

# France in the Indo-Pacific

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## Abstract

*France is hardly mentioned in discussions pertaining to major stakeholders in the Indo-Pacific Region (IPR). With territories in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans, France is a resident power in the region. With its military power projection capability, strategic partnerships and arms agreements, it is actually a major player across the IPR. It is one of the few countries that have published an Indo-Pacific policy document. This article traces French interests and activities in the IPR to highlight its relevance in the region. This includes its territories, military presence, bilateral/ trilateral/ multilateral engagements, defence cooperation, arms exports, military deployments, and cooperation in the sectors of space and nuclear energy. The article highlights how this engagement is set to increase further due to the push by the European Union (EU) nations for strategic autonomy in the realm of security, with France leading the way.*

*India and France are strategic partners with collaborations across multiple sectors that include defence, space and nuclear power. Both nations have stated intentions to jointly explore possibilities of cooperation with other nations and to work towards building a regional architecture for stability. During the year 2018, a mutual military logistics agreement was concluded and the space agencies are collaborating on technology to enhance Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) in the Indian Ocean Region. The French presence in the IPR is very relevant for India.*

## Introduction

France has been curiously under-estimated in the narratives

being woven about the Indo-Pacific Region (IPR). With territories in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans, France is a resident power in the region. With its military power projection capability, strategic partnerships and arms agreements, it is actually a major player in the environment of contest and contestation across the IPR. The Indo-Pacific mapping suits France since it has territories at either ends of this region and hence, has an interest in the stability and freedom of navigation in the common maritime channel traversing it. It is one of the few countries that have published an indo-Pacific policy document.

### **French Interests**

France has elaborately narrated its interests in various policy documents released over the years. These include Defence and National Security White Papers of 1972, 1994 and 2008, Blue Book: National Strategy of the Oceans of 2009, Southern Indian Ocean Blue Book of 2011, Defence White Paper of 2015, National Strategy for Security of Maritime Areas of 2015, France and Security in the Asia Pacific of 2016, National Security Strategic Review of 2017 and France and Security in the Indo-Pacific of 2018. These documents indicate the geographical expansion of French security outlook over these years.<sup>1</sup>

The issues flagged by the Indo-Pacific policy document include security responsibilities of a 'resident power' (protection of its territories, Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) and population); threats to multilateralism and international order due to the big power rivalry and weakening of rule of law; threats from terrorism, nuclear proliferation (North Korea) and climate change. To counter these challenges, France intends to develop a network of strategic partnerships in the Indo-Pacific with countries like India, Australia, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, New Zealand, Indonesia and Vietnam. It wishes to contribute to building of regional security architecture.<sup>2</sup> The document describes the Indo-Pacific as "from the east African coastline to the west American seaboard". This

geographical mapping matches India's construct as outlined by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the Keynote Address at the Shangri-La Dialogue.

French Defence Ministers have addressed the Shangri-La Dialogue for the last three years. Each one has invoked 'rule based international order' and 'freedom of navigation', and spoken with unusual frankness on the need to uphold international maritime law in the South China Sea. They have clearly announced intentions for greater European presence in these waters.<sup>3,4,5</sup>

### **Territories**

France can claim to be a resident Indo-Pacific power due to the island territories it possesses, in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans, under varied administrative arrangements. By virtue of these numerous island territories, it claims 11 million square kilometres of EEZs that is the second largest in the world.<sup>6</sup> 67 per cent of it is in the Pacific Ocean and 27 per cent in the Indian Ocean. The territories are listed in **Table 1**. There are 1.5 million French citizens in these territories and 200,000 more in other countries of the IPR. There are lingering territorial disputes over Mayotte and the four Scattered Islands with neighbouring nations.

### **Military Presence**

France maintains permanent military presence in the IPR with the stationing of 7000 personnel – 4100 in the Indian Ocean and 2900 in the Pacific Ocean.<sup>7</sup>

The Indian Ocean Islands of Reunion and Mayotte have two frigates (with integral helicopter), one multi-mission ship, two patrol vessels (including one polar patrol vessel) and two tactical transport aircraft. The Pacific Ocean islands of French Polynesia and New Caledonia have three frigates (with integral helicopters), two multi-mission ships, three patrol vessels, five maritime surveillance aircraft, four tactical transport aircraft and five helicopters.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, it has bases at United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Djibouti. The base in UAE was commissioned in May 2009 and

has 650 personnel<sup>9</sup>. It has naval, air and land forces. The air component has six Rafale aircraft and one tactical transport aircraft. The naval facility enables docking of all French naval vessels except its aircraft carrier. The base at Djibouti is the largest French base overseas with 1450 personnel.<sup>10</sup> It has four Mirage-2000 aircraft, eight helicopters and one tactical transport aircraft.<sup>11</sup>

There are four regional Joint Commands – Commander of the French Armed Forces in the South of the Indian Ocean (COMSOP FAZSOI), Commander of the French Armed Forces in New Caledonia (COMSOP FANC), Commander of the French Armed Forces in French Polynesia and Commander of the Pacific Ocean Maritime Zone (COMSOP FAPF/ALPACI), Commander of the French Armed Forces in the United Arab Emirates and Commander of the Indian Ocean Maritime Zone (COMSOP FFEAU/AL INDIEN).

### **Bilateral Engagements**

France has concluded numerous strategic partnerships across the region – South Korea (1992), Cambodia (1993 and 1994), Malaysia (1994), Philippines (1994), Japan (1995, Ministerial level in 2012), China (1997), Singapore (1998, 2012), India (1998), South Korea (2004), Indonesia (2011), Australia (2012), Vietnam (2013) and Thailand (2016). Its primary partners in the region are India, Australia, United States and Japan. It has also strengthened ties with Malaysia, Singapore, New Zealand, Indonesia and Vietnam “as well”.<sup>12</sup> France has forged close economic and military relations in West Asia, especially with UAE and Qatar. Both President Emmanuel Macron and his predecessor Francois Hollande have visited the region extensively. President Hollande was the first President ever to visit Australia in 2014 (for a G20 summit) and Singapore in 2017. President Macron’s visit to Australia last year was the second by a French president. To face the security challenges in the region, France seeks to “develop a network of strategic partnerships”.

The India-France relationship is one of the most important with cooperation across multiple sectors – defence, space, nuclear energy, solar energy and climate change. On the occasion

of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the strategic partnership between India and France, the relationship has been upgraded with the decision to hold biennial summits between the Prime Minister of India and the President of the French Republic. Both countries have agreed to cooperate in developing strategic partnerships with other countries.

The France-Japan Treaty of Friendship and Trade of 1858 is the oldest and ties are consolidating in the 160<sup>th</sup> anniversary year. The partnership was elevated to an 'exceptional' level in 2013 and the first Ministerial level 2+2 (Foreign and Defence) Dialogue was held in January 2014 at Tokyo. The third such dialogue was held last year. Japan is France's second largest trading partner in Asia (after China) and the region's leading investor in France. Cooperation in Africa, initiated with a plan for sustainable development, health and security, was adopted on 05 Oct 2015.

With Australia, the Strategic partnership that commenced in 2012 was enhanced in 2017.<sup>13</sup> It includes annual dialogues between the Foreign ministers and Defence ministers. Both nations have agreed to cooperate in the IPR. As with India, the cooperation is across several sectors. France has a lot of technical collaboration with Singapore. A Joint Declaration on innovation was signed in 2017.

On 4 June 1886, France and Korea signed a Treaty of Friendship and Commerce, marking the start of diplomatic relations. Comprehensive partnership for the 21<sup>st</sup> century between France and South Korea began in 2004 and the action plan was adopted by the Heads of State in November 2015.

### **Trilateral Engagements**

Trilateral engagements are increasingly providing linkages between like-minded nations. France, Australia and New Zealand signed the FRANZ Arrangement on 22 December 1992 to coordinate Human Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR). Since the agreement has been signed, military forces of the three nations have been deployed on more than 30 occasions to assist Pacific Island states.

During his May 2018 visit to Australia, President Macron suggested collaboration between France, India and Australia to respond to the challenges of the region.<sup>14</sup> India and France are also contemplating trilateral arrangements with UAE.<sup>15</sup>

### **Multilateral Engagements**

France is a strong advocate of multilateralism and has been engaged with multilateral forums across the region. It has announced its intention to engage in the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus), of which it is still not a member.

France is a Dialogue Partner of Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) since 2011 and has Observer status in the African Union. It is a member of the Indian Ocean Commission, Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group, Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) and South Pacific Defence Ministers Meeting.

The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia that was established by founding members of ASEAN was acceded to by France in January 2007.

In September 2016, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) admitted France's Pacific territories of New Caledonia and French Polynesia as full members making it a stakeholder in the organisation. Wallis and Futuna gained observer status in 2006, which France is currently seeking to upgrade to Associate Membership.

### **Defence Cooperation**

Defence Cooperation with India has been upgraded during the visit of President Macron to New Delhi in March 2018. Agreement on provisioning of Reciprocal Logistics Support was concluded to extend logistical support on reciprocal access to Indian and French Armed Forces. To enhance MDA, the White Shipping Agreement signed in January 2017 has been made operational. Bilateral naval exercises were initiated in 1983. They were christened as "Varuna" in 2001 and the 16<sup>th</sup> edition was held in the Indian Ocean in 2018. The last Army joint exercise "Shakti"

was held in France in January 2018 and the Air Force joint exercise “Garuda” (initiated in 2003) will be held in France in 2019.

With Japan, the first ever bilateral naval exercise was conducted in February 2018. The two countries have signed an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) for mutual logistics support (including ammunition) between their militaries. Defence equipment and technology cooperation has commenced with a joint study on next-generation mine detection technology. Joint development of undersea drones for mine-sweeping is under discussion.

With Australia, the Defence Cooperation and Status of Forces agreement was signed on 14 December 2006. The Future Submarine Project of Australia is a major component of the partnership. The armed forces have signed a bilateral Mutual Logistics Support Agreement aiming to enhance their interoperability.

In South East Asia, France has Defence Cooperation Agreements with Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam. Singapore is France’s second largest partner in defence research and technology. The Ministers for Defence of France and Singapore meet roughly twice per year. France has hosted Singapore Air Force Advanced Jet Training detachment in Cazaux since 1998. In March 2018, a high-level French defence ministry delegation visited Manila for the first Philippines-France Joint Cooperation Committee meeting.<sup>16</sup>

France signed a 15 year Defence Agreement with UAE in 2012. Bilateral military exercises are organized on a regular basis in the emirates.

Agreement for security and defence cooperation between France and Qatar was signed in 1994. In 2011, French and Qatari pilots were jointly deployed in operations in Libya.

The Defence cooperation treaty between France and Djibouti was signed in Paris on 21 December 2011. It entered into force on 01 May 2014.

France has been organising the Croix du Sud (Southern Cross) biennial, multilateral exercise for HADR in the Pacific Islands since 2002. 1800 soldiers from 12 countries participated in the 2016 edition.<sup>17</sup>

France has been involved in the multilateral anti-piracy operations at the Horn of Africa and collaboration for capacity enhancement of nations in the region. There are two EU operations - EUNAVFOR Atlanta launched in 2008 to combat piracy off the coast and EUCAP Nestor launched in 2012 to enhance maritime and judicial capacity of countries in the region. Military capacities are also being strengthened in Somalia, with the help of EUTM Somalia, a mission launched in 2010. The other related multilateral activities are Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS) and Shared Awareness and Deconfliction Mechanism (SHADE).

France has participated in setting up the regional maritime Information Fusion Centre at Madagascar and the regional centre for coordination of maritime operations at Seychelles, as part of the European Maritime Security (MASE) programme.<sup>18</sup>

### **Arms Exports**

For the period 2013-17, France was the third largest arms exporter in the world (6.7 per cent of global sales) and its major clients were Egypt, China and India. The geographical distribution of the total arms exports in this period was – 42 per cent to West Asia, 31 per cent to Asia and Oceania, 10 per cent to Europe, 9.1 per cent to Americas and 7.5 per cent to Africa.<sup>19</sup> France is a major supplier for Saudi Arabia (third largest), India (fourth largest), UAE (second largest), China (second largest), Malaysia (second largest), Australia (third largest), Singapore (second largest), Kuwait (third largest) and Indonesia (third largest).

As per the French Indo-Pacific document, its major customers in the region between 2008 and 2017 were India, Singapore, Malaysia, South Korea, Indonesia and Australia.<sup>20</sup>

France has been a traditional defence equipment supplier for numerous countries across West Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia. The deals in the recent past include six Scorpene



submarines and 36 Rafale aircraft for India, 36 Rafale aircraft for Qatar, 12 submarines for Australia, six frigates for Malaysia and CAESAR 155 mm howitzers to Indonesia.

### **Military Deployment**

France has been engaged in peacekeeping and military operations in the region as part of its international security responsibilities. This includes UN missions for Cambodia (UN Advance Mission in Cambodia UNAMIC and UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia UNTAC), 1990-91 Gulf War, East Timor (Operation INTERFET in 1999-2000) and monitoring in Aceh (2005). It was part of the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom of 2001 and the International Security Assistance Force thereafter that operated in Afghanistan. The peak deployment of 4000 troops was in 2010.<sup>21</sup> It lost 83 soldiers in the operations.<sup>22</sup> However, it withdrew its troops in 2012. France also sent its aircraft carrier, the Charles de Gaulle, to the Persian Gulf to carry out strikes against ISIS in Syria and Iraq at the end of 2015.

The annual “Jeanne d’ Arc” mission is a long term (five months) deployment of an amphibious task force, with integrated United Kingdom units and personnel. In addition to amphibious exercises with regional navies and US Marines, the task force makes port calls across the region. Since 2014, French naval vessels have regularly transited the South China Sea and made port calls in the region. Five ships did this sailing in 2017.<sup>23</sup>

In September 2018, a French Air Force contingent was deployed on Mission PEGASE. The contingent participated in the multilateral exercise Pitch Black in Australia. Thereafter, it flew to Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Singapore, India and UAE. It had three Rafale fighter aircraft, one A400M plane, one C-135 plane and one A310 plane, in addition to 100 personnel.

In May 2018, the navies of USA, UK, France and Japan held an amphibious exercise off American islands in the Pacific. The French Foreign Minister indicated that France is keen on joint and multilateral exercises with Japan in the region.<sup>24</sup> The French aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle is expected to complete its refit

soon. Defence Minister Florence Parly has indicated that the aircraft carrier will be deployed to Indian Ocean in 2019.<sup>25</sup>

In addition, France is a regular participant in bilateral and multilateral exercises across the region like RIMPAC, Kakadu, Talisman Sabre, Cobra Gold, Pacific Partnership, Ulchi Freedom Guardian, Key Resolve, Southern Katipo, Kurukuru, Takafula, Castor, Khaan Quest, Southern Katipo, Papangue, Diana and Cutlass Express.

### **Space Cooperation**

The French and Indian space agencies have a long association that commenced with an agreement in 1964. Over 20 Indian satellites have been launched by French launch vehicles commencing with India's 1st communication satellite launched in 1981. As per the "Joint Vision for Space Cooperation" of 2018, the space agencies will work together to co-develop products "to monitor and protect the assets in land and sea", including Automatic Identification System (AIS) for detection, identification, and monitoring of vessels. Both agencies will also begin working on launching a constellation of maritime surveillance satellites focused on the Indian Ocean.<sup>26</sup> The other joint projects under an umbrella agreement operative since 1993 include Megha-Tropiques, Saral-Altika, Trishna satellite and Oceansat 3-Argos mission.

The Ariane 5 has been used to launch satellites of Australia, Vietnam, Saudi Arabia, South Korea and Indonesia. UAE's communication satellite Al Yah 3 and Japan's dual use communication satellite DSN1/Superbirds were launched from French Guiana in January and April 2018 respectively.<sup>27</sup> France and UAE have agreed to develop a joint hyper-spectral imaging satellite to support efforts to tackle climate change.<sup>28</sup>

### **Nuclear Cooperation**

Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd (NPCIL) and the French Électricité de France (EDF) have an agreement for construction of six nuclear power reactor units at Jaitapur. Once installed, the Jaitapur project will be the largest nuclear power plant in the

world, with a total capacity of 9.6 GW. France and Japan too have a long-standing civil nuclear energy partnership.

### **European Strategic Autonomy**

With the USA perceived to be rescinding its global responsibilities, Europe has initiated the quest for strategic autonomy. This is expected to provide greater salience to the French in the IPR. President Macron's "Initiative for Europe" or "Europe Intervention Initiative" (EII) speech at Sorbonne in 2017 spelt out the steps – establish a common intervention force, European Defence Fund, a common doctrine for action, and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO).<sup>29</sup> French President Emmanuel Macron has spearheaded the creation of this European military force and 10 nations have joined the EII.<sup>30,31,32,33</sup>

EU has stepped up its engagements with Asia. The announcement of the EU-Asia Connectivity Plan to enhance connectivity, the recently released policy document on engagement with India, the Free Trade Agreement with Japan are all part of this push, and France led by President Macron is the most vocal advocate of it.<sup>34</sup>

### **Conclusion**

When Commander Abhilash Tomy of the Indian Navy got stranded during the Golden Globe Race 2018, in the southern Indian Ocean (about 2700 nautical miles or around 5000 km from Kanyakumari), it was a fishing patrol vessel (Osiris) owned by French seafood firm SAPMER that rescued him on 24 September 2018 and got him to the French administered island of Lil Amsterdam.

France is a major player in the IPR and its salience is expected to get more prominent with proactive foreign policy, forging of strategic relationships, active participation in creation of regional mechanisms for stability, increasing defence cooperation and military deployments.

### **Endnotes**

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