

# STRATEGY

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## France's Indo-Pacific strategy and its overseas territories in the Indian and Pacific oceans

Characteristics, capabilities, constraints and avenues for deepening the Franco-Australian strategic partnership



Nicolas Regaud

June 2021

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**Cover image:** A French Navy helicopter from FS Tonnerre approaches HMAS *Parramatta* as the two ships sail together in the South China Sea. Defence image library, [online](#).

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

France's strategy in the Indo-Pacific takes place in a context of regional political, economic and strategic re-engagement that dates back to the early 1990s. This has enabled France to develop a policy of partnerships legitimising its place and role as a power that's both global and a riparian Indo-Pacific state. Until the mid-2010s, it took place in a permissive context in which the US appeared to be the undisputed dominant power of a vast region from the Eastern Pacific to the Arabian Gulf. It was essentially the rise of China and the assertive policy led by Xi Jinping, combined with the erosion of American dominance and leadership, that led France to develop a real strategy in the Indo-Pacific. The policy's implementation relied upon strengthening cooperation with France's major strategic partners in the region, in particular Australia, India and Japan, as well as on its overseas territories in the Indian and Pacific oceans.

The broad outlines of this strategy have many points in common with those developed by France's major partners, particularly with regard to free access to contested global commons and the rejection of any hegemonism, but it's nearly unique in its insistence on the importance of multilateralism, from the fight against climate change to France's refusal to direct its strategy 'against' a state. Indeed, as the EU stated in March 2019, China is seen as a cooperative partner, a competitor and a systemic rival when promoting alternative governance models. But what differentiates the European and French approaches is that France has a significant territorial, human and military presence in the Indo-Pacific, which increases the stakes and France's potential for action.

The political statutes of the *départements* (Réunion and Mayotte) and the overseas collectivities (New Caledonia, French Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna Islands) are different: the former are inalienable parts of the national territory, while the latter have very broad autonomy, to possibly evolve until independence as far as New Caledonia is concerned. Consequently, the policy led by Paris can't be articulated in exactly the same way, even if the desire to promote the integration of those territories into their regional areas is common to all. French policy in the Indo-Pacific is therefore partially contingent on the evolution of its territories on the statutory level and their will and capacity to be relays for regional action in Paris. Their low economic, energy and food autonomy is unlikely to change in the short or medium terms, while their defence and security remain the exclusive responsibility of mainland France. On the military level, France's pre-positioned capabilities are just sufficient to ensure the missions of sovereignty and in its regional cooperation activities, Paris seeking to compensate for its limits, notably by the development of long-distance air and naval projection capacities.

It's certainly in terms of its economic presence and official development assistance (ODA) commitment that the French strategy suffers from the most significant limitations, which may nevertheless be offset by a growing commitment from the EU. The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, which should be released in September 2021, may ease that pressure. Indeed, in a context of multiple and heavy external commitments (in Europe, Africa and the Near and Middle East), France can't engage more in the Indo-Pacific other than through strategic partnerships allowing it to pool efforts at all levels (political, military, economic) to meet China's and global challenges (climate change, environmental protection, health, terrorism, piracy, cybersecurity and so on).

By proposing the construction of an 'Indo-Pacific axis' to his Indian and Australian partners, President Emmanuel Macron aimed to highlight the potential for trilateral cooperation in the region, in particular in the Indian Ocean, taking into account the French overseas territories and their fragile neighbourhoods. One of the main tools at France's disposal is to contribute to the construction of a regional political and security architecture to better respond to challenges by promoting the development of the capacities of vulnerable countries, particularly in the regions surrounding its overseas territories. Among the avenues for progress, Australia could consider taking up observer status at the Indian Ocean Commission, as that subregional cooperation platform is likely to play an increasing role in development, environmental protection and maritime security. Australia could also share its experience gained from the Pacific Fusion Centre, with a view to the centre's possible duplication in the southwest Indian Ocean, and consider having a liaison officer at the Madagascar-based Regional Maritime Information Fusion Center (a body supported by the Indian Ocean Commission and responsible for maritime domain awareness in the Western Indian Ocean). France became a full member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) in December 2020, so exchanges with France could develop in that context, so that the association becomes a place of exchange and cooperation on climate and security issues. Finally, in its development assistance policy, Australia could consider increasing ODA directed to East African states bordering the Indian Ocean, while the strengthening of France's development assistance in the South Pacific could possibly involve the conclusion of a partnership agreement between the French Development Agency and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

# INTRODUCTION

A historical detour is essential for questioning the coherence of France's foreign and security policy in the Indo-Pacific. The policy was formalised for the first time at a high level in 2018, but it's being applied in the context of France's strategic re-engagement in Asia, which dates back to the very beginning of the 1990s. To understand the springs of France's foreign and security policy in the southern Indian Ocean and in the Pacific, which is the main subject of this study,<sup>1</sup> it's essential to take a step back and broaden one's geopolitical focal length in order to embrace the whole Indo-Pacific region—a concept adopted by France since 2018 because it fitted well with France's geopolitical characteristics and its significant territorial, human, economic and military presence in both the Indian and the Pacific oceans.

Until the mid-2010s, France reinvested in the region without an explicit overall strategy or high-level political impetus. This politico-strategic re-engagement took place in a favourable geopolitical context, marked by the end of the Cold War, the establishment of flexible and inclusive multilateralism (driven, in particular, by ASEAN) and a spectacular development of economic exchanges from which the Asia-Pacific region emerged as a new engine of the global economy. Certainly, one could be worried about the persistence of old tensions between powers, as well as within countries beset by centrifugal forces, but the American superpower remained unchallenged and seemed able to control international tensions, ensure the security of trade flows necessary for economic development and promote the development of democracy and standards of good governance. It was a favourable context for a re-engagement of France in the Asia-Pacific, economically, diplomatically and, to a certain extent, militarily. The developments that have taken place during the two decades straddling the turn of the century are important insofar as France's recent Indo-Pacific strategy can be based on a whole set of achievements that, from now on, can make sense and contribute to the implementation of a strategy that's both global and regional.

The first part of this study is therefore devoted to a historical perspective on France's commitment in the Asia-Pacific.<sup>2</sup> The second part examines events at the turn of the 2010s that would lead to a change of scale and the development of a strategy in the Indo-Pacific (with written documents, guidelines and a political narrative), aiming at the same time to take into account the evolution of the stakes and a hardening of the risks and threats, the two main game-changers being (to simplify) the appearance of a hegemonic Chinese policy and the erosion of American leadership.

That perspective then makes it possible to analyse in more detail the actions carried out by France in the southwest Indian Ocean and the Pacific, particularly from its overseas territories, while underlining the political and material constraints weighing on its regional commitment. Finally, the last section suggests some avenues for deepening Franco-Australian cooperation in those two subregions.

# THE END OF THE COLD WAR, FOLLOWED BY GLOBALISATION AND RE-ENGAGEMENT IN ASIA

On the diplomatic, strategic and economic levels, the end of the first Indochina conflict signalled the demise of France as a great power in the Asian theatre. The French expeditionary force left Vietnam in April 1956, and the last French military base in Asia, in Laos, was closed in 1963. France was a party to the Treaty of Manila and a member of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), but it ceased to participate in SEATO's military exercises from 1965. Over the next 25 years, France played only a negligible role in the politico-strategic affairs of the region. However, some of its activities were the subject of strong criticism from its Pacific neighbours, particularly the 46 atmospheric and then 147 underground nuclear tests carried out from 1966 at the Pacific Experiments Centre on the atolls of Mururoa and Fangataufa. The non-aligned movement, especially India, also considered the French territories of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, whatever their specific history and political status, as territories to be decolonised—a posture that didn't favour their regional integration or the development of an ambitious French policy in the region. Regional integration was all the more limited because, at that time, Paris didn't want it.

However, France benefited from a certain international aura because of the policy of independence embodied by General de Gaulle and, in Asia, was able to support the development of the armed forces of several newly sovereign countries—in particular, India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore—while Australia looked to Paris to modernise its combat aviation.<sup>3</sup> But that didn't make a policy and, like the UK, which withdrew from east of Suez in 1971, France was commonly perceived as an external neocolonial power in the region.

The end of the Cold War offered France an extraordinary opportunity to play in the first division through her key diplomatic role in the settlement of the third Indochina conflict (1978-1991) at the end of the 1980s, which culminated in the Paris Peace Agreements of October 1991. France made a very significant contribution to UN military operations in Cambodia (UNAMIC and then UNTAC<sup>4</sup>) by deploying nearly 1,500 soldiers, the second-largest contingent after that of Indonesia, which was the co-sponsor of the peace negotiations.<sup>5</sup> That commitment to the resolution of the conflict favoured, for the first time, a coordinated diplomatic and military approach, as well as a substantial dialogue with countries that would become major strategic partners, such as Australia, Japan, Indonesia and Vietnam.

More modestly, France participated in the resolution of another conflict in Southeast Asia by deploying 600 troops as part of INTERFET<sup>6</sup> in East Timor, under a UN mandate, at the turn of the century. A third significant operational engagement was that following the tsunami that devastated several countries in the Indian Ocean in 2004, for which France mobilised 1,300 military personnel and numerous naval and air assets as part of a humanitarian relief operation of unprecedented scale.

Besides those exceptional operational commitments, signifying a desire to contribute to regional security beyond words and diplomacy, France initiated a first series of dialogues and strategic partnerships with the major regional powers—Japan (1995), China (1997) and India (1998)—but also cooperation agreements with middle powers in East Asia and the Pacific. In December 1992, France and its Australian and New Zealand partners concluded an agreement on cooperation in humanitarian assistance in the event of natural disasters in the South Pacific (known as the FRANZ agreement), which allowed the coordination of relief operations for the benefit of the regional island states regularly hit by tropical storms and cyclones. Since that date, the Armed Forces of New Caledonia (FANC)

and the Armed Forces of French Polynesia (FAPF) have participated in around 30 humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations in the region within the FRANZ framework. France's relations with the Oceanian countries were nevertheless to experience serious turbulence due to the last French nuclear test series between September 1995 and January 1996. But the signing of the Treaty of Rarotonga in March 1996, then the signing of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in September 1996, and finally the closure of the Pacific Experiments Centre in 1998, not only allowed France's relations with its Pacific neighbours to normalise, but gave new impetus to their cooperation. This was evidenced in particular by the participation of France, from 1998, in the Quadrilateral Defense Coordination Group (since renamed the Pacific QUAD) alongside the US, Australia and New Zealand—the objective of which is to coordinate the security effort in the South Pacific, primarily in the maritime domain, for the benefit of island states.

France's re-engagement was also economic in nature, as the Asia–Pacific region emerged as the new global centre of production, trade and innovation. France's trade with the countries of the region has thus quadrupled in 30 years, while its share in non-EU trade has increased from 14% at the end of the 1980s to 24% in 2000 and more than 30% since the mid-2010s. On the military level, that resulted in a doubling of the Asia–Pacific's share in French arms exports, which went from one-sixth in the early 1990s to nearly one-third since the beginning of the 2010s, or an average of US\$3 billion per year in orders.<sup>7</sup>

The nature of France's re-engagement in the region reflected that of the regional strategic context, which can be qualified as permissive and marked more by the persistence of old intra- and inter-state tensions and the emergence of global threats calling for multilateral responses. During this period, the political, economic, technological and military dominance of the US remained unchallenged. Admittedly, France's 1994 Defence White Paper underlined the development of Chinese naval capabilities, the North Korean nuclear issue, the proliferation of nuclear and ballistic technologies and the growing importance of peri-Asian maritime communication routes for French foreign trade. But it was essentially a question of taking note of the risks and threats in a region of growing importance at all levels—which the American superpower seemed able to master—rather than of considering that they should lead to significant changes in France's foreign and defence policies. On the contrary, this period was marked by a significant reduction in the military resources deployed in the overseas territories of the Indian and Pacific oceans.

A first significant change occurred with the 2008 White Paper on Defence and National Security, which took into account the strategic consequences of globalisation and the new interdependencies that it fostered and stressed that 'major conflicts in Asia would undoubtedly affect the interests of France and Europe.' It noted, in particular, the consequences of a possible conflict in the region for the security of critical maritime routes, its global economic and financial repercussions, and the consequences for Europe of a conflict involving the US, which is the guarantor of the security of several states in the region. It therefore concluded that 'the prevention of major conflicts in Asia is a central objective for all international actors.'<sup>8</sup>

In line with that general objective of prevention, France continued its bilateral and multilateral commitment during the first decade of the century, for example by becoming the first European country to sign the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, in July 2006, and by establishing a series of strategic partnerships with countries in Southeast Asia and Oceania,<sup>9</sup> mostly based on three pillars: politico-strategic dialogue; military cooperation; and technological and armament cooperation. That comprehensive approach aimed to make it possible to build convergences on strategic questions and, on that basis, to contribute to the strengthening of defence capabilities, including doctrine, operational training and equipment. It deserves to be underlined because it differs from the approach of other countries—mostly European—for which arms exports are a strictly industrial and commercial affair and don't involve political and military rapprochement and cooperation.

France increased its participation in a whole series of forums for dialogue and cooperation in the Asia–Pacific, such as the Chiefs of Defense Conference, the Pacific Intelligence Chiefs Conference, the Western Pacific Naval Symposium and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium. This was also a decade in which France initiated the European naval operation *Atalanta* to fight piracy in the northwest of the Indian Ocean (from 2008 onwards), while its armed forces deployed in the Indian and Pacific oceans began to be proactive at the regional level by organising multilateral military exercises—all initiatives that have contributed significantly to making France progressively appear as a net contributor to regional security. In the South Pacific, this involves in particular the biannual joint Exercise *Croix du Sud*, inaugurated by the FANC in 2002, which is focused on humanitarian relief and non-combatant evacuation operations and has gradually risen to become the main multinational HADR exercise in the South Pacific, in which around 10 countries from the region and more than 2,000 soldiers now participate.<sup>10</sup> The FAPF has been conducting a similar but more modest biannual regional exercise, *Marara*, while the Armed Forces of the South Indian Ocean (FAZSOI) have been organising the *Papangue*<sup>11</sup> and *Diana* exercises since the mid-2000s with the countries of the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC)—joint exercises that engage more than a thousand soldiers from the five countries every two years. But the most important exercises are organised with India, in particular in the naval field: Exercise *Varuna*, held annually since 2001, has continued to gain in importance and complexity, as illustrated in the 2019 edition,<sup>12</sup> which brought together 12 units in coordinated manoeuvres and, for the first time, in all three dimensions.

However, France’s growing participation in the regional security architecture during these two decades was built without a comprehensive plan, an explicit strategic vision or high-level political impetus as part of an essentially bottom-up approach; that is, it was driven by the administrations and without any interministerial coordination structured by a strategy or a dedicated joint action plan.

That patchwork of political and military initiatives made a policy of engagement, not a strategy, but that’s also true of other countries in the region, which took action in a post–Cold War context marked by the development of multilateralism, the actors’ focus on economic development and the benefits to be drawn from globalisation, and a policy of engagement with China, which then largely obeyed the ‘low profile’ line or the ‘24 characters’ policy stated by Deng Xiaoping in 1991.

The accelerated transformation of that strategic context from the beginning of the 2010s led France to change its approach, to structure its engagement policy, and thus respond to the expectations expressed by the partners with which Paris had built robust relationships based on political and strategic convergences.

# THE TURNING POINT OF THE 2010s AND THE FORMULATION OF A FRENCH STRATEGY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

A whole set of factors has helped to increase the importance of the strategic challenges for France in political and security developments in Asia–Pacific, leading to those developments being given a special place (20 paragraphs) in the White Paper issued in 2013. The perception of risks and threats was more worried than ever—Asia was termed ‘one of the regions of the world where the risks of tensions and conflicts are the highest’—while the consideration of interdependencies and the shrinking of strategic space–time led to the assertion that the prosperity of France ‘is henceforth inseparable from that of Asia’. Like previous White Papers, it stressed the importance of the sea lines of communication, which led it to conclude that ‘the stability of the Asian area and the freedom of navigation are diplomatic and economic priorities. *Alongside its allies, France would, in the event of an open crisis, make an appropriate political and military contribution*<sup>13</sup> (emphasis added).

Based on the presentation of the challenges in the White Paper, a summary document of France’s security commitments in the Asia–Pacific was published in April 2014.<sup>14</sup> The summary was jointly produced by the ministries of defence and foreign affairs and was intended to contribute to a better understanding and greater visibility of France’s regional actions, the challenge being both to explain the reasons for its regional strategic commitment and to legitimise its ambition to participate in some regional cooperation forums, such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus and the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia. This public diplomacy document aimed at officials in the Asia–Pacific region also had the advantage of giving French civilian and military officials an educational summary of the means available and the actions undertaken over the past 20 years, of which many were far from being aware, and so promoting their interest in this theatre and a better political understanding of it.

That wasn’t yet a strategy, however. It took a whole series of external events to lead to a shift in outlook between 2013 and 2017. Those events helped raise awareness of strategic tectonic shifts at the regional and global scales. This study doesn’t include an exhaustive analysis of those shifts, but I’ll mention a few of them:

- Tensions hardened after a series of *faits accomplis* and uses of force by China in 2012 and 2013: the takeover of Scarborough Shoal; a war of words with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, China’s declaration of an air defence identification zone in the East China Sea; and China’s reclamation of land and construction of military infrastructure in the South China Sea. Those events caused reverberations in France because of the threat they posed to freedom of navigation and overflight in international waters vital for Euro-Asian trade, but also because France’s allies and partners asked it to take a stand and made that a test of the credibility of France’s strategic engagement in the region. China’s refusal to comply with the judgement of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in July 2016 showed that China didn’t consider itself bound by its legal obligations under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, the terms of which it sought to reinterpret, in particular by asserting ‘historic rights’. The Court of Arbitration rightly invalidated those claims.

China was crossing a French ‘red line’ by posing a threat to international law and freedom of navigation and overflight, as the Minister of Defence, Jean-Yves Le Drian, clearly indicated in his speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2016.<sup>15</sup>

- The second shift was the launch of the One Belt, One Road project (now known as the Belt and Road Initiative) by Chinese President Xi Jinping in September 2013. The project couldn't fail to cause concern due to its global scale, the resources invested in it and its dual civil–strategic nature, which could potentially give China a hegemonic command of vast trade and digital flows resulting from globalisation. It demonstrated both the end of Deng Xiaoping's low-profile policy in the international arena and China's ambition to regain the global weight and dominant position in Asia that it had enjoyed until the beginning of the 19th century. It brought the risk of a new polarisation, the probable creation of spheres of influence and the extraction of strategic advantages from countries that had become dependent on Chinese investment, as the concession of a 99-year lease on the port of Hambantota and the construction of a Chinese military base in Djibouti in 2017 seemed to illustrate. France wasn't alone in its concerns about the spectacular development of the Chinese navy and the number and quality of its ships, which enabled Beijing to pursue its global oceanic ambitions, including its first long-term deployment of a nuclear attack submarine in the Indian Ocean in 2014.<sup>16</sup>
- The pusillanimity of American policy during the years from 2012 to 2015, which resulted from Washington's desire to put an end to the overextension of the Bush administration's external commitments, damaged relations with US allies and partners. In addition to Washington's naive management of the Scarborough Shoal affair in 2012, which made the Philippines doubt the US security commitment, Washington's refusal to react to the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime in 2013, despite the fact that President Obama had made such use a 'red line' a year earlier, also had negative repercussions. The allies of the US consequently questioned the solidity and durability of American security guarantees, particularly because of the absence of a coherent strategy to oppose the development of North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programs, China's assertiveness and the *aporia* of the 'pivot to Asia' announced by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2011, particularly in its economic dimension (the Trans-Pacific Partnership). For France, it thus appeared that what had been seen as a lasting achievement in the Asia–Pacific—a stabilising American hegemony—was in question, which both left the way open to those, such as the Chinese leadership, who would disrupt the *status quo*, but also led to stronger cooperation and multilateralism among democratic middle powers in the region.
- A significant strengthening of high-level relations between France and India, Japan and Australia during these years of transition encouraged a convergence of those nations' strategic visions. The election of President Trump brought a new American posture that was unilateralist, brutal, unpredictable and little concerned with taking into account the interests of allies (exemplified by the US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the Paris Agreement on climate, the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, and the chaotic management of the North Korean dossier), which reinforced the importance of the dialogue between middle powers. France's association with this cooperative dynamic was also a means of encouraging the EU to invest more in a theatre where the stakes are not only military but now cover almost all the fields in which power politics can be expressed, including physical and digital connectivity, trade and investments, humanitarian assistance, cybersecurity, and international law and standards. The establishment of an annual 2+2 ministerial dialogue between France and Japan in 2014, an enhanced strategic partnership between France and Australia in 2017 and the intensification of Franco-Indian cooperation from 2016, particularly to act in concert in the Indian Ocean region,<sup>17</sup> are evidence that France had made a major turn in its engagement in the Indo-Pacific.

The *Strategic review of defence and national security* published in October 2017 noted the major strategic changes that had taken place since 2013 and a general hardening of threats on the global scale, especially in Asia. It justified a revival of the defence force through a military programming law (2019–2023), breaking with 10 years of budget and staffing reductions and planning to devote 2% of GDP to defence by 2025 (around US\$350 billion from 2019 to 2025), up from a low point of 1.78% in 2017.

The review used the term 'Indo-Pacific region' for the first time in a French public document. It's important to note the stress placed on maritime security and the direct tone used to speak of China:

Sea lanes in the Indian Ocean are amongst the most strategically important for the world economy, with 25% of world seaborne trade and 75% of EU exports transiting through this maritime space. The Mozambique Channel is thus an area of strategic interest [and a] vital commercial sea lane still under the threat of piracy. In a different way, China's growing naval presence represents a new strategic challenge. Chinese presence in the region, which started in 2008, is now permanent, and relies both on an operational base in Djibouti and a support facility in Gwadar (Pakistan). This trend reflects China's strategic ambition to develop a long-term naval influence in a maritime area extending from the South China Sea to the whole Indian Ocean. China's activities have been widely seen as the most important element in reshaping the entire region's security dynamic. Littoral states worry about an increase in China's activities: this is true of India (historical stakeholder) as well as of Australia which, like France and the United States, has to cope with security issues both in the Pacific and the Indian Oceans.<sup>18</sup>

The review underlined the convergences of interest and the importance of the strategic partnerships built with the three large Indo-Pacific countries—India, Australia and Japan—as well as with close partners with smaller means of action, such as Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam and New Zealand. This point is important because the Indo-Pacific strategy that was to be developed over the next two years was essentially to be articulated with those partner countries within the framework of bilateral or plurilateral cooperation, particularly in the maritime domain.

It was President Emmanuel Macron who provided the decisive impetus for the development of an Indo-Pacific strategy. During his visit to Sydney in May 2018, in a speech at the Garden Island naval base,<sup>19</sup> he highlighted the challenges posed by China's new assertiveness and its Belt and Road Initiative, which he said were the main factors necessitating the development of 'new rules of the game'. He stressed the need for reciprocity in exchanges, the preservation of an international rules-based order, coordination between states in order to resist China's policy, and the protection of key economic sectors and critical technologies.

Macron proposed the building of an 'Indo-Pacific axis' with India and Australia (he added Japan in later speeches) that would be based on the pursuit of four major objectives:

- ensuring mutual security (the fight against terrorism, proliferation and illegal trafficking of all types)
- respect for international law and standards, particularly freedom of navigation and overflight in international areas
- the preservation of states' sovereignty and rejection of any hegemony
- the fight against climate change.

In a nutshell, this strategy isn't fundamentally different from the 'free and open Indo-Pacific' vision developed by India, Australia and Japan, but with the addition of climate change.

The defence strategy in the Indo-Pacific presented by Defence Minister Florence Parly at the Shangri-La Dialogue in May 2019 set out the major presidential orientations in the field of defence. This first regional strategy document for the ministry proposed a definition of the Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical unit stretching from the eastern coasts of Africa to the shores of the Americas, including all the Asian countries bordering the northern seas and oceans and Antarctica, and encompassing all the territories under national sovereignty as well as the five military commands operating in that vast area. Based on the indisputable reality of France as an 'archipelago country'—as described by Macron—in both the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, this is the French definition of the Indo-Pacific, which is different from that of the US but comparable to India's and Japan's definitions. The strategy distinguishes four strategic priorities in the Indo-Pacific and details how they can be achieved:

- Defend and ensure the integrity of our sovereignty, the protection of our nationals, territories and EEZ, those missions being at the core of our defence and national security strategy
- *Contribute to the security of regional environments surrounding our overseas territories* through the promotion of military and security cooperation [emphasis added]
- Maintain free and open access to the commons, in cooperation with our partners, and ensure the security of sea lanes of communication
- Assist in maintaining strategic stability through global action based on multilateralism, in order to protect European interests, including in the counter-proliferation domain.<sup>20</sup>

In terms of implementation, it's worth mentioning the importance given to the 'forces of sovereignty', whose installations in the Indian and Pacific oceans allow the routing and rapid deployment of additional capabilities and are outposts for surveillance, planning, protection and prevention.

Maritime issues are at the heart of the strategy, which underlines the importance of:

- open and free access to international passages and straits
- cooperation with France's partners on maritime security (India, Japan, Australia and possibly Indonesia)
- active participation in relevant regional maritime security forums (the Heads of Asian Coast Guard Agencies Meeting, the Western Pacific Naval Symposium, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia)
- regional maritime fusion centres, particularly those based in Singapore, Madagascar and India.

Shortly afterwards, the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs set out its own Indo-Pacific strategy, which covers a wider field, including the environment and economic, scientific and cultural exchanges.<sup>21</sup> It also has certain specific political features, such as inclusiveness, so as not to make it appear to be directed *against* China, which is a characteristic that differentiates it from the American strategy. It makes a greater effort than does the Ministry for the Armed Forces' document to integrate the countries of the Americas, East Africa and the Gulf, even if the countries of Asia and Oceania remain at the heart of the discourse. It also stresses the importance of multilateralism, whatever its weaknesses, and the central role of ASEAN in building a political, economic and security regional architecture. Finally, it underlines the importance of the EU both to protect the interests of the continent but also in terms of connectivity with Asia.



Figure 1: French military presence in the Indo-Pacific

Source: Armed Forces Ministry, *La stratégie de défense française en Indo-Pacifique* [French defence strategy in the Indo-Pacific], French Government, 24 June 2020, 5, online.

# FRENCH OVERSEAS TERRITORIES IN THE INDIAN AND PACIFIC OCEANS: CONVERGING APPROACHES

All French political speeches on the Indo-Pacific begin with a reminder of the importance of the French presence in the region, in both human and territorial terms,<sup>22</sup> as a way of justifying France's power status in the Indo-Pacific. In this immense area, France doesn't weigh heavily demographically and economically compared to medium and large powers, but things are different at the subregional level. In 2021, the French population of Réunion and Mayotte numbered 1.13 million (4% of the population of countries belonging to the IOC), while that of New Caledonia, French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna totalled nearly 580,000, or about 11% of the population of the island states of the South Pacific (excluding Australia, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea). Economically, some territories even appear to be heavyweights in their regional environments. For example, the GDP of the *départements* of Réunion and Mayotte (US\$26 billion in 2019) made up 45% of the GDP of the IOC countries, which was comparable to the share of the French Pacific territories (\$16.5 billion) compared to all small island states in the South Pacific.

The proactive speech delivered by President Macron during his stay in Réunion in December 2019 was certainly addressed to the French territories of the Indian Ocean, but its orientations and priorities are similar for those in the Pacific, as the challenges they face are comparable.<sup>23</sup>

In his speech, Macron outlined three areas of effort:

- *Security*: Aim to prevent hegemonic policies, particularly through regional cooperation, which requires the strengthening of the territories' resilience, cooperation on maritime security and the development of the blue economy.
- *The environment*: Act in favour of the fight against climate change, the development of sustainable energies and the protection of biodiversity.
- *Economics*: Develop connectivity and physical and digital infrastructure (particularly submarine cables, 'which must be developed, but we must care about who controls them'), sustainable development, tourism, and academic and scientific exchanges.

The security risks and threats facing the French territories differ little between the territories or between the territories and their neighbours in the two sea basins. The territories in subtropical zones are exposed to major natural risks that increase considerably with climate change, particularly those linked to sea-level rise and the amplification of extreme weather events. Countries that are dependent on the sea and its resources are confronted with the problem of illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing in their immense exclusive economic zones (EEZs), which make monitoring difficult, while their own capacities to exploit fishery resources remain insufficient. They're also faced with increasing illicit trafficking of all types (narcotics, in particular), while the political and economic fragility of certain neighbouring island states, which are particularly vulnerable financially, makes those states potential prey for outside powers likely to seek strategic advantages.<sup>24</sup>

However, some major differences distinguish the Pacific and Indian Ocean theatres. While several strategic partners of France are present and active in the South Pacific (Australia above all, but also New Zealand, the US since 2018, and Japan to a lesser extent), the situation is very different in the southwest Indian Ocean. There, France is still a

major power able to bring support to the countries of the subregion, with the support of the EU, even if India has significantly developed its economic and military presence in the subregion over the past decade, as illustrated by rising regional military cooperation<sup>25</sup> and the construction of a naval and air base on the Mauritian island of Agalega.<sup>26</sup> That's the reason why France has sought to encourage India,<sup>27</sup> Japan and Australia (which certainly has a foot in the Indian Ocean but which barely touches the African continent<sup>28</sup>) to consider the usefulness of an increased engagement in the southwest Indian Ocean by emphasising the growing strategic importance of the sea lines of communication passing the Cape of Good Hope<sup>29</sup> and through the Mozambique Channel, through which passes about 30% of global tanker traffic. In addition, the subregion is vulnerable to internal destabilisation, particularly rising radical Islamism in several countries and the growing pressure of Daesh-linked terrorist groups in northern Mozambique, which is deeply destabilising that country. That fragility was demonstrated when the French multinational TotalEnergy had to interrupt an energy megaproject (worth about €20 billion) after the coastal city of Palma was briefly seized in March 2021 by al-Shabaab jihadists. The threat of a widening hotspot and of its spillover into the maritime space of the Mozambique Channel, where terrorist and maritime piracy activities could develop,<sup>30</sup> has led France and Mozambique to agree on humanitarian and military training arrangements. President Macron has proposed, 'taking into account our Indo-Pacific strategy', 'to take part in maritime operations' in the channel, in coordination and at the request of Mozambique and the countries of the region.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, the dramatic increase in China's economic presence and influence, particularly in Madagascar, Mauritius, Tanzania and Mozambique, is another cause for concern. While the average market share of France in the countries of the subregion has decreased from 13% to 7.5% in 20 years, that of China has tripled to reach 13% in 2020 and up to 21% and 23% in Kenya and Tanzania, respectively. Moreover, according to a 2020 US Department of Defense report on China's military power, those two African countries are potential locations for Chinese military bases.<sup>32</sup> India uses the same definition of the Indo-Pacific as France and has launched initiatives in the Indian Ocean (notably the Security and Growth for All in the Region policy and the Indo-Japanese Asia–Africa Growth Corridor initiative) that include African countries in a global approach promoting development and security in the broad sense. France pursues a comparable ambition, but that isn't the case with Australia, whose policy of engagement with Africa remains limited, despite the recommendations of the Advisory Group on Australia–Africa Relations established by the former Minister for Foreign Affairs, Julie Bishop.<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, the first trilateral dialogue between the secretaries of the Australian, Indian and French foreign ministries in September 2020 illustrates the effort of convergence of the Indo-Pacific policies of the three countries, particularly in the maritime domain.<sup>34</sup> The first meeting in a trilateral format between the three foreign ministers, on the sidelines of the G7 summit in May 2021, gave high-level political impetus to the deepening of exchanges and cooperation in this new framework. Their joint media release illustrates diverse themes of cooperation, which cover the strengthening of multilateral cooperation, the fight against climate change and Covid-19, the defence of freedom of navigation, maritime security and the fight against IUU fishing.<sup>35</sup>

Support for multilateralism is at the core of the French strategy, so France has sought both to boost the main regional cooperation body of which it's a full member (the IOC, by virtue of Réunion)—and to obtain full member status in the IORA, which it gained in December 2020 after having been a dialogue partner since 2011. It has supported the strengthening of the IOC's governance, particularly on the occasion of the 34th Council of Ministers on 6 March 2020. The council revised the Victoria Agreement, establishing a summit of heads of state and government every five years, and appointed a new secretary-general, the Réunionese Vêlayoudom Marimoutou. It was also an opportunity to admit India, Japan and the UN as observer members, alongside China (since 2016) and the EU (2017), all of which are likely to support IOC projects, both through their expertise and financially. It's a modest regional organisation (it has implemented around 50 technical projects worth about \$270 million since its inception), but its scope has greatly expanded over the past 30 years (it covered 14 areas of cooperation in 2020, compared to nine in 1984). The IOC intervenes in a broad spectrum of fields, particularly the blue economy; maritime security; education and scientific cooperation; climate change and sustainable development; and maritime, air and digital connectivity.

All of those sectors are likely to contribute to the development, security and resilience of member states. In this regard, the announcement of a project funding envelope by the French Development Agency to the tune of €35 million (US\$42 million) over the 2021–23 period appears to be a significant quantitative leap that aims to provide concrete support for the further development of the organisation.<sup>36</sup>

Beyond the clear signal of a convergence of views on the necessary inclusion of East Africa in the Indo-Pacific vision,<sup>37</sup> this participation by India and Japan in the IOC is important because the IOC is directly associated with the EU's regional maritime security programs (MASE<sup>38</sup> and CRIMARIO<sup>39</sup>), to which France is actively contributing, which led to the inception of the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Center (RMIFC), based in Madagascar,<sup>40</sup> and the Regional Centre for Operational Coordination in Seychelles. It's therefore not trivial that, following the granting of its observer status in the IOC, India is planning to have a liaison officer at the RMIFC,<sup>41</sup> thus joining liaison officers from France, Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritius, Kenya and Seychelles. Behind this initiative, the objective is to build, in stages, a shared maritime picture of the Indo-Pacific, linking the Indian Information Fusion Centre—Indian Ocean Region, the RMIFC, the Singaporean Information Fusion Centre<sup>42</sup> and the national operational centres. The establishment of a regional architecture of national and regional centres for the fusion of maritime information is a central issue for monitoring and analysing illegal activities at sea (IUU fishing, piracy, oil spills, trafficking) but also for supporting the efficient intervention of air and naval assets—in limited numbers—in a manner coordinated between states.

In the South Pacific, Australia is the main actor for strengthening regional resilience, particularly through several structuring projects, notably the creation of the South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting in 2013, the Pacific Maritime Security Program and, especially from 2016, the multifaceted Pacific Step-up program, which is an ambitious plan to strengthen Canberra's commitment to South Pacific countries for development, defence, resilience and connectivity.<sup>43</sup> In this context of Australian regional leadership, the French response still appears modest. Beyond FRANZ and the Pacific QUAD cooperation activities, it has notably consisted of positioning France in innovative niches, such as climate security, in line with French commitment in that area since the Paris Agreement but also because of the expectations of the Oceanian countries, as illustrated by the Pacific Islands Forum's Boe Declaration making climate change the 'single greatest threat'.<sup>44</sup> In 2017, France proposed to its South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting partners a study on the defence and security consequences of climate change in the South Pacific by 2030,<sup>45</sup> the conclusions and operational recommendations of which were approved by the ministers in May 2019. The positive reception given to that initiative led to its transposition to the Indian Ocean, in collaboration with Australia, within the framework of the AFiniti cooperation plan adopted in May 2018.<sup>46</sup> This Franco-Australian study also made it possible to identify bilateral or plurilateral cooperation projects in the Indian Ocean, some of which are directly inspired by initiatives undertaken in the Pacific.<sup>47</sup>

The French response included encouraging the French Development Agency to develop a Pacific strategy for the 2019–2023 period, articulating four priorities: resilience to climate change; access of populations to basic services; sustainable development and connectivity; and support for the regional integration of overseas territories.<sup>48</sup> The strategy document indicates that the agency financed projects to the tune of €350 million per year during the 2015–2018 period, mainly for the benefit of French overseas territories, but doesn't specify its future funding ambition, only that its action will now encompass the whole South Pacific.

Encouraged by Paris, New Caledonia and French Polynesia gained full member status in the Pacific Islands Forum in 2016.<sup>49</sup> That was a turning point. From then on, those territories would be able to participate actively in the structures of cooperation and in forums that until then had been closed to them or in which they participated only through Paris. They now attend Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting summits organised by Japan and the Pacific Fusion Centre created by Australia in Vanuatu, among other meetings.

Having a particular political and administrative force and conferring a very broad autonomy, a 1999 organic law authorised New Caledonia to have representatives in states or territories of the Pacific. The territory has sent 'delegates'—working within French embassies—to New Zealand since 2012 and then to Australia, Fiji, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea from 2019.<sup>50</sup> The delegates are responsible for promoting economic and cultural exchanges and cooperation. Several nations also have consulates or consulates-general in the territories, in increasing numbers.<sup>51</sup>

# CONSTRAINTS AND LIMITS

While it's undeniable that France is showing real ambition to participate in building multilateralism on security, connectivity, climate change and sustainable development by relying on its partnerships with India, Australia and Japan, it nonetheless continues to face a number of political and financial hurdles that are constraining its Indo-Pacific policy. Despite those limits, the fact that French territories are zones of stability and relative prosperity in a subregional environment characterised by fragility in itself constitutes a positive contribution for France's strategic partners.

Political weaknesses or uncertainties in the Indo-Pacific are linked, in particular, to unresolved territorial disputes, which complicate relations with some regional partners. The Comoros still doesn't accept the choice of the inhabitants of the island of Mayotte in favour of an attachment to France at the independence referendum in 1974. The Republic of Madagascar claims the Scattered Islands in the Mozambique Channel. Mauritius claims the island of Tromelin, while Vanuatu considers that it has rights to the uninhabited islets of Matthew and Hunter. Those disputes remain under control and are for the most part the subject of discussions, even negotiations in the case of Tromelin (however, the co-management agreement concluded with Mauritius in 2010 hasn't been ratified by the French National Assembly<sup>52</sup>), but they constitute weaknesses susceptible to exploitation by external powers, particularly China.

The question of illegal immigration in Mayotte is a source of major social and economic tensions in that *département*.<sup>53</sup> In New Caledonia, the organisation of a series of self-determination referendums in 2018, 2020 and the second half of 2021, as provided for in the 1998 Noumea Accords, is a source of political uncertainty. The one organised in October 2020 was won by the 'loyalists', but the supporters of independence increased their score significantly (to 46.7% from 43.3% in 2018), which makes independence or a form of independent association with France plausible if the political forces manage to imagine a shared destiny. Whatever the case, New Caledonia has now entered a new and delicate phase. The framework of the Noumea Accords will disappear in 2022, which will naturally raise the question of the future of institutional relations between Paris and New Caledonia and the stability of the territory, which is a major issue for all of its Pacific neighbours and beyond. Discussions between the French Government and the main political forces of the territory were held in Paris from 25 May to 3 June 2021 in order to examine all the consequences of independence or of a third refusal of it, without taboos, if not the clear refusal of Paris to consider the partition of the territory.<sup>54</sup> The main conclusions of the consultation were to agree on a third referendum in December 2021 and on a two-year transition period, whatever the outcome of the ballot, either to help prepare for independence or to develop a new status for New Caledonia within the framework of the French Republic.

The possible independence of New Caledonia wouldn't call into question the broad commitment of France in the Indo-Pacific, but it's certain that the political status of New Caledonia will evolve over the next few years (in the direction of increased autonomy, if not independence) and that this will lead to a parallel evolution of the status and competences of other French overseas territories.

Beyond these political difficulties and tensions, which remain under control at this stage, the issue of the resilience of the French overseas territories is an old one. Not only do the territories remain strongly dependent on financial support from metropolitan France (a dependence that's trending down, however), they're also not self-sufficient in food and energy, while their regional economic integration remains modest, which means that their ability to relay France's policies as subregional powers is limited. Today, financial and budgetary transfers from Paris still make up 18% of New Caledonia's GDP, 23% of French Polynesia's and 55% of Réunion's. Those transfers totalled €10.27 billion (US\$12 billion) in 2020.<sup>55</sup> Food self-sufficiency, which has been the subject of recent efforts, is still limited and is only 20%–25% in New Caledonia and Polynesia<sup>56</sup> and 55% in Réunion.<sup>57</sup> Energy autonomy also remains problematic, and renewable energies, which are the subject of ambitious development plans, still account for very little in the energy balance: energy autonomy is only 2.3% in New Caledonia, 6.4% in French Polynesia and 12.8% in Réunion.

In terms of regional integration, these territories can certainly be satisfied with being members of the main regional organisations, such as the IOC since 1986. New Caledonia and French Polynesia were admitted to the Pacific Islands Forum as full members in 2016, and Wallis and Futuna gained associate member status in 2018. However, the economic integration of the territories into their Indo-Pacific environment remains limited, but more in volume than in proportion to their overall trade (24% with Indo-Pacific neighbours for French Polynesia and 74% for New Caledonia in 2018<sup>58</sup>). In this regard, it should be noted that 37% of New Caledonian exports (mainly nickel) and 46% of those from French Polynesia (mainly cultured pearls) were directed to China and Hong Kong in 2020, thereby creating a potential vulnerability, even if Beijing has so far refrained from visibly using its levers of influence or economic coercion as it does today against Australia. Possible independence for New Caledonia could offer Beijing an opportunity to develop its political and economic influence there, as it does everywhere else in Oceania.

This unbalanced development, added to the economic and budgetary constraints experienced by France, greatly aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the large number of other priorities for action both in metropolitan France and in its turbulent periphery, explains why Paris concentrates most of its financial support in its own territories and makes it improbable that France will launch major initiatives in the Indian and Pacific oceans.

Admittedly, France has set itself the ambition of very significantly increasing its financial effort in the form of development aid, which had reached a low point in 2015 (0.35% of GDP), to bring it to 0.55% of GDP in 2022. According to forecasts from the Ministry of Economy and Finance, those objectives should be exceeded: ODA is forecast to reach €17.15 billion in 2021, or 0.69% of France's gross national income. The consolidated figures for 2019 thus illustrate that French ODA was 20% lower than that of Japan but four times higher than Australia's. However, that assistance remains very heavily focused on Africa. In this regard, aid intended for the countries of the southwest Indian Ocean (including the IOC countries, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique and South Africa) has contracted by a third in constant dollars since 2010, to only US\$226 million in 2019. Aid for Oceania was only US\$142 million in 2019, up 25% compared to 2010,<sup>59</sup> while the Wallis and Futuna territory received 87% of the regional ODA. By comparison, Australia's ODA for Oceania was US\$820 million in 2019, while that for East African countries was only US\$38 million, down 60% from 2010.

However, we should add the French share (17.8%) in the development aid provided by the EU, even if the European ODA envelope in these two subregions has been reduced by 29% since 2010 to total only US\$590 million in 2019, of which 75% was for countries in the southwest Indian Ocean. The challenge for France is therefore to work for better consideration by the EU of the need for a re-engagement in these regions, particularly the Pacific, within the framework of the European strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, which is expected to be finalised in September 2021.<sup>60</sup> The Kiwa Initiative launched in 2020 to respond to the challenge of climate change and 'strengthen the resilience of ecosystems, economies and communities in the states and territories of the Pacific', which is mainly funded by the EU (US\$14 million), France (US\$13 million) and to a lesser extent by Canada, Australia and New Zealand, is illustrating the potential for combined action in the region.<sup>61</sup>

On the military level, France can still make a good impression, but it's more in support of Australian policy in the Pacific, where it participates in the security architecture and contributes as much as possible to Canberra's initiatives. On the other hand, it's still quite isolated in the southwest Indian Ocean, where one of its objectives is to foster the engagement of its Indo-Pacific partners. It's had some success with India and Japan but will probably need more time to involve Australia because Canberra's policy attention remains very focused on the Pacific and Southeast Asia.

The strategic importance of France's overseas territories was stressed in the 2017 *Strategic review*, which considered that they constitute:

major assets from the perspective of military cooperation, crisis anticipation and regional integration. They also accommodate bases able to play a role in controlling global commons and providing aid to countries struck by natural disasters. They give France secure platforms for power projection all over the world, and the possibility to redeploy military assets in response to changes in the strategic situation. France is present as a credible partner and ally in both the Indian Ocean and the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>62</sup>

Despite significant and efficient pre-positioned French military capabilities compared to those of developing countries in the two subregions, it's nonetheless true that the number of deployed personnel has been declining since the turn of the century, while equipment and infrastructure suffers from structural ageing. In 20 years, the number of FAZSOI personnel stationed in Réunion and Mayotte declined from 3,000 to 1,450, the FANC from 2,600 to 1,660 and the FAPF from 2,600 to 1,180 (a global 50% reduction in military personnel).<sup>63</sup> In terms of capacity, the FAZSOI has no maritime surveillance aircraft (unlike the FANC and FAPF), in the two theatres the C-160 Transall tactical transport aircraft have been replaced by CN-235s with half the payload,<sup>64</sup> and the four Floreal-type surveillance frigates, the average age of which is 29 years, won't be replaced before 2030.<sup>65</sup> The entry into service of three d'Entrecasteaux-class overseas support and assistance vessels in 2016–17, and of six overseas patrol vessels from 2022 to 2025 and new maritime surveillance aircraft in the middle of the decade, will make it possible to fill some capacity gaps, but it's clear that French overseas military capabilities are 'sized to the strict minimum necessary', as recognised by the *Strategic review*. While those capabilities enable missions to be carried out at the 'bottom of the spectrum' (maritime surveillance, humanitarian relief, the fight against trafficking of all types and regional cooperation) they appear to be undersized in relation to the immensity of the area in a rapidly evolving strategic context in which environmental risks, conventional threats and the demand for international cooperation are increasing.

French forces are currently engaged in several operations in Africa, the Mediterranean and the Near and Middle East, and the pre-positioning of significant added capabilities in the Indian and Pacific oceans doesn't seem to be envisaged.

However, three solutions seem to be favoured:

- The first is to accelerate the rapprochement with France's Indian and Australian strategic partners, in particular through logistical cooperation agreements allowing mutual access to military bases, such as the one signed with India in 2018, which allows the Indian Navy access to the French bases in the United Arab Emirates, Djibouti and Réunion, and the Mutual Logistics Support Agreement with Australia in the same year. It's against this background that India deployed a P-8 maritime patrol aircraft to Réunion in February 2020.<sup>66</sup>
- The second involves the occasional deployment of first-rank air and naval forces to the Indo-Pacific, as was the case for Rafale aircraft during the multinational Exercise Pitch Black in 2018. In fact, the modernisation of the tanker aircraft fleet will bring the number of Phoenix A330-MRTT<sup>67</sup> (multi-role transport tanker) aircraft to 15 by 2023, which will allow the long-distance projection of Rafale aircraft in significant numbers. Thus, in June 2021, three Rafales should be projected into French Polynesia, supported by two MRTTs and one A400M transport aircraft.<sup>68</sup> In March 2021, Defence Minister Florence Parly announced that the ambition is to be able to project up to 20 Rafale and 10 A330-MRTTs to 20,000 kilometres from mainland France by 2023—a capability that would

make it possible to cover the whole of Indo-Pacific region.<sup>69</sup> The deployment of the *Emeraude* nuclear attack submarine at the end of 2020 to Guam, via Australia and the South China Sea, is another example of this policy aimed at demonstrating the distant projection capabilities of capital ships.<sup>70</sup> Those deployments participate in naval diplomacy and strategic communication, particularly with regard to China, but they could mean that French military capabilities aren't limited to the forces pre-positioned in the Indian and Pacific oceans. However, they don't fully compensate for the structural limitations of the pre-positioned capabilities.

- The third is to further develop high-level technological cooperation with India and Australia, particularly in the space sector, as illustrated by the framework agreement signed by France's National Centre for Space Studies and the Australian Space Agency in September 2018 and the agreement concluded in the same year between the National Centre for Space Studies and the Indian Space Research Organisation relating to the development of a satellite system for the surveillance and monitoring of maritime traffic in the Indian Ocean.<sup>71</sup>

# WHAT AVENUES ARE THERE FOR STRENGTHENING FRANCO-AUSTRALIAN COOPERATION?

Australia, India and France have repeatedly stressed their attachment to multilateralism and their ambition to develop their cooperation within the framework of the regional cooperation architecture now under construction. It's therefore logical to explore different options for strengthening cooperation. There are many options, but I'll give only a few examples in this report.

In seeking to obtain full member status in the IORA, France recognised that this regional organisation had a relevant and inclusive geographical framework, covering a wide spectrum of subjects of common interest, including trade promotion and investment; natural disaster management; maritime security; the development of the blue economy; and scientific and technical cooperation. The necessary revitalisation of the IORA's activities could notably involve the launch of joint initiatives led by Australia, India and France. Among the themes likely to be supported by the three nations, environmental security (in the sense of the protection of environmental heritage, particularly marine biodiversity) and climate security (in the sense of anticipating the consequences of climate change for the security and adaptation of armed and security forces) would be both inclusive and innovative.

A Franco-Australian study on the consequences of climate change for security in the Indian Ocean was carried out as part of the AFiniti cooperation program.<sup>72</sup> The study made it possible to draw up a regional climate risk map and to open up avenues for regional cooperation in this domain. Thus, environmental security will be the central theme of the French presidency of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium in 2021–2022,<sup>73</sup> making it possible to link combating IUU fishing and illegal trafficking, improving coordination in HADR operations and building the resilience of critical infrastructure to the risks posed by climate change. Taking advantage of this momentum, it's possible that this theme will be the subject of exchanges and cooperation within the broad regional and political framework of the IORA.

The IOC shares many of IORA's objectives, but within the smaller area of the southwest Indian Ocean. France took over the presidency of the IOC in May 2021 for one year and intends to continue the IOC's institutional reform and the development of its activities, particularly in maritime security, the promotion of the blue economy, environmental protection and health security.<sup>74</sup> In the context of an increase in the number of external cooperation partners having observer status in the IOC (China, the EU and then India, Japan and the UN in 2020), it's appropriate for Australia to consider taking up observer status in the commission, thereby showing its support for efforts to consolidate a modest but effective regional platform located at a major crossroads of maritime communication lines in the Indian Ocean. While this idea isn't new, it's still relevant today.<sup>75</sup> The subregion—like the Pacific island countries—faces the challenges of climate change, IUU fishing, transnational crime and the Covid-19 pandemic, and Australia could provide a significant contribution to the IOC's activities. In particular, it could share its experience in strengthening regional cooperation through the establishment of a security information fusion centre along the lines of the Pacific Fusion Centre, which was created by an initiative of Canberra.<sup>76</sup>

In the same vein, would it not be possible for Australia to have a liaison officer at the RMIFC in Madagascar, as India intends to do? That would allow it to improve its maritime domain awareness of the southwest Indian Ocean, where maritime trade flows continue to increase, and contribute to the suppression of illicit activities, particularly IUU fishing and perhaps maritime piracy and terrorism. Such initiatives could be integrated into the framework of an

African strategy for Australia, or at least into an extension of its Indo-Pacific policy to East Africa, adopting the same definition of the Indo-Pacific as that of France, India and Japan. In the absence of a 'pivot towards Africa', could Australia consider a more ambitious policy of engagement with African countries bordering the Indian Ocean and take into account some of the recommendations made by the Advisory Group on Australia–Africa Relations in 2016?

While Australia has only eight embassies in Africa, including two in East Africa (in Mauritius and Kenya), it should be possible for it to open diplomatic representation in Tanzania and Mozambique (its main economic partner in the subregion and the one facing the most serious security challenges today). Madagascar could also be a candidate, given the importance of the political, security and development challenges that the island faces. The Advisory Group on Australia–Africa Relations recommended an increase in Australian ODA to Africa (which was less than 3% of total Australian ODA in 2020), which could be directed to the countries of the southwest Indian Ocean, which received only US\$7 million in 2020, down from US\$30 million in 2010. Such a re-engagement would be very likely to benefit from the support of France and Japan and would pave the way for fruitful cooperation, all the more so as the Japanese ODA directed to the southwest Indian Ocean has increased by 12% since 2010, reaching US\$398 million in 2019.

In the South Pacific, one of the major challenges in France's engagement relates to the structuring and ramping up of its development aid policy. To support it and strengthen the projects that the Pacific island countries need for resilience, connectivity and the fight against the consequences of climate change, it would be appropriate for the French Development Agency and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to deepen their cooperation, which is today restricted to a partnership agreement on agriculture and research on climate risks in Africa,<sup>77</sup> through a partnership agreement covering the South Pacific, in particular. The agreement could be inspired by the memorandum of understanding signed in 2011 by AusAID and the Japan International Cooperation Agency or the one between the French Development Agency and the Japan International Cooperation Agency in 2019, focusing on cooperation on high-quality infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific.

These are just a few avenues for strengthening the Franco-Australian strategic partnership, which has considerable development potential in all the regions comprising the Indo-Pacific but also concerning global issues such as cybersecurity, disinformation, space issues or disruptive technologies, to name a few. Even if it was not the only triggering factor, the conclusion of the 'Contract of the Century' on the Future Submarine Program - which testifies of a very high level of confidence and strategic convergence - made it possible to pass a threshold to the bilateral strategic relationship, opening the door to cooperation in new fields, covering a very broad spectrum and sometimes highly sensitive.

The increase in the number and regularity of high-level political meetings are able to ensure that the dynamic of bilateral rapprochement continues. They are now regular at the level of defense and foreign ministers, but more irregular at other ministries. For a new threshold to be crossed, would it not be appropriate for the heads of state and government to agree on the principle of an annual meeting?

# CONCLUSION

As the only European power with sovereign territories in the Indo-Pacific, permanent military bases and capacities there and a strategic vision for the region, France intends to participate in the new ‘Grand Game’ at the regional and global levels and to encourage Europeans to be more committed to defending their interests in the region, as illustrated by the policy guidelines on the Indo-Pacific region adopted by Germany in September 2020<sup>78</sup> and, above all, the European strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. This should give coherence to European cooperation and regional action covering the entire spectrum of areas relevant to contributing to the stability, security, prosperity and sustainable development of the countries in the Indo-Pacific region. The means and actions of implementation should therefore cover defence, security, ocean governance, R&D, connectivity, the strengthening of regional organisations and the fight against global challenges such as climate change.<sup>79</sup>

This multi-domain strategy is certainly difficult to implement, but it’s undoubtedly the most suitable strategy, particularly to meet the challenges posed by Chinese power ambitions in the Pacific and Indian oceans and by regional vulnerabilities. France—a country that has a strong centralising experience but sometimes insufficient interdepartmental implementation tools—needs more than anything else to meet the challenge of this global approach.

Its resources are not only those of a regional power with modest capacities, but also those of a global power that’s largely autonomous at the strategic level and able to count on a wide spectrum of high-end capabilities. One of the key questions remains that of the integration of this policy because, as General François Lecointre, Chief of Defence Staff recently underlined, the answers to be given to the hybrid strategies developed by disruptive actors such as China must be ‘global, inter-ministerial and intervene in all fields—diplomacy, development, security, military action. We certainly have some progress to make at the inter-ministerial and international levels—we are working on it.’<sup>80</sup>

# NOTES

- 1 Questions relating to the Southern Ocean are separate issues and aren't addressed in this study.
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# ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
EEZ	exclusive economic zone
EU	European Union
FANC	Armed Forces of New Caledonia
FAPF	Armed Forces of French Polynesia
FAZSOI	Armed Forces of the South Indian Ocean
GDP	gross domestic product
HADR	humanitarian assistance and disaster relief
IOC	Indian Ocean Commission
IORA	Indian Ocean Rim Association
IUU	illegal, unreported and unregulated
MRTT	multi-role transport tanker
ODA	official development assistance
RMIFC	Regional Maritime Information Fusion Center
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations

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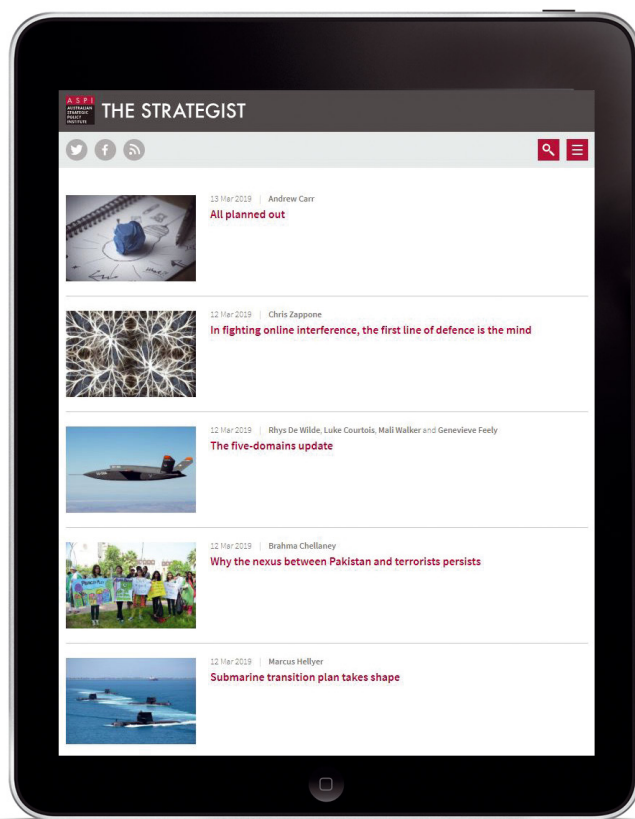


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## **France's Indo-Pacific strategy and its overseas territories in the Indian and Pacific oceans**

Characteristics, capabilities, constraints and avenues for deepening the Franco-Australian strategic partnership