia, and Indonesia relating to the combat against illegal fishing, the blue economy, maritime safety, and Covid-19 response. Paris also links with like-minded partners, namely the Pacific Quadrilateral Defense Coordination Group with Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, or strengthens partnerships with ASEAN Member States by co-hosting the first ASEAN-France Development Partnership Committee (AF-DPC) Meeting in March 2021. Through various groupings,

France longs to enhance regional cooperation on issues ranging from maritime security to sustainable development (Morcos 2021a).

In the meantime, France is also sailing towards the Quad Plus since France and the four Quad members joined hands for the La Pérouse naval drill in the Bay of Bengal from April 5 to 7. This group conveys a more significant regional coalition of democracies and high-level cooperation on specific challenges such as illegal maritime activities, disaster relief, and increasing Chinese military presence for a free and open Indo-Pacific (Morcos 2021b; Chaulia 2021).

Constructivism: Defending the Established Norm-Based Order Throughout History

French legacies in the Indo-Pacific should be taken into consideration. Through social interactions dating back to the colonial era, France contributed to the establishment of codes of conduct and legal order in the region (especially in Indochina). The understanding gained from the long history of interaction also paved the way for the French to intervene actively and positively in the region today.

In particular, France's legal system and modern cartography provide an authentic basis for Vietnam to protect its sovereignty and the potential resolution of contemporary conflicts. As early as 1885, after the Sino-French war about Tonkin, the border with China was precisely delimited by military topographers and ratified by bilateral agreements in 1886, thus rejecting the Chinese Empire's concept of the delineated border over the vaguer notion of unprecise margins (Journoud 2016). When China seized the Paracels by force, the Vietnamese claimed against China after 1974, using universally accepted concepts such as proximity or actual and continuous occupation and valid evidence inherited from the French. Today's negotiations between China and Vietnam, as well as with other countries with claims in the South China Sea, still rely on the treaties signed by France at the end of the 19th century and, most importantly, on the archives, maps and treaties kept at the French National Library, the Ministry of foreign affairs archives, and the archives of the Ministère des Outre-Mer (Niquet 2018, 4).

Following historical insights from the colonial and immediate post-colonial period, France takes a rigid stance on territorial disputes in the South China Sea, in which any settlement must adhere to international law and avoid the use of force or unilateral decisions that may change the status quo. In an official document adopted by the French Ministry of Defense in 2018, the Spratlys are described as "claimed" by Brunei, China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam, while the Paracelsare "occupied by China and claimed by Vietnam" (Ministère des Armées 2018), which reaffirms its stance on maritime sovereignty in a region where France, as a former colonial power, played a major role in borders definition (Niquet 2018).

France's Approach and Actions in the Region

Approach

Unsurprisingly, France's objectives for the region largely overlap with those of its allies. 80% of goods that go to the EU must transit to the Indian Ocean, so EU countries undoubtedly have a far bigger stake in freedom of navigation (Luthra 2021). The Netherlands and Germany have also

developed their policy papers on the Indo-Pacific. Having been aware of "strategic competition and increasingly restrictive military environments" (Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères 2021, 6), France reiterates the maintenance of freedom of navigation on the sea and in the air and the enhancement of security cooperations. Safety and security implications also include countering terrorism, piracy, nuclear proliferation, trafficking of all kinds, and attacks on sovereignty (Grare 2020).

Although the Netherlands fancies itself as a driver of the cyber area or Germany focuses on connectivity, France is the only EU Member State capable of covering the strategic and security aspects of the Indo-Pacific. If you want "to be provided security, you have to look at France, you cannot look any further in the EU, frankly. The strategic and security aspect of Indo-Pacific will always driven by France", said Mohan Kumar, Chairperson of the Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS) (ORF 2021). France also plays a crucial part in providing invaluable intelligence regarding counter-terrorism and piracy. It was the earliest country to post a naval liaison officer at the Information Fusion Centre - Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) at the Gurgaon base established by the Indian Navy in 2018 (a key agency for keeping track of ship movements and other developments in the Indian Ocean) (PTI 2021).

Multilateralism, which involves enhancing coordination within existing international mechanisms and fostering collaboration with like-minded partners, lies at the heart of the French strategy. For France, this approach serves to uphold international order and regional security architecture while mitigating the increasing polarization. Additionally, through bilateral and multilateral dialogues, France promotes its own "models of ocean governance and maritime security" (Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères 2021, 7).

Nevertheless, a distinct and resolute commitment to environmental protection may differentiate the French approach from its partners. France seeks to safeguard not only the achievements of the Paris Agreement but also maritime resources, addressing challenges posed by climate change, including natural disasters and climate refugees. It is the only country that uplifts the issue of the environmental dimension by integrating it into the strategy as a pillar alongside traditional political and security issues (Grare 2020; Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères 2021).

Actions

Naval Deployment

Since the Indo-Pacific is primarily a maritime region, French involvement targets the protection of their possessions, particularly Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), through naval deployments. It is worth noting that 2,650,013 km^2 of EEZ based on all the scattered islands in the Indian Ocean is under French control (Scott 2019, 7). Concerning maritime security, from 2016 onwards, French navy ships have patrolled the region to enforce the freedom of navigation. Speaking in the session 'Reflecting on France's Indo-Pacific strategy' held by Observer Research Foundation, H.E. Emmanuel Lenain - Ambassador of France to India, said: "We are very proud of that, and we feel it is a commitment" (ORF 2021). Indeed, France has fulfilled its commitment through joint maneuvers with the naval forces and regular excursions by warships in the region.

France's military presence comprises ongoing "sovereign forces" stationed at the French territories in the Indian Ocean (Reunion) and Pacific Ocean (New Caledonia), combined with "pre-positioned forces" in Djibouti and Abu Dhabi.

Since 2014, initial French naval deployments have expanded to the South China Sea and made clear moves near the artificial islands created by China. The frigate FS Vendémiaire and the Jeanne d'Arc group accompany the deployments. In early April 2019, during a trip from Japan to the Philippines, frigate FS Vendémiaire might draw the Chinese's attention 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 (Scott 2019). Over the past few years, French naval activities have expanded eastwards into the South China Sea, Taiwan Strait, and the Western Pacific. The 2018 Jeanne D'Arc five-month mission paid a monthly visit to the South China Sea and conducted FONOP near the Spratly Islands. Recently, the French Navy signals intelligence (SIGINT) ship Dupuy de Lôme (A759) conducted a rare transit through the Taiwan Strait (Vavasseur 2021).

The French Navy is also a frequent participant alongside other Indo-Pacific forces in regional exercises, for example, the Komodo multilateral exercise organized by Indonesia, the biannual Kakadu hosted by Australia, the biannual Southern Katipo hosted by New Zealand, and the Rimpac exercises hosted at Hawaii by the US (Scott 2019).

Deepening Cross-Continent Collaborations

Given the formation of new US-centric groupings such as Quad and AUKUS, France feels the need to build up a network of reliable partners in the region on its own. Following his predecessor, President Macron has advanced its security partnerships with such outstanding players as Australia, India, and Japan and bilateral agreements with Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam, making France by far the most deeply connected European country in the Indo-Pacific today (Grare 2020).

Franco-Indian Partnership

Bilateral ties between France and India have significantly warmed up. Both countries' leaders meet annually for a bilateral summit. At the most recent one held in Paris in August 2019, Macron invited Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to attend the G7 summit in the French city of Biarritz, where the two countries agreed on joint cybersecurity and digital technology roadmaps. Macron's visit to India in March 2018 affirmed that France is "with India for freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific" (Le Quintrec 2018).

They share a complementary economy and an eagerness to employ the full potential of their bilateral ties. Their cooperative agenda has extended to many issues, including trade, civil nuclear power, energy policy and climate change, maritime security, and outer space. In terms of commerce, French exports to India reached €4.23 billion in 2020, and France mainly provided airplanes, other powered aircraft, and different types of machines (Embassy of India 2021). Regarding security and defense, France and India both have grave concerns about the growing Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean; they have already set up a regular maritime security dialogue; the most recent one took place in New Delhi in November 2019 (Brattberg and Le Corre 2019). In addition,

France has expanded its defense exports to India, including an $8.8 billion deal in 2016 to supply thirty-six Rafale fighter jets, the first of which was delivered in October 2019 (Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères 2021). A new level of maritime cooperation has been achieved as both countries approved the Joint Strategic Vision of India - France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region, which was facilitated by the Reciprocal Logistics Supportagreement between their two forces, paving the way for increased French use of Indian bases in the Indian Ocean. This logistics support agreement was supplemented with the arrival of the anti-aircraft destroyer FS Cassard at Mumbai in January 2019 (Scott 2019). Besides bilateral links, they also seek support from other countries for ocean governance (preparation of a roadmap is in progress) via regional Indian Ocean organizations (Indian Ocean Rim Association - IORA and the Indian Ocean Commission - IOC).

Franco-Australian Partnership

Paris and Canberra have long shared common values and have fought together on many battlefields. French New Caledonia even shares a maritime border with Australia in the Southern Ocean and Coral Sea. Macron's remarkable visit to Canberra and announcement of the French Indo-Pacific strategy have symbolized enhanced relations between France and Australia. During the visit, the Vision Statement signed by the Australian Prime Minister comprised a specific section on Indo-Pacific cooperation involving "undertaking cooperative maritime activities in the Indo-Pacific in the years to come", 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" (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2018).

Both countries are deeply concerned by China's mounting adventurism across the region, and an active Franco-Australian defense cooperation would counter China. In particular, the two navies regularly organize training for scenarios such as rescue operations and armed conflict. The French-led exercise Croix du Sud, held every two years, is the most significant humanitarian assistance and disaster relief exercise in the South Pacific, involving the naval forces of Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and the United States. Both countries' navies must also fight against illegal maritime activity across the Pacific, from piracy to illegal fishing (Morcos 2021b). Moreover, Australia and France currently have a Status of Forces Agreement - which sets out how the forces of each country should operate together - but are making room for greater access to their mutual militaries. French naval ships can now maintain a permanent presence at Australian naval bases or deploy troops through Australian training bases (Galloway 2021).

However, until very recently, Canberra's brutal termination of a $90-billion defense deal with France to supply 12 submarines and the new AUKUS alliance between Australia, the UK, and the US came as a shock for Paris and resulted in a deteriorating Franco-Australian partnership. Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian described the September 15 incident as a "stab in the back, leading to a French revision in their relations with key allies (Fathi 2021). Without a credible regional security architecture, France may find its way to Europeanize the strategy and pivot to other emerging players, for example, ASEAN states, Japan, and South Korea.

Franco-Japanese Partnership

France regards Japan as a natural partner since they claim to be Pacific citizens and share concerns over the East China Sea. French links with Japan have been fruitful, with the Indo-Pacific at the heart of their strategic partnership. Their recent 2+@ Foreign and Defence Ministers mechanism (initiated in 2014) has emphasized France's military presence and cooperation with Japan in both oceans (Siow 2022). 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. For the first time, France joined Japan-US joint ground exercises being staged in southwestern Japan to simulate regaining control of remote islands from enemy forces in May 2021, with an eye on China and North Korea (The Asahi Shimbun 2021).

Recently, in a meeting between President Macron and Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga in Tokyo on the sidelines of the Olympic opening ceremony, they came up with a joint statement that pledged to "actively work together (…) on priority areas such as maritime security, climate change, environment and biodiversity" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2021, 2). It remains unclear whether Japan will join France's 'Indo-Pacific axis' as the French grouping is still in progress. Also, while the French stance is away from anti-China and escalating tensions in the region, Japan, a traditional US ally, tends to be involved in a confrontation with China.

France-ASEAN Partnership

France has also re-entered Southeast Asia and South China Sea dynamics with "strategic partnerships" signed with Indonesia in 2011, Singapore in 2012, and Vietnam in 2013. In March 2016, the French frigate FS Provence, while crossing the Indian Ocean, conducted anti-submarine warfare (ASW) exercises with the Malaysian Navy in the South China Sea, repeated with the dispatched French frigate FS Auvergne in October 2017. In March 2018, the first meeting of the joint France - Philippines defense cooperation committee was held, with discussions on maritime security and the friendly port call of the frigate FS Vendemiarie. A year later, France sent the aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle to the region (Opération Clemenceau) following French Defense Minister Parly's commitments in the 2019 Shangri-La Dialogue to protect freedom of navigation and counter sweeping territorial claims in the region (Scott 2019). Notably, the first ASEAN-France Development Partnership Committee (AF-DPC) Meeting virtually occurred on March 4, 2021, marking a formal and promising partnership between the two sides. The meeting sets out key areas of cooperation, for example, the Post-Pandemic Recovery Framework, human rights, cyber security, and the blue economy (ASEAN 2021).

Furthermore, in a bid to enhance its engagement in Southeast Asia, France has opted to deploy additional international technical experts and increase investment through the French Development Agency (AFD). New experts who will be deployed annually by 2023 will take charge of implementing existing projects and finding potentials "where France can bring added value". French-funded projects are expected to expand to many fields, such as the green and circular economy, vaccine research, connectivity and sustainable infrastructure, managing disasters, human rights, tourism, and culture. For the time being, "the AFD carried out 170 projects in the region for a total commitment of €3.7 billion" (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs 2021, 43), including a biodiversity

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hotspot protection project in Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos in progress, an epidemiological monitoring project in response to Covid-19. Concerning the environmental problems, the AFD joined other donors to promote energy transition and air quality improvement in the region (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs 2021, 43).

Given the ASEAN centrality, strengthening links with the bloc is one of the priorities of the French strategy. A closer relationship with ASEAN countries, many of which have maritime disputes with China, is also a French move against China's hegemony and to increase its political presence in one of the most vibrant cooperation frameworks in the region.

In addition to strengthening established bilateral cooperation, France has placed increased emphasis on maritime security, which was a primary concern upon entering the region. Regarding a realistic view, as the third largest arms exporter worldwide, France sees benefits of maritime collaborations with major arms contracts: sales of advanced nuclear-delivered Rafale Fighter Jets to India, conventional attack submarines to India and Australia, and La Fayette frigates upgrades to Taiwan (Babones 2021). Also, as the world's largest and most powerful naval force, France is taking responsibility for preserving multilateralism and international rules-based order in and beyond French overseas assets.

Vietnam: An Important Partner in France's Masterplan

Vietnam and France have a longstanding historical relationship. Contemporary ties were formalized in 1973 since the post-colonial period. However, it was not until recently that there was an overall acceleration, with the two sides proclaiming a strategic partnership in 2013.

French ties with Vietnam have been bolstered since the initiation of the French Indo-Pacific strategy, expanding into the area of security. According to the official strategy, Vietnam was mentioned as France's leading partner in ASEAN alongside Indonesia and Singapore. As France's former colony and current strategic partner, Vietnam facilitates a more significant French presence in the region, especially regarding freedom of navigation operations. At the same time, Hanoi views improving relations with Paris as part of its foreign policy objective of engaging multiple major powers and diversifying strategic partnerships, particularly with the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. The Vietnam-France Defense Policy Dialogue was first held in November 2016 and was followed by a second one in January 2018. Defense discussions gained fruitful results, with a new Joint Vision statement for 2018-2028 maritime cooperation and calls for open sea lanes and legal compliance (Scott 2019). Both sides had agreed to further cooperate in areas discussed, such as training, military medicine, maritime security, aviation security and safety, peacekeeping operations, and defense industrial cooperation.

France also mentioned the increasing visits by French vessels to support FONOP and Vietnam's maritime defense (Parameswaran 2018). In subsequent ministerial-level meetings, Vietnam was regarded by French counterparts as a "key partner for [its] interests in Southeast Asia and in the Indo-Pacific region" (Déplacement du Premier ministre, Édouard Philippe, au Vietnam n.d.). Besides, something might be going on behind the scenes, for example, whether Vietnam could be a potential market for French arms.

Indeed, the French did walk the talk. More warships have been touring in the region since the signing of the joint declaration. From May to June 2019, the anti-aircraft frigate Forbin conducted

a week-long visit to Vietnam, where both countries' navy crews exchanged practice sessions (Nguyen 2019). In February 2021, the French minister of defense announced that a French nuclear attack submarine had completed a patrol in the South China Sea. Another French frigate docked at Cam Ranh port for helicopter repairs in March (Haver 2021). The visits deliver an affirmative message in support of freedom of navigation in the air and at sea, which is long recognized in international law and against any assertive behaviors in the region.

Various areas of cooperation have yielded positive outcomes. Overall, bilateral trade has intensified, experiencing an average annual growth of 15.7 percent (Nguyen and Ha 2023). Vietnam has notably benefited from projects initiated by the Agence Française de Développement (AFD) in Southeast Asia, such as the implementation of a network for the collection and transmission of hydrometeorological measurements in real-time (Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, 2021). In 2017, Airbus sold 40 aircraft to Vietnamese airlines, and Alstom, in collaboration with Colas Rail and Thales, signed a contract valued at EUR 265 million for supplying a complete telecommunications system for Line 3 of the Hanoi metro (Roy 2017).

Transport, infrastructure, and the agri-food industry remain focal points for French investors (Shira 2018). Following the meeting between Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh and President Macron on the sidelines of COP26, both sides agreed to boost cooperation for sustainable development, signing 29 cooperation agreements between the two countries' ministries, agencies, and businesses. Notably, French multinational company Thales and Vietnamese state-owned VNPT signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on technical collaboration in areas such as telecommunication satellites, smart cities, digital identity, and biometrics, as well as 5G, IoT, and cybersecurity (Samuel 2021; Thales 2021). This move illustrates France's efforts to secure market share and influence in Vietnam's security sector. Additionally, increasing French investment is believed to help reduce Vietnam's reliance on Chinese investment and create favorable conditions for business collaboration between the two countries.

Regarding the Covid-19 response, as of November 2021, France donated over two million doses of the Covid-19 vaccine to Vietnam through the COVAX mechanism, which aligns with the longstanding and successful cooperation between France and Vietnam in the medical field (UNICEF 2021).

Thus, besides economic cooperation, France - Vietnam relations since France's "pivot" to the Indo-Pacific have carried more security implications. As part of the Francophone community, with the potential to become a middle power, Vietnam helps expand France's influence and involvement in the region. Meanwhile, given France's naval superiority, its presence will exert considerable deterrence and pressure in conflict hotspots where Vietnam can enlist support in maritime disputes.

CONCLUSION

In the coming years, the Indo-Pacific will be the major gravity of the world, given the importance of maritime trade routes linking Europe and the Persian Gulf to the Pacific. We cannot afford to have them at risk at any point. French strategy is not necessarily the result of political change. It reflects a realization of the potential threats that China's rise and the Sino-American rivalry will harm France's interests, leverage, and status, as well as an effort to prevent possible marginalization in gravity toward Asia.

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For France, defending its national interests, preserving its maritime sovereignty, and a rules-based order are uppermost when entering the region. Its official Indo-Pacific strategy document also emphasizes the role of a "mediating, inclusive and stabilizing power" in the region. Aside from echoes of the colonial era, France has 8,000 troops and a modern nuclear-powered aircraft carrier to back its plan (Maślanka 2021). Besides security implications, climate change, sustainable development, and ocean resources governance are given greater attention in the grand strategy, bringing about a less egocentric, more humane, and responsible France.

On a personal level, the inauguration of the French Indo-Pacific strategy also reflects Macron's desire to revive France's great power status. The French leader declared France to be an Indo-Pacific power alongside China, the US, India, and Japan and stuck to the new European catchphrase of "strategic autonomy". For Macron, echoing de Gaulle's policy of grandeur would also help him to restore the faith of an increasingly disillusioned population concerning low approval ratings and the Gilet Jaunes protests (Qi Siang Ng 2019).

France is the first EU country to embrace the notion of Indo-Pacific and launch the regional strategy. The French plan tends to be independent of European counterparts since they do not share the equal interest in the region. As Europe tends to adopt a relatively lenient stance on China, and the U.S. takes a more assertive approach, France has chosen a distinct path by adopting a strong position towards China without actively seeking confrontation. In contrast to the strategies pursued by Germany and the Netherlands, which appear to be adaptations to the strategic pivot, French policies are "based on shared geography and longstanding, carefully cultivated, bilateral relationships" (Paskal 2021). On the other hand, France serves as a bridge between the EU and the Indo-Pacific and tries to harmonize the EU strategy with its own. It has promoted the increased presence of the EU in regional fora, for example, by establishing a strategic partnership with ASEAN in December 2020. Alongside Germany and the Netherlands, France has contributed to drafting the European Union's Indo-Pacific strategy. It engaged other European naval forces in maritime patrols; for instance, ships from Italy, Portugal, and Denmark accompanied the Charles de Gaulle on its mission in 2019 (Morcos 2021a).

However, France's pivot towards the region remains fragile due to its lack of financial means and human resources. A sluggish economy combined with a rising budget deficit has impeded a more ambitious policy (Huger and Raj 2021). French defense mechanism across the Indo-Pacific through its naval deployments and naval diplomacy may not be fully operational due to financial constraints on defense budgets and shipbuilding programs at home. Furthermore, the production of a second aircraft carrier was canceled in 2013, leaving France dependent on only one left, the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier Charles De Gaulle, which limited the French deployment capability (Scott 2019).

It is no wonder that France's remarkable presence helped unfold the region's geopolitical dynamics and challenge the Chinese hegemony. The strategy also portrays France as a responsible and prestigious power and paves the way for more profound interventions in the region.

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CRediT AUTHOR STATEMENT

Nguyen Thi Hanh: Conceptualization, methodology, supervision, writing - review and editing.
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All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the article.

COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Acknowledgments:
Not applicable.

Funding:
Not applicable.

Statement of Human Rights:
This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any authors.

Statement on the Welfare of Animals:
This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any authors.

Informed Consent:
Not applicable.

Disclosure statement:
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author/s.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

The Institute for Research and European Studies remains neutral concerning jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

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