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## STRATEGIC FILE

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### “Global France”: The Significance and Consequences of Macron’s Policy in the Indo-Pacific

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The growing importance of the Indo-Pacific in France’s foreign policy is related to the fear that the rivalry between the U.S. and China will threaten the sovereignty of its overseas territories. France also wants to emphasise its ambitions to shape the EU as a superpower, as well as to promote economic exchange and defence cooperation with selected partners in the Indo-Pacific region. China’s confrontational attitude towards France and the strengthening of allied ties between the English-speaking powers (AUKUS) indicate that it will be increasingly difficult for the French authorities to find partners in the region willing to support its policy course independent of the U.S. and China.

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## Assets

France is the only EU country with territories in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>1</sup> These include the two overseas departments (DOM) of Mayotte and Reunion in the Western Indian Ocean, the Overseas Communities (COM) of New Caledonia and French Polynesia, the islands of Wallis and Futuna in the Pacific Ocean, and the uninhabited French South and Antarctic Territories.<sup>2</sup> As a rule, overseas departments have a considerable degree of legal link to the French mainland, while communities are governed by their own organic laws. However, an amendment to the constitution adopted in 2003 opened the possibility of a hybrid status of overseas territories in accordance with the will of their inhabitants as expressed by referendum.<sup>3</sup> The overseas departments of France also have the status of “outermost regions of the EU”, are part of the Community, and use the euro. As for the overseas communities, they are not considered part of the EU and their currency is the Pacific Franc. New Caledonia has the most articulated aspirations for independence. Agreements concluded in 1998 provide for a series of referenda on this matter. The last one took place in October 2020 when the opponents of independence won (53.26%).<sup>4</sup> The next one is scheduled for December 2021.

China’s questioning of the rules of freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific and interference in the economic and political life of French territories, as well as the U.S. activity to stop China’s actions have made the French authorities aware of the need to develop an action plan to maintain sovereignty over these territories.

French territories in the Indo-Pacific are inhabited by about 1.65 million people. The insular nature of these lands has allowed France to significantly expand its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in recent years to cover an area of 10.2 million square kilometres.<sup>5</sup> China’s questioning of the rules of freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific and interference in the economic and political life of French territories (especially in New Caledonia<sup>6</sup>), as well as the U.S. activity to stop China’s actions have

made the French authorities aware of the need to develop an action plan to maintain sovereignty over these territories.<sup>7</sup>

France is increasingly marking its military presence in the Indo-Pacific through intensified exercises and cooperation with partners, among other means. French military assets consist of the *Forces de Souveraineté*, which are troops stationed in the overseas territories of France (New Caledonia, Polynesia, Reunion, and Mayotte), and *Forces de Présence*, troops deployed on the territory of a foreign country on the basis of bilateral agreements (Djibouti, UAE).<sup>8</sup> The number of these forces amounts to about 8,000 troops supported by 15 ships and 38 planes or helicopters.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The prevailing definition of the Indo-Pacific in France covers the entire territory of the Indian Ocean basin and the western and central Pacific, up to French Polynesia. M. Tarer, “L’Indopacifique : concept flou ou réalité géostratégique?,” *Open Diplomacy*, 8 February 2021, [www.open-diplomacy.eu](http://www.open-diplomacy.eu).

<sup>2</sup> J.-Ch. Gay, *La France d’Outre-mer. Terres éparses, sociétés vivantes*, Armand Colin, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> “Outre-mer : des statuts de plus en plus différenciés,” *Vie publique*, 27 March 2019, [www.vie-publique.fr](http://www.vie-publique.fr).

<sup>4</sup> F. Tręda, “Trójkolorowy sztandar nie cieszy Kanaków. Raz się nie udało, teraz stoją przed drugą szansą,” TVN24, 4 October 2020, [www.tvn24.pl](http://www.tvn24.pl).

<sup>5</sup> “The Indo-Pacific region: a priority for France,” France Diplomacy, July 2021, [www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en](http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en).

<sup>6</sup> J-B Jeangène Vilmer, P. Charon, “Les opérations d’influence chinoises : un moment machiavélien,” IRSEM, September 2021, [www.irsem.fr](http://www.irsem.fr).

<sup>7</sup> D. Scott, “France’s ‘Indo-Pacific’ strategy: regional power projection,” *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, Vol. 4 (19), 2019, p. 81.

<sup>8</sup> A. Olech, “Międzynarodowe zaangażowanie wojsk Republiki Francuskiej,” Instytut Nowej Europy, 2021, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> “French Joint Commander for Asia-Pacific Outlines Paris’ Indo-Pacific Defense Plans,” *The Diplomat*, 13 April 2021, [www.thediplomat.com](http://www.thediplomat.com).

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In addition to its military presence, France also includes a network of 25 embassies, 14 consulates general, and two representative offices (Taiwan and North Korea) in the countries of the region. France has 96 educational establishments in the Indo-Pacific, 24 trade promotion offices (Business France) and 10 tourism promotion offices (Atout France). The governmental development cooperation agency AFD is present in 24 countries.<sup>10</sup> French direct investment (FDI) in the Indo-Pacific countries amounted to €113 billion in 2019, or 8% of all French foreign investments. According to data from 2019, 18% of French imports came from Indo-Pacific countries, while France sent 14% of all its exports there.<sup>11</sup>

## Aims and Instruments

The document “France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy”, published in 2018 and updated in July 2021, emphasises the need to work with regional partners to ensure the security of French territory and freedom of navigation. France’s military priorities are detailed in two documents published in 2019 by the Ministry of the Armed Forces: “The French Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific” and “France and Security in the Indo-Pacific”.<sup>12</sup> The French strategy is based on four pillars: security, multilateralism, economy, and protection of the environment.<sup>13</sup>

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The “Strategic Review” published in 2017 by the French Ministry of Armed Forces highlights France’s partnerships with selected countries in the region (India, Japan, Australia, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia).<sup>14</sup> Its 2021 update already recognises the Indo-Pacific as “an area in deep strategic evolution” and notes that the countries of the region—unlike the Europeans—have increased their defence spending over the past decades. This strengthens the imbalance of power, which is considered detrimental to France and its partners.<sup>15</sup>

Marking the increased military presence in the Indo-Pacific is meant to indicate France’s readiness to defend its sovereign rights and cooperate with partners. A combat group with the aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* operated in the Pacific in 2019 and is currently carrying out a patrol mission in the Indian Ocean. The *La Pérouse* training mission with the participation of the *Jeanne d’Arc* battle group (the frigate *Surcouf* and a Mistral-class amphibious assault ship) serves to increase interoperability with French partners, guarantee freedom of navigation in disputed waters, or fight piracy.<sup>16</sup> Recently, in February 2021, two French ships, including one nuclear-powered submarine, crossed the South China Sea.<sup>17</sup> The French Minister of the Armed Forces Florence Parly announced that the operation would be repeated twice a year, regardless of China’s objections or claims to the sea.<sup>18</sup> The French navy is also active in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Strait of Malacca—three key areas for the global movement of goods.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> “France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy,” p. 22. The document is accessible on the following page: “The Indo-Pacific region: a priority for France,” France Diplomacy, July 2021, [www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en](http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 27.

<sup>12</sup> The documents are accessible on the following page: “French Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific,” Ministère des Armées, June 2020, [www.defense.gouv.fr/english](http://www.defense.gouv.fr/english).

<sup>13</sup> “France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy,” *op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> “Revue stratégique de défense et de sécurité nationale 2017,” France Défense, 22 December 2017, [www.defense.gouv.fr](http://www.defense.gouv.fr), p. 65.

<sup>15</sup> “Actualisation stratégique,” France Défense, 10 February 2021, [www.defense.gouv.fr](http://www.defense.gouv.fr), p. 35.

<sup>16</sup> “French Joint Commander for Asia-Pacific ...,” *op. cit.*

<sup>17</sup> “La marine française a patrouillé en mer de Chine méridionale,” *Le Figaro*, 9 February 2021, [www.lefigaro.fr](http://www.lefigaro.fr).

<sup>18</sup> “Discours de Florence Parly, ministre des Armées\_Allocation au Shangri-La Dialogue,” France Défense, 1 June 2019, [www.defense.gouv.fr](http://www.defense.gouv.fr).

<sup>19</sup> “Interview - La France, État de l’océan Indien,” France Défense, 12 May 2021, [www.defense.gouv.fr](http://www.defense.gouv.fr).

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All these activities signal that France wants to be a valuable partner for those countries in the region for which it is important to ensure freedom of navigation, fight crime and terrorism, and ensure the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The activity of the French Navy in the Indo-Pacific

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Another goal of France is to use its permanent presence in the Indo-Pacific to advance its economic interests. In addition to promoting exports and investments, it also means striving to balance trade with the countries of the region in such a way as to reduce China's dominance. This

relationship is particularly visible in the case of imports: goods imported from China account for more than half of the goods supplied to France from the Indo-Pacific area. Equally important for France is that it reduce the trade deficit with Asia and Oceania, which in 2017 amounted to €28.8 billion, or almost half of the total French trade deficit (€62.3 billion).<sup>20</sup>

This increased diplomatic activity directed at, among others, the promotion of French business and exports has not managed to achieve this goal so far: In the last pre-pandemic year (2019), France's trade deficit with Asia and Oceania amounted to €35.7 billion of the €78.9 billion global trade deficit).<sup>21</sup> However, the state's involvement in the promotion of exports has had an effect in some strategic industries, such as the arms industry. By combining the concluded partnerships with the promotion of its technologies, France also wants to increase its credibility as a defence partner.

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Scientific cooperation is for France an instrument to promote its economic interests. France accepts around 50,000 out of 2 million students from Asia and Oceania studying abroad. The majority of them are Chinese (37,000). France's goal is to expand scholarship programmes in ASEAN countries, especially in Thailand, Malaysia, and Cambodia, and to strengthen contacts with universities in Australia, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan. France also intends to increase the visibility of universities located in overseas departments and territories, as well as branches of its leading research centres in Indo-Pacific countries (e.g., the Pasteur Institute).

The Indo-Pacific region is particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of climate change and biodiversity loss. At the same time, the countries of the region were responsible for 45% of global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in 2019.<sup>22</sup> The French strategy covers both the fight against the causes and effects of these phenomena on its own territory—during a visit to Polynesia in July, President Emmanuel Macron announced the allocation of €50 million to protect the population of French islands against cyclones<sup>23</sup>—and through regional cooperation. One of the leading French environmental projects is the Kiwa Initiative, announced at the 2017 World Planet Summit, which aims to distribute grants to 19 Pacific countries and territories particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. The budget of the initiative, implemented by AFD, is €35 million.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> "Relations économiques : un espace d'opportunités pour la France," France Diplomacy, June 2018, [www.diplomatie.gouv.fr](http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr).

<sup>21</sup> "Le commerce extérieur de la France. Rapport annuel 2019," Direction générale du Trésor, 2020, p. 70.

<sup>22</sup> "France's Indo-Pacific Strategy," *op. cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>23</sup> "En visite en Polynésie, Macron inaugure le chantier d'un abri anti-cyclonique aux Tuamotu," BFMTV, 27 July 2021, [www.bfmtv.com](http://www.bfmtv.com).

<sup>24</sup> "France's Indo-Pacific Strategy," *op. cit.*, p. 46.

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## Partners

The turning point for French activity in the Indo-Pacific in recent years, preceding the announcement of the Strategy, was a speech given by Macron on 2 May 2018 at the Australian Navy base on Garden Island.<sup>25</sup> The speech was aimed at making the regional partners of France aware of the fact that it is a country permanently anchored in the Indo-Pacific, as it is connected with it by the interests of defending its own territory. At the same time, Macron initially tried not to take a side in the U.S.-Chinese rivalry. The alternative was to be the Paris-Delhi-Canberra<sup>26</sup> axis, popularised since the speech, for multilateralism and democracy in the Indo-Pacific area. According to the French concept,

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Australia, France, and India would jointly improve their defence capabilities and develop economic cooperation because only a counterbalance of power can induce China and the U.S. to treat these countries as partners. Macron's visit to Australia took place a year after the conclusion of the Franco-Australian strategic partnership, the basis of which was Australia's order for 12 submarines from the French Naval Group (a contract worth €56 billion that assumed cooperation between the shipbuilding industries of both countries<sup>27</sup>).

France has also intensified cooperation with India, both bilaterally and within international organisations. The Franco-Indian strategic partnership has been ongoing since 1998. Cooperation with the French arms industry is also important for India, which in 2016 ordered 36 Rafale aircraft for €7.8 billion euros.<sup>28</sup> In September 2021, India also decided to buy 24 used Mirage 2000 aircraft<sup>29</sup> from the French Air Force and 56 new Airbus C295 transport planes. France is also seeking to provide India with another 150 aircraft. Both countries intend to put into orbit satellites that would control sea traffic in the Indian Ocean on an ongoing basis. France and India have also granted each other access to their naval bases for the purpose of supplying ships.<sup>30</sup> The French company EDF has made an offer to India to build six EPRs for a future nuclear power plant in Jaitapur.<sup>31</sup>

Australia, France, and India also put an emphasis on maritime safety issues (disaster prevention, joint exercises, information exchange), the fight against illegal fishing, and environmental protection (especially the Franco-Indian initiative of the International Solar Alliance aimed at promoting this source of energy). France has tried to encourage India to be more active in the Pacific, and Australia in the Indian Ocean. In December 2020, France became a member of the Indian Ocean Coastal Association (IORA), and in March 2020, India was granted observer status by the Indian Ocean Commission (COI).

France has been developing the strategic partnership with Japan since 1995. In 2013, both countries elevated it to the rank of "exceptional". French companies were involved in clearing the Fukushima site of radioactive waste. France sees, however, the trade deficit as a problem in its relations with

<sup>25</sup> "Discours à Garden Island, base navale de Sydney," Elysée, 3 May 2018, [www.elysee.fr](http://www.elysee.fr).

<sup>26</sup> "Macron wants strategic Paris-Delhi-Canberra axis amid Pacific tension," Reuters, 2 May 2018, [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com).

<sup>27</sup> "Naval Group trumpets its Australian industry focus in submarine deal," *Defense News*, 30 March 2021, [www.defensenews.com](http://www.defensenews.com).

<sup>28</sup> "L'Inde utilise l'arrivée des Rafale comme avertissement envers la Chine," *Le Figaro*, 29 July 2020, [www.lefigaro.fr](http://www.lefigaro.fr).

<sup>29</sup> "India purchases phased out Mirage 2000s from France," *Aerotime*, 20 September 2021, [www.aerotime.aero](http://www.aerotime.aero).

<sup>30</sup> "En Inde, Jean-Yves Le Drian achève une visite pour pousser la stratégie « indo-pacifique » de la France," *Le Monde*, 15 April 2021, [www.lemonde.fr](http://www.lemonde.fr).

<sup>31</sup> "France's EDF makes binding offer to build six nuclear EPR reactors in India," Reuters, 23 April 2021, [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com).

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Japan (€2.6 billion in 2019). During his visit to Japan in July 2021, Macron announced actions to “direct the strategic attention, presence, and action of the EU to the Indo-Pacific”.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the ambition of remaining neutral in the U.S.-China dispute, [deteriorating relations with China](#) prompted France to modify its political course in 2019. French diplomacy became less inclined to refer to the Paris-Delhi-Canberra axis, preferring instead to strengthen ties with the Quad format (Australia, India, Japan, U.S.). In 2020, American, Australian, Indian, and Japanese ships participated in the French *La Pérouse* training mission in the Bay of Bengal, and in April 2021, France commanded joint sea exercises with Quad-member ships.<sup>33</sup> However, France has not joined this format.

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[The presidency of Joe Biden raised hopes in France](#) for better cooperation with the U.S. in terms of security in the Indo-Pacific, although in February 2021 Macron warned against attempts to create a joint bloc against China. Recognising that France and the U.S. share common values, the French

president expected Biden to pursue policies in the Indo-Pacific that would recognise the distinctiveness of the political actions of U.S. allies.<sup>34</sup> The intention to deepen the partnership with the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific was also confirmed by the head of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs Jean-Yves Le Drian during his visit to Washington in July 2021. He stated that work on the EU strategy towards this region would be one of the priorities of the [French presidency of the EU Council](#) in mid-2022. Referring to Biden’s electoral victory in the U.S. presidential elections, the head of French diplomacy stressed that a more balanced transatlantic relationship should also include “a joint transatlantic shift towards the Indo-Pacific”.<sup>35</sup>

The hope of the French authorities for deepened—while still independent—cooperation with the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific area was thwarted by the announcement of the trilateral AUKUS defence agreement involving Australia, the U.S. and the UK on 15 September 2021.<sup>36</sup> Particularly painful from the French point of view was Australia’s withdrawal from the contract for submarines concluded with the Naval Group. AUKUS is perceived in France as a gesture of distrust in the French capabilities and ambitions in the Indo-Pacific. It also introduces the prospect of a bipolar rivalry in this area, a scenario Macron warned against.

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France’s failure to form a partnership with the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific on its own terms may induce the French authorities to even more intensively promote active EU policy in this area.

The exclusion of France from the agreement of the three English-speaking countries calls into question French hopes for enhanced intelligence (including with the exclusive “Alliance of the Five Eyes”) and military cooperation.<sup>37</sup>

France’s failure to form a partnership with the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific on its own terms may induce the French authorities to even more intensively promote active EU policy in this area. The EU strategy for cooperation in the

<sup>32</sup> “France and Japan pledge ‘active’ Indo-Pacific collaboration,” *Politico*, 24 July 2021, [www.politico.com](http://www.politico.com).

<sup>33</sup> “France-led Multination Naval Exercise Commences in Eastern Indian Ocean,” *The Diplomat*, 5 April 2021, [www.thediplomat.com](http://www.thediplomat.com).

<sup>34</sup> “Transcript: President Macron on his vision for Europe and the future of transatlantic relations,” Atlantic Council, 5 February 2021, [www.atlanticcouncil.org](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org).

<sup>35</sup> “United States - Visit by Jean-Yves Le Drian - speech at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (14 July 2021),” France Diplomacy, 14 July 2021, [www.diplomatie.gouv.fr](http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr).

<sup>36</sup> “Aukus: How transatlantic allies turned on each other over China’s Indo-Pacific threat,” *Financial Times*, 24 September 2021, [www.ft.com](http://www.ft.com).

<sup>37</sup> “Indo-Pacifique : les enjeux pour l’Europe,” *France Culture*, 25 September 2021, [www.franceculture.fr](http://www.franceculture.fr).



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Indo-Pacific region, announced in September 2021, is in line with France's goals, focusing on the promotion of multilateralism, sustainable development, and human rights.<sup>38</sup> Using the economic potential of the EU (the Community is the largest investor in the region<sup>39</sup>) to implement France's global ambitions fits in with [the French understanding of EU strategic autonomy](#). First of all, France aims to increase the involvement of EU funds in the implementation of joint projects with regional organisations such as ASEAN or IORA. The trade and investment agreements concluded by the EU are intended to diversify partners, in particular to reduce dependence on China (in this context, the investment agreement between the EU and China—CAI—which France supported in the end, is problematic). France also wants greater involvement of EU countries in joint operations aimed at securing freedom of navigation and security in the Indian Ocean (*Atalanta*, CRIMARIO II) and to launch a similar one in the Pacific.<sup>40</sup>

Among the EU countries, Germany and the Netherlands seem to be the most important partners for France in the Indo-Pacific, as they have presented their own strategies or guidelines for the region. In order to encourage Germany to cooperate in shaping a joint EU strategy, France also emphasises the non-military goals of its actions.<sup>41</sup> Macron hopes that during the French presidency of the Council, Germany, as well as Italy, Spain and the Netherlands, will support France in its ambitions to focus the EU's attention on the Indo-Pacific.

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[France needs Britain](#) to lend credence to its military presence in the Indo-Pacific. AUKUS, though, can significantly hamper that cooperation, although both countries still share the goal of promoting multilateralism, freedom of navigation, the primacy of international law, and human rights. Parly emphasised the friendly nature of the competition between France and the

United Kingdom in sending more naval forces to patrol the Indo-Pacific waters.<sup>42</sup> Despite the crisis of confidence caused by leaving France outside the alliance of the three English-speaking countries, France and the UK will seek to coordinate sea expeditions in the Indo-Pacific.

Due to the commonality of goals, France, Germany, and the UK (acting as the "E3" group) regularly issue joint declarations on the security situation in the Indo-Pacific, such as the *note verbale* addressed in September 2020 to the UN Secretary-General in which the three states expressed their strict adherence to UNCLOS and rejection of China's "historic claims" in the South China Sea.<sup>43</sup>

## Challenges and Threats

France considers the deepening U.S.-Chinese rivalry and the resulting crisis of multilateralism to be the greatest threat to the territorial integrity and security of its lands in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>44</sup> The French authorities also see a risk of "nuclear multipolarity", with the development of nuclear forces in China, Pakistan, and North Korea, as well as Iran's ambitions (India's arsenal is not mentioned in the French defence strategy). While most threats to freedom of navigation, democracy, and the rule of law are linked to China's expansion, the French strategic documents are also critical of unilateral U.S. decisions, such as its withdrawal from the INF treaty or the JCPOA.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> "Indo-Pacific: Council adopts conclusions on EU strategy for cooperation," European Commission, 16 September 2021, [www.ec.europa.eu](http://www.ec.europa.eu).

<sup>39</sup> *France's Indo-Pacific Strategy*, op. cit., p. 68.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 71.

<sup>41</sup> D. Camroux, Ch. Jaffrelot, "L'Indo-Pacifique : quels contours ? Quels enjeux ?," Sciences Po, 28 March 2021, [www.sciencespo.fr](http://www.sciencespo.fr).

<sup>42</sup> "Discours de Florence Parly ...," op. cit.

<sup>43</sup> P. Jha, "France, Germany and the UK note verbale to the UN on the SCS issue," *Modern Diplomacy*, 23 September 2020, [www.moderndiplomacy.eu](http://www.moderndiplomacy.eu).

<sup>44</sup> "French Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific," op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, p.11.

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The emphasis placed in the French strategy on promoting multilateralism is above all an expression of France's reluctance to make policy dependent on U.S. strategy, perceived as unpredictable and changing.

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This assessment of the situation was confirmed in the eyes of the French authorities by Trump's unilateral policies, then the way in which U.S. troops were pulled out of Afghanistan, perceived as chaotic in France, and then in particular by the unexpected conclusion of the AUKUS agreement. However, the French quest for independence is being put to the test by China's increasing aggressiveness, which has encouraged the French authorities in the last several months to strengthen ties with partners in the Quad format and together with the U.S. China has made France

understand that its actions are perceived as threats to China's interests. Macron's announcements regarding the diversification of supply chains, securing French companies against takeovers, fighting cyberattacks, or selling weapons to Taiwan trigger a reaction in the form of interference by Chinese diplomats and media in French domestic policy and the intensification of aggressive rhetoric. The testing by the French Navy of the limits of freedom of navigation in international waters off the coast of China may further encourage the Chinese authorities to try to tie France's actions to U.S. strategy.<sup>46</sup>

The weakness of France's involvement in the Indo-Pacific is its limited scope in relation to the scale of France's challenges and ambitions. Its military presence in the region is dispersed, and its participation in naval operations is still only occasional. [Although French defence spending has been increasing](#) since the beginning of Macron's presidency, the primary task of the armed forces still remains the defence of French territory in Europe and expeditionary tasks in the Sahel. The French authorities have not decided, for example, to build a second aircraft carrier, which would allow for continuous operations. [France's nuclear potential](#) appears to be an effective deterrent against an attack on French overseas territories at the moment, but does not in itself provide a sufficient guarantee for the defence needs of France's non-nuclear partners, such as Australia and Japan.

## Conclusions and Prospects

The French strategy for the Indo-Pacific fits in with Macron's narratives of rebuilding France's role as a global power. France's military strengths justify the country's ability to defend its own territory and promote the export of military technology, but are not a factor that could make its most important partners (especially Australia and Japan) perceive France as a key ally in the event of a conflict with China. For its part, China does not seem to accept even a limited presence of France near its borders or claims and is reacting to it by equating France's actions with the U.S. strategy. Under these conditions, the room for emphasising French independence in the rivalry between the U.S. and China will narrow.

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The conclusion of the AUKUS defence pact between Australia, the UK, and the U.S., and sidelining France, illustrates the basic weakness of the French involvement in the Indo-Pacific, which is the lack of the ability and willingness to provide partners with allied guarantees. China's increasingly expansive policy pushes countries in the region with no nuclear deterrence potential to strengthen their ties with the U.S. as the only credible guarantor of security. It will also have an impact on their purchasing decisions in the area of military modernisation. France will, however, continue to try to emphasise its independence, for example, by strengthening defence and economic cooperation with

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<sup>46</sup> M. J. Valencia, "With its support for US strategy, France is playing with fire in the South China Sea," *South China Morning Post*, 12 March 2021, [www.scmp.com](http://www.scmp.com).



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India and some ASEAN countries. India, a nuclear power, does not need external allied guarantees and, like France, is not interested in the bipolar rivalry between the U.S. and China in the Indo-Pacific.

Another way to increase the importance of France in the Indo-Pacific is to involve the EU in active policy in this area. Promoting the EU's political, military, and economic involvement in the Indo-Pacific fits in with the French vision of the "EU as a power". The challenge for France may be to find partners in the EU capable of ensuring the regular presence of a navy in the Indo-Pacific, which makes France seek close cooperation with the UK, despite the distrust stirred up by the conclusion of the AUKUS pact without France. The matter of the EU's common economic goals in the Indo-Pacific raise even more questions as the industries of the Member States often compete with each other in the struggle for Asian markets.<sup>47</sup> It seems that the most appropriate way to shape EU policy towards the Indo-Pacific is to regain control of security-critical supply chains, use European market access as a negotiating factor to reduce the trade deficit, and promote common values (e.g., by favouring trade and investment agreements with democratic states) and coordinating development cooperation.

Emphasising the turn of France and the EU towards the Indo-Pacific may also raise doubts among France's European allies, including Poland, as to the appropriate selection of priorities. Brexit has made France the greatest EU military power. However, France's involvement in counteracting the greatest threat to EU security—Russian aggression (mentioned at the very beginning of the "Strategic Update" issued by the French Ministry of Armed Forces<sup>48</sup>)—seems insufficient. The French authorities are also inconsistent when, while noting their reluctance to confront China, suggest at the same time that the scale of this threat should induce the U.S. and NATO to adopt a more conciliatory policy towards Russia.<sup>49</sup> The EU partners will expect France to participate first in building up the EU's defence capabilities before committing to the significant involvement of Community resources in the Indo-Pacific.

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<sup>47</sup> In June 2021, Indonesia ordered the construction of six frigates and the modernisation of two more at the Italian shipyard Fincantieri. This caused a stir in the French shipbuilding industry because it is struggling with a shortage of new orders. M. Cabirol, *Le coup de tonnerre de Fincantieri en Indonésie secoue fortement la France*, *La Tribune*, 17 June 2021, [www.latribune.fr](http://www.latribune.fr).

<sup>48</sup> "Actualisation stratégique 2021," *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>49</sup> "Pour Macron, la Russie n'a pas d'autre choix qu'un 'partenariat' avec l'Europe," *L'Express*, 7 November 2019, [www.lexpress.fr](http://www.lexpress.fr).