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France and the Indo–Pacific: Devising a Strategy
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The Indo–Pacific concept has recently entered the French narrative. President Emmanuel Macron referred to an “Indo-Pacific axis”¹ when he visited Australia in May 2018, and subsequently, both the Ministry of the Armed Forces (MAF)² and the Ministry of the European and Foreign Affairs (MEFA)³ issued key documents to present the French vision of the region.

While this effort to design a strategic approach in the Indo–Pacific is still new, France is the European country that has developed the more precise vision for the region so far. Therefore, Paris, as a United Nations Security Council Permanent (P5) member, a resident power both in the Indian and Pacific oceans with forward-deployment armed forces, and a strategic partner or ally of the four members of the Quad, is an important player to be taken into account for the regional development and security. The French vision and approach for the Indo–Pacific are highly compatible with existing proposals from the Quad members. However, several differences also emerge.

This approach is now being concretized and is so far mainly focusing on security issues, especially at sea. While the great powers rivalry provides an important background to the French Indo–Pacific vision, Paris’s approach is not to act as a new competitor, but rather to mitigate the risks by fostering a multipolar and multilateral region governed by the Rule of Law. In this way, it firmly differs from the American perspective. France’s ambitious objective to strengthen its presence and influence in the region may be seriously constrained by the limited means and capacities to commit

¹Ben Doherty, “France and Australia can be heart of new Indo-Pacific axis, Macron says,” *The Guardian*, May 2, 2018.

²The title of the Ministry of Defense’s brochure on the French security approach to Asia evolved from “France and Security in the Asia Pacific” in 2016 to “France and Security in the Indo-Pacific” in 2018. See Ministry of the Armed Forces, <http://www.defense.gouv.fr> (accessed October 10, 2019).

³Only an excerpt of the strategy is made public. The document is available in French and English: “2030 French Strategy in Asia-Oceania. Towards an Inclusive Asian Indo-Pacific Region,” French Ministry of European and Foreign Affairs, Paris, August 2018, <http://www.diplomatique.gouv.fr> (accessed October 10, 2019).

in the Indo–Pacific. For this reason, Paris expects to rely on its strategic partners in the region by promoting flexible formats of cooperation.

This paper explains the genesis of the French commitment in the Indo–Pacific, discusses France’s vision, objectives, and means to act in the region, and how these are compatible with the approaches of the Quad members.

The Genesis of a French Vision for the Indo–Pacific

France has sovereignty interest to act in the Indo–Pacific area: it has territories both in the Indian Ocean (La Réunion, the Scattered islands, etc.) and the Pacific (New Caledonia, French Polynesia, etc.): 1.5 million citizens are living there and in other countries in the region (approximately 200,000 people), and more than 90 percent of its large exclusive economic zone (EEZ) (9 million km²) is located in the Indo–Pacific. France maintains a military presence of 7,000 personnel to take care of this vast area.

Beyond this, Paris has gradually developed a comprehensive vision for the broader Asia–Pacific region that rests on its growing economic interests there and the strategic centrality of the area.

In the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis, Asian countries emerged as the new center of gravity for the world economy. Along with greater prosperity, geopolitical tensions also grew and fueled military expenditures: for the first time in 2012, Asian defense investments exceeded European budgets altogether.⁴ The Asia–Pacific thus appeared as a new opportunity to trade in goods and also defense equipment deals. President Hollande’s administration (2012–2017) decided to revive the French economic diplomacy under the lead of the then–Minister of Foreign Affairs, Laurent Fabius. In Asia, the new strategy sought a diversification of the partners, away from a sino-centric approach. Strategic partnerships (encompassing economic, political, and security cooperation) were launched with Indonesia (2011), Singapore (2012), Australia (2012), Vietnam (2013), and Japan (2013), and reports started to discuss a French “pivot” to Asia.⁵

However, at the 2013 Shangri-La Dialogue the speech of the then–Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian that presented France as an “Asia Pacific power”⁶ was met with skepticism. Over the years, though, France’s image in the region improved and Paris received more and more invitations from its Asian partners to reinforce its strategic commitment in the region. Major defense deals with India and Australia confirmed and fueled the deeper interest and engagement in strategic affairs in the region. India represents 12 percent of the French selling of armaments since 2013, with the September 2016 deal for 36 Rafale fighter aircraft, among others. In April 2016, the French then-DCNS (now Naval Group) won the “contrat du siècle” (worth \$39 billion) to provide 12 submarines to be phased into the Australian navy by 2050. This long-term deal also implies that France will stay engaged in the region for the coming decades. During the period 2008–2017, the broader Asian region accounted for 29 percent of the total commands for French Armament.⁷

If the broader Indo–Pacific region made sense for the French Navy sailors and the French strategic community, it only began to infuse the wider policymakers circle in 2015 or so. A working group was then set up in the French Senate to examine the Franco–Australian relations and the French role in the “New World.” The report,⁸ issued in December 2016, mentioned the 2013 Australian

⁴Myra MacDonald, “Asia’s Defense Spending Overtakes Europe’s: IISS,” Reuters, March 14, 2013.

⁵François Godement, « France’s ‘pivot’ to Asia », *ECFR policy brief*, n°101, May 2014; Hadrienne Terres, “La France et l’Asie : l’ébauche d’un « pivot » à la française ?”, *Asie. Visions*, n°75, Ifri, April 2015.

⁶Sylvie Kauffmann, « La France peut-elle devenir une puissance de l’Asie-Pacifique ? », *Le Monde*, 2 June 2013.

⁷Rapport au Parlement 2018 sur les exportations d’armement de la France, Ministère des Armées, Paris, June 2018, p. 15, <http://www.defense.gouv.fr> (accessed October 10, 2019).

⁸« Australie : quelle place pour la France dans le Nouveau monde ? », *Rapport d’information n° 222 (2016-2017)* de M. Christian Cambon, Mme Perol-Dumont, MM. Laufoaulu, Trillard et Namy, fait au nom de la commission des

Defense White Paper and its conceptual innovation of the “Indo–Pacific.” Noting the relevance of this concept to reflect the economic and security continuum formed by the two contiguous oceans, the report called for designing a French Indo–Pacific policy.

Several developments in the region were closely monitored and served as a catalyst to prompt the definition of a French strategic vision. In particular, the advance of China in the South China Sea and the risks it posed to the freedom of navigation is one important trigger, as well as the development of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that spreads all the way to the Indian Ocean and Europe. The opening of a large Chinese base in Djibouti in 2017 was an eye-opener not only for the French defense community, and the geoeconomic and geopolitical implications of the Chinese BRI convinced the Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Economy of the necessity to better define the national interest and strategy vis à vis China, including in the Indo–Pacific.⁹ France is now aware that the Chinese strategy challenges its vision of the liberal order and its interests in the region.

The 2017 Strategic Review of Defense and National Security¹⁰ thus clearly acknowledged the importance of the stability of the Indo–Pacific region for the national interest:

A deterioration of security in Asia would have significant consequences for France, because of its status as a permanent member of the Security Council of the United Nations, of its own interests (overseas territories, nationals, economic interests), and finally partnerships established with several States: Australia and India rank first, but also Japan, Singapore as well as Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam. Freedom of supply and navigation, shared interests of all Europeans, would also be threatened by a deterioration of the regional strategic context. In the relative proximity of these remote regions of the metropolis, France maintains sovereignty in the ‘Overseas Departments and Regions – Overseas Collectivities’ often named by the acronym, DROM-COM of the Pacific and the Indian Ocean.¹¹

As a result, France wants to play a larger role, and be recognized as a credible and responsible stakeholder in the Indo–Pacific area.

Emmanuel Macron, elected as president in May 2017, made clear that he wanted to restore France’s global influence by upholding its values and principles, and be a central player for global governance and multilateralism. His public statements point to the risks of a Chinese hegemony

affaires étrangères, de la défense et des forces armées, 14 December 2016, <http://www.senat.fr> (accessed October 10, 2019).

⁹Alice Ekman [Eds.], « La France face aux Nouvelles Routes de la Soie chinoise », *Etude de l’Ifri*, October 2018, <http://www.ifri.org> (accessed October 10, 2019); « Les nouvelles routes de la soie », *Trésor-éco*, n°229, Direction générale du Trésor, Ministère de l’Economie et des Finances, Octobre 2018, <http://www.tresor.economie.gouv.fr> (accessed October 10, 2019).

¹⁰2017 *Strategic Review of Defense and National Security* – Paris, October 2017, <http://www.defense.gouv.fr> (accessed October 10, 2019).

¹¹2017 *Strategy Review*, p. 26–27.

and the need for France to develop its own approach of the Indo–Pacific region.¹² In the course of 2018, both the MAF and the MEAE released key documents presenting their Indo–Pacific strategy.

France’s Vision for the Region

Geographic Definition. The French general definition of the Indo–Pacific is a broad one, as it encompasses its overseas territories in the two oceans. However, slight differences appear between the MAF that is using the label “Indo–Pacific,” and the MEFA, which is talking about the “Asia Indo–Pacific,” and underlines France’s role in the Asia–Oceania area. In their respective booklets, maps therefore show that the MAF vision is broader and includes the eastern coasts of Africa, while the MEFA’s map stops at Afghanistan and Pakistan on its western border.

The MAF vision reflects the security continuum from East African coastline to the Western American seaboard and a maritime-centric view, focusing on the sea lanes of communications (SLOCS) running from the Bab al-Mandab Strait to the South Pacific. In contrast, the MEFA focus on the Asia–Oceania is meant to underline stakes related to great powers rivalry and competition of models. MEFA is also including Afghanistan and Pakistan as it points to the need for a comprehensive response to the threat of Islamist terrorism in the region. This map also certainly reflects the administrative organization within the MEFA that divides the Asia–Oceania Direction and the Africa Direction in charge of the Western Indian Ocean area.

Challenges for France in the Region. The Indo–Pacific is now recognized as a central stage where major transformations are ongoing that have global consequences, and direct implications for French interests: The Indo–Pacific is now the economic epicenter of world trade, production, and hosts vital sea lanes of communications. It forms a security continuum where freedom of navigation should not be challenged and in which issues such as terrorism, environmental issues, and great power politics trigger tensions, and where different models of development, cooperation, and regional integration compete. The region is also a central stage for key issues regarding the governance of the commons (oceans, cyber) and of transnational challenges, such as climate change and biodiversity, and a crucial actor for norms shaping.

Thus, several regional features that present both opportunities and challenges for France are identified by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Some relate to sovereignty, others to the responsibility of France as a global middle power:

- Peace and security issues (safety of shipping routes, counterterrorism, among others);

¹²“China, while actively participating in the classic multilateral game, promotes its own vision of the world, its own vision of a reinvented, more hegemonic multilateralism.... And so I hope France to promote a balanced vision and to protect both our interests and our worldview in this constructive, demanding and confident dialogue with China.... So, in March and May of this year, I proposed in New Delhi and Sydney to work on a new strategic Indo-Pacific axis, which should not be directed against anyone and can be an essential contribution to international stability.” [Author’s translation] Discours du Président de la République à la conférence des Ambassadeurs, Paris, 27 August 2018, <http://www.elysee.fr> (accessed October 10, 2019).

- The future of multilateralism (need to uphold key values and take into account different models (BRI, FOIP, Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-led multilateralism));

- Global challenges (definition of international standards and norms, biodiversity, and climate change);
- The promotion of human rights and rule of law (France’s special responsibility); and
- Economic opportunities (infrastructure needs, silver economy, emerging middle classes, sustainable development).

The MAF, meanwhile, focuses on several security challenges such as terrorism; challenges to multilateralism (including challenges to the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and great power rivalry); climate change as a security risk; proliferation issue; and risks of new technology.

Because of its presence and interest in the Indo–Pacific, France should enhance its commitment to deal with these challenges to preserve the stability of this key area.

What Should Be the Rules and Organization of the Indo–Pacific? France seeks to uphold its norms and principles, to maintain a multipolar and law-based order in the Indo–Pacific, and to encourage a multilateral regional cooperation to tackle the challenges in the security, political, and economic spheres.

Regarding norms, the MEFA and MAF brochures show that the broad rhetoric about “democratic values” is absent. Instead, a more precise terminology is used: France stands for the freedom of maritime and aerial circulation, multilateralism, principles of transparency and respect of human rights,¹³ and a law-based order (more specific than a rules-based order).¹⁴

In terms of regional organization, the focus is put on the need for a multipolar, inclusive, and balanced region, “where hegemonic tendencies along with temptations of division or confrontation [should be] discouraged.”¹⁵ In particular, “The rise of an increasingly assertive China” is mentioned as a challenge, both for the diversity of the region and the maintenance of multilateralism.¹⁶

Taking into account the coexistence of several models (BRI, Free and Open Indo–Pacific, ASEAN-led multilateralism), France’s aim is to “propose an alternative aimed at promoting a stable, law-based and multipolar order,” in an inclusive and balanced way.¹⁷

The stability should be fostered through “an international order based on dialogue and multilaterally set rules”¹⁸ to deal with transnational risks and governance of the commons

¹³*France and Security in the Indo-Pacific*, MAF, June 2018.

¹⁴MEFA brochure, August 2018.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁸MAF brochure.

(maritime security, nuclear proliferation, terrorism, climate change and biodiversity, cyber, space). In particular, maritime security is an important focus.

The Prevalence of the Maritime Security. In its approach to the region, Paris is placing the priority on the broadly defined maritime security. Admiral Prazuck, Chief of Naval Staff, presented a holistic approach regarding the commons to protect at sea: France is interested in keeping the safety of “dots” (chokepoints like Hormuz, Malacca, Bab-El-Mandeb Straits), SLOCs, and stocks (fish, hydrocarbons, rare earth present in respective EEZs).¹⁹

Accordingly, France supports the strict application of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, contributes to act against crime at sea, and is keen on actively demonstrating its commitment to the freedom of navigation. In 2016, the Statement of then–Minister of Defense Jean-Yves Le Drian at the Shangri-La Dialogue emphasized the need to discourage unilateral *coups de force* in the China seas, for fear that such actions might expand in other strategic areas like the Mediterranean Sea.²⁰ While not taking sides on sovereignty matters, Paris has thus consistently conducted its own quiet Freedom of Navigation Patrols in the South China Sea in recent years, through the passing of the Jeanne d’Arc mission or the surveillance frigates based in New Caledonia.

Beyond the defense of the freedom of navigation, the security implications of environmental issues, such as the depletion of resources (fisheries) and climate change, are core issues of concern for the MAF.²¹ These kinds of risks, along with natural disasters, actually represent the first threat to human lives in the Indo–Pacific area.

Therefore, France aims at developing the maritime surveillance capability in the region, through capacity-building, networking of partners, and information sharing. Maritime security and surveillance may indeed be the least common denominator that gathers the majority of the Indo–Pacific countries, from great powers to small island states. Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) is not only a requirement for better managing one’s own sovereign territory and EEZ, but also to ensure the safety of international waters, SLOCs, and freedom of navigation. It is also instrumental to prevent crisis resulting from environmental issues, such as natural disaster or fisheries depletion. It is thus possible to foster international cooperation on a crucial capacity (a shared MDA), but in a consensual or nonconfrontational manner (environmental crisis prevention).

France’s Means of Influence in the Indo–Pacific

In order to achieve this vision, France will develop and deepen its strategic partnerships in the region and strive to strengthen ties between its partners. Flexible tools such as ad hoc, mini-lateral groups to tackle a specific issue, and uphold common understanding and norms as a regime, will be promoted. Paris will take advantage of its overseas territories to play as a local actor and nurture

¹⁹Admiral Christophe Prazuck, Chief of Naval Staff, France, at the Raisina Dialogue 2019, Panel: Indo-Pacific: Ancient Waters and Emerging Geometries, 9 January 2019, <http://www.youtube.com> (accessed October 10, 2019).

²⁰Jean-Yves Le Drian, Minister of Defense, France – Statement for the fourth plenary session: The Challenges of Conflict Resolution, 15th Asia Security Summit, The IISS Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, June 5, 2016, <http://www.iiss.org> (accessed October 10, 2019).

²¹MAF brochure, p. 12.

the cooperation with regional partners, and will maximize its military presence in the area. The focus will lie on upholding principles, multilateralism, maritime security, and environmental matters.

Networking Partnerships to Weigh in the Indo–Pacific. As it may be challenging to mobilize new capacities to reinforce its influence in the region, France is trying to strengthen its partnerships and build up a network of strategic partnerships with India, Australia, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, New Zealand, Indonesia, and Vietnam.²² During his visit to Australia in May 2018, President Macron referred to a “Paris-Delhi-Canberra axis.”

These partnerships, based on common values and similar interests, are supported by defense equipment sales and concrete security cooperation (facilitated by ACSA deals) with a strong focus on maritime security. In January 2017, India and France signed a White Shipping agreement to enable information sharing on maritime traffic and MDA in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). In March 2018, a Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) on military cooperation was signed, with reciprocal access to each other’s bases.²³ The two states have also signed a “Common Strategic Vision” for their cooperation in the Indian Ocean, including maritime intelligence and protection of exchange of sensitive information. India set up an Information Fusion Center for the Indian Ocean last December, and a French liaison officer will be dispatched there.²⁴ With Australia, suggestions have been made for joint freedom of navigation patrols in the South China Sea.²⁵ Canberra is also planning to establish a regional maritime coordination center (Information Fusion Center) to better monitor the waters in the South Pacific and coordinate regional responses.²⁶

This “axis” (it seems a bit premature to use this kind of terminology, though) encompassing Australia and India is bound to expand. Indeed, the latest Strategic Visions with India²⁷ issued in March 2018, and the one with Australia,²⁸ released in May 2018, specifically mentioned the possibility to coordinate with third partners through trilateral dialogues and joint exercises. In this perspective, Japan appears as a key partner for France—it has the capacity to help monitor the SLOCS, and share France’s concern about keeping multipolarity in the region and avoid Chinese hegemony. A maritime dialogue has been launched with Tokyo, and a joint reflection to identify concrete areas of cooperation in the Indo–Pacific is ongoing.

²²Foreword by the Minister of the Armed Forces, June 2018, MAF Brochure.

²³The Indian Navy will be able to benefit from logistical support and bunkering within the French military facilities of Reunion, Mayotte, and Djibouti, and, potentially, the bases of the Emirates and the Pacific Ocean.

²⁴Pradip R. Sagar, “Indian Navy launches Information Fusion Centre to Boost Maritime Security,” *The Week*, December 22, 2018.

²⁵Grant Wyeth, “France in the Pacific: Growing Strategic Ties with Australia,” *The Diplomat*, October 16, 2017.

²⁶Sam Bateman and Anthony Bergin, *Staying the Course: Australia and Maritime Security in the South Pacific*, ASPI, May 2011, <http://www.aspi.org.au> (accessed October 10, 2019).

²⁷Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region, Ministry of External Affairs of India, New Delhi, March 10, 2018), <http://www.mea.gov.in> (accessed October 10, 2019).

²⁸“Vision Statement on the Australia-France Relationship by The Honourable Malcolm Turnbull, Prime Minister of the Commonwealth of Australia and His Excellency Emmanuel Macron, President of the French Republic,” Prime Minister of Australia, May 2, 2018, <http://www.pm.gov.au> (accessed October 10, 2019).

Other identified partners to expand the network are Malaysia, Singapore,²⁹ New Zealand, Indonesia, and Vietnam. For the MEFA, a deepening of the relations with the ASEAN countries is set as a priority. ASEAN centrality is seen as a stabilizing factor and Southeast Asia as a new ground for the Great Game between China and the U.S. Therefore, the aim is to achieve a convergence of views on a number of issues and to help build up these countries' resilience vis à vis China through maritime capacity-building assistance. This kind of activity can also be coordinated with local partners such as Japan, India, or Australia.

The ultimate aim is to build up an open, inclusive, and transparent cooperation architecture that will allow a shared MDA in order to prevent or manage crisis resulting from environmental issues, natural disaster, crimes at sea, or further.

How to Do More with the Same Capacity? Empowering of Overseas Territories, Maximization of Asset Deployment and Regional Organizations. France will likely have difficulties to permanently dispatch more military capacities in the region to enhance its presence. Therefore, it will seek to take advantage of its overseas territories to empower them as real stakeholders in their region, and as players that will nurture the relations with Asian partners. For example, La Réunion³⁰ (home to 2,000 French troops) sees its importance growing in the partnership with Delhi, and New Caledonia³¹ (where 1,660 troops are posted) is a natural partner for Australia (along with French Polynesia—the two territories joined the Pacific Islands Forum in 2016). The role of these territories is thus likely to be strengthened.

Also, a greater effort will be made to maximize the deployment of forward-based military assets and punctual dispatch of other assets in the region. In 2019, the surveillance frigate *Vendémiaire*, based in New Caledonia, will be dispatched in the region to make strategic port calls and passage exercises (PASSEX), exert its freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, conduct joint exercises with Japanese forces, and take part in the Enhancement Coordination Cell (ECC) activities to help enforce the international sanctions vis à vis North Korea. This year, too, the *Charles de Gaulle* aircraft carrier and its naval group will be deployed to Singapore for the Shangri-la Dialogue. Bilateral exercises will be held in the Gulf of Aden and in the Indian Ocean on the way. For several years now, the naval mission Jeanne d'Arc has also been an opportunity to show the flag and demonstrate the French and European commitment to the Freedom of navigation.

Coordinating with European partners is indeed also a way to enhance the visibility and the significance of the French deployments and activities. Back in 2016, Jean-Yves le Drian called for a greater European presence in the region, through a better coordination, especially in the South

²⁹A French Liaison officer is dispatched in the Intelligence Fusion Center for Southeast Asia, based in Singapore.

³⁰The French Armed Forces in the Indian Ocean (FAZSOI) are posted in La Réunion and Mayotte Islands and use two surveillance frigates equipped with one helicopter each, one multi-mission ship, two patrol vessels (including one polar patrol vessel), and two tactical transport aircrafts. MAF Brochure, p. 6.

³¹The French Armed Forces in New Caledonia (FANC) and in French Polynesia (FAPF) operate two surveillance frigates equipped with one helicopter each, three patrol vessels, two multimission ships, five maritime surveillance aircrafts, four tactical transport aircrafts, and five helicopters. MAF Brochure, p. 6.

China Sea.³² After Brexit, France will be the only EU member state with permanent forces in the Indo-Pacific. France is thus ready to take the lead in Europe and encourage greater European presence in the region. In this respect, British troops and helicopters joined the Jeanne d'Arc Mission in 2017, and U.K. ships sailed along the French ones in 2018. Paris is also supporting an EU membership to the East Asia Summit, is calling for the implementation of an EU “connecting Europe and Asia” plan, and is seeking a revitalization of the Asia-Europe Meeting Dialogue (ASEM).

³²Jean-Yves Le Drian, Minister of Defense, France – Statement for the fourth plenary session: The Challenges of Conflict Resolution, 15th Asia Security Summit, The IISS Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, June 5, 2016.

France also expects to be able to join regional organizations like the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM+), or the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy against Ships in Asia (RECAAP). Greater contributions in the Head of the Asian Coast Guard Agencies Meeting (HACGAM) and Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) are also ways to strengthen the French influence in the region. **Limitations to the French Approach**

The Ambiguous Line vis à vis China. The French approach vis à vis China certainly needs to be clarified. While it is clear that France's Indo-Pacific strategy is motivated by the Chinese rise and has elements of a hedging approach vis à vis Beijing by sending signals and seeking to gain leverage through its partners, France seeks to avoid antagonizing China. Paris indeed highlights the importance of engaging China, keeping a robust dialogue and partnership, and encouraging Beijing to play the role of a responsible stakeholder on issues such as climate change or the reform of the World Trade Organization.³³ Therefore, France refuses to formally join an initiative, such as Freedom of Information and Privacy (FOIP), or a group of countries, such as the Quad, that may be seen as having anti-China connotations, and rather emphasize the "inclusive" nature of its own approach. This difficult position of trying to walk a fine line on China generates frustrations internationally as well as domestically.

This position is also about keeping its strategic autonomy as rivalry between China and the U.S. is growing.

The Low Prioritization of the Indo-Pacific. On the issue of prioritization of the Indo-Pacific theater in the overall French strategy, ambiguity also prevails. While the MEFA brochure claims: "From a foreign policy and strategic influence perspective, the region is a priority for France,"³⁴ it is quite clear that French concrete efforts in foreign and defense policy are focusing on the European, Middle East, and African theaters. It took months before the Macron government could articulate some thoughts about Asia,³⁵ and even today, beyond the official statements, it is difficult to identify what kind of efforts and assets will be dedicated to the region.

Reflecting on the issue of great powers rivalry and limited priority given to the region, some critics point to the risk of entrapment into a U.S.-led strategy that may lead France to take a side and be drawn into a conflict with China. Another risk would be one of overstressing capacities, while military assets should be centered on more pressing theaters. Therefore, the relevance of the concept of the Indo-Pacific for France has been questioned by some.³⁶

³³Discours du Président de la République à la conférence des Ambassadeurs, Paris, 27 August 2018.

³⁴MEFA brochure, p. 1.

³⁵Thomas Gomart and Marc Hecker eds., "Macron, Diplomat: A New French Foreign Policy?," *Etudes de l'Ifri*, April 2018, <http://www.ifri.org> (accessed October 10, 2019).

³⁶Jean-Dominique Merchet, « L'« axe indopacifique » est-il un piège pour la France ? », *Blog Secret Défense*, 2 November 2018.

Conclusion

The French approach to the Indo–Pacific is in an ascending phase. The overall objective is to increase France’s contribution to build up a stable Indo–Pacific governed by the rule of law and to mitigate the risks of great powers competition in a key area for its interests. Multipolarity and multilateral cooperation should thus be fostered. In order to achieve this vision, France relies on its strategic partnerships in the region and strives to build up a network in order to mutualize capacity and have a greater impact. Mini-lateral, ad hoc groupings should be privileged to discuss and adopt a shared understanding and common principles to tackle issues, from climate change to governance of the commons (oceans, Internet). Paris will also empower its overseas territories to play as regional actors, as it is still unclear to what extent it will be able to mobilize additional assets to deploy in the broad area. For now, Paris puts the priority on keeping its flexibility and implements concrete initiatives to flesh out its vision.

This approach has many commonalities with those of the Quad members, but presents also some differences, that can act as limitations or, on the contrary, as an opportunity to raise its profile. First, France’s commitment in the region is not about great power rivalry but rather about governance of the commons and enhancing coordination and cooperation in an inclusive manner. This is clearly different from the U.S. approach that is shaping its Indo–Pacific strategy as part of the greater competition with China. It also departs partly from the Japanese vision. However, this approach might facilitate the coordination with India and Australia, which are more reluctant to appear as openly confrontational to China.³⁷

Similarly, the broader definition of the Indo–Pacific that France maintains is different from the American one, which sees the Indo–Pacific stopping at the west coast of India. While this can geographically limit the cooperation with Washington, it also allows France to play the role of a privileged partner to India and Japan in the Western Indian Ocean.

Another example is the importance given to multilateralism, which clashes with President Donald Trump’s bilateral approach. This, conversely, can also be an asset when developing cooperation on trade governance with other players like Japan.

Lastly, France’s approach to the Indo–Pacific seems so far to focus on security issues, broadly speaking. Almost no mentions appear about connectivity and infrastructure financing, except for the reference to the EU–Asia connectivity strategy. This can be problematic, as it is a central element of the Indo-Pacific approach of the Quad members, and also a less provocative agenda for China—thus potentially easier for France to implement.

³⁷See Prime Minister Modi’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue, June 1, 2018, <http://www.mea.gov.in> (accessed October 10, 2019).