

# France's Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Quad Plus

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## Abstract

In France, the launch of the Quad Plus raised little attention. The emergence of yet another minilateral framework in the Indo-Pacific attracted some interest but also raised many doubts about the sustainability of this initiative. The general impression was that this new grouping was quite heterogeneous and maybe not the most relevant to tackle the challenge it ambitioned to address: the COVID-19 crisis. So, while it might be too soon to tell if Paris would be ready to join such a scheme, the examination of France's various engagements in the Indo-Pacific can provide some clues regarding the synergies or divergences with the Quad Plus initiative.

In 2018, Paris unveiled its own Indo-Pacific strategy. It reflects a strategic reassessment of the region for French interests: the area is now widely acknowledged as the world economic powerhouse, and major trade partners are located there. The Indo-Pacific is also a key region when it comes to the governance of the commons and multilateralism. At the same time, there is now a recognition that China's rise is increasingly challenging French interests in the region. Maritime security is a core interest and objective in developing an Indo-Pacific approach. The Indo-Pacific terminology serves to highlight the strategic dimension of France's comprehensive approach to the region, by providing it with a powerful narrative. This narrative also strengthens Paris's legitimacy to act in the area and is useful to develop and expand cooperation with like-minded partners. Through its Indo-Pacific strategy, France can thus more adequately protect its sovereign interests while promoting and advancing its very own vision for a balanced, multipolar, inclusive Indo-Pacific regional order, upheld by key liberal principles and multilateral schemes.

The French Indo-Pacific vision relies on key strategic partnerships with all the members of the Quad. However, a concern to keep its strategic autonomy in the context of a worsening US–China rivalry and the strong interest to coordinate with European partners in the Indo-Pacific explain why Paris would be reluctant to join the Quad Plus in its current form. Paris would certainly favor minilateral or multilateral initiatives in which France would find more aligned interests and retain greater autonomy, as well as a deepening of the bilateral relations with the members of the Quad Plus and ad hoc coordination on specific issues.

## **Introduction**

In France, the launch of the Quad Plus raised little attention. The emergence of yet another minilateral framework in the Indo-Pacific attracted some interest but also raised many doubts about the sustainability of this initiative. The general impression was that this new grouping: the Quad (the United States, Japan, India, and Australia) plus New Zealand, South Korea, Vietnam, Brazil and Israel was quite heterogeneous and maybe not the most relevant to tackle the challenge it ambioned to address: the COVID-19 crisis. Indeed, Washington initiated the so-called Quad Plus in March 2020, in the midst of the pandemic, to exchange best practices and coordinate consular policies and strategic supplies between like-minded countries. From mid-March to mid-May, officials from the foreign affairs services held weekly discussions on practical issues pertaining to the management of the COVID crisis (visa exemptions, repatriation of nationals, maintenance of critical medical supplies, and so on).<sup>1</sup> It is unclear if this group has continued to meet since then. The Quad Plus, nevertheless, prompted a flurry of comments and discussions about the opportunity for the Quad to expand its membership and develop cooperation in domains other than maritime security, counterterrorism, humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR), or connectivity.

Because the Quad Plus is still a very nascent and debated initiative, it is difficult to discuss how Paris sees it and how France could formally associate or cooperate with the grouping. That said, the examination of France's various engagements in the Indo-Pacific can provide some clues regarding the synergies or divergences with the Quad Plus initiative.

In 2018, Paris unveiled its own Indo-Pacific strategy, which reflects a strategic reassessment of the region for French interests: the area is now widely acknowledged as the world economic powerhouse, and major trade partners are located there. The Indo-Pacific is also a key region when it comes to the governance of the commons and multilateralism. At the same time, there is now a recognition that Chin's rise is increasingly challenging French interests in the area. The Indo-Pacific terminology serves to highlight the strategic dimension of France's comprehensive approach to the region, by providing a powerful narrative. This narrative also strengthens Paris's legitimacy to act in the area and is useful to develop and expand cooperation with like-minded partners. Through its Indo-Pacific strategy, France can thus more adequately protect its sovereign interests while promoting and advancing its very own vision for a balanced, multipolar, inclusive Indo-Pacific regional order, upheld by key liberal principles and multilateral schemes.

This paper will offer perspectives on the development of the French Indo-Pacific strategy over the past two years. France's vision for the regional order will

be highlighted. It appears that maritime security is a core interest and objective in developing an Indo-Pacific approach. The French Indo-Pacific vision also relies on key strategic partnerships with all the members of the Quad. However, a concern to keep its strategic autonomy in the context of a worsening US–China rivalry and the strong interest to coordinate with European partners in the Indo-Pacific explain why Paris would be reluctant to join the Quad Plus in its current form. Paris would certainly favor unilateral or multilateral initiatives in which France would find more aligned interests and keep greater autonomy.

### **France's Indo-Pacific Strategy Vision**

The Indo-Pacific concept has recently entered the French narrative. Pres. Emmanuel Macron referred to an “Indo-Pacific axis”<sup>2</sup> when he visited Australia in May 2018, and subsequently, both the Ministry of the Armed Forces (MAF) and the Ministry of the European and Foreign Affairs (MEFA) issued key documents to present the French vision of the region.<sup>3</sup>

France has interest to act sovereignly in the Indo-Pacific area, having territories both in the Indian Ocean (La Réunion and the Scattered Islands) and the Pacific (New Caledonia and French Polynesia). Among these territories, 1.5 million citizens are living—along with approximately 200,000 French living in other countries throughout the region—and more than 90 percent of France's large (9 million km<sup>2</sup>) exclusive economic zone (EEZ) is located in the Indo-Pacific. France maintains a modest military presence of 7,000 personnel to protect this vast area. There is now a wide recognition that the deterioration of the security environment in Asia puts these interests at risk. The 2017 *Defense and National Security Strategic Review* notes that French overseas territories as well as freedom of supply and navigation are at risk.<sup>4</sup> President Macron repeatedly underlined the risks of a Chinese hegemony and the need for France to develop its own approach of the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond this, the Indo-Pacific is now recognized as a central stage where major transformations are ongoing that have global consequences, with direct implications for French interests. The Indo-Pacific is the economic epicenter of world trade and production and hosts vital sea lines of communications (SLOC). It forms a security continuum where freedom of navigation (FON) should not be challenged, 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 milieu for the shaping of international norms. President Macron made clear that he wanted to

restore France's global influence by upholding its values and principles and for Paris to be a central player for global governance and multilateralism.<sup>6</sup> The Indo-Pacific is at the core of challenges to the world order, and therefore, France should be engaged as a responsible stakeholder there.

France seeks to develop a principled approach to the Indo-Pacific and aims to maintain a multipolar and law-based order in the Indo-Pacific and to encourage multilateral regional cooperation to tackle the challenges in the security, political, and economic spheres. France supports a multipolar, inclusive, and balanced region, "where hegemonic tendencies along with temptations of division or confrontation [should be] discouraged."<sup>7</sup> 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. The focus on multipolarity and multilateralism is certainly different from the Trump administration's more confrontational vision of an Indo-Pacific strategy aimed at building anti-China coalitions. France is not supporting Washington's attempt to decouple economically from China. Also, Paris insists that its Indo-Pacific strategy is not military-driven, which again is a significant difference from the American one (for example, the renaming of the US Pacific Command to the Indo-Pacific Command [INDOPACOM]). France's vision encompasses broader issues such as the blue economy and environmental questions.

Taking into account the coexistence of several models—for example, the Belt and Road Initiative, Free and Open Indo-Pacific, and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (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.<sup>8</sup> The stability should be fostered through "an international order based on dialogue and multilaterally set rules" to deal with transnational risks and governance of the commons (maritime security, nuclear proliferation, terrorism, climate change and biodiversity, cyber, and space).<sup>9</sup> Three major pillars have been identified: maritime security, connectivity and infrastructure, and environmental issues (climate and biodiversity). All three priorities relate to the ocean, the good order at sea, the sustained management of the marine resources, and safety of the sea lanes.

### **The Prevalence of Maritime Security**

In its approach to the region, Paris is placing the priority on the broadly defined maritime security. At the 2019 Raisina Dialogue, French admiral Christophe Prazuck, Chief of Naval Staff, presented a holistic approach regarding protecting the commons at sea: France is interested in keeping the safety of "dots" (chokepoints like Hormuz, Malacca, and Bab el-Mandeb Straits), SLOCs, and stocks (fish, hydrocarbons, and rare earths present in respective EEZ).<sup>10</sup>

Accordingly, France supports the strict application of the United Nations Convention for the Law of the Sea, contributes to actions against crime at sea, and is keen on actively demonstrating its commitment to the FON. In 2016, the statement of the 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.<sup>11</sup> Thus, while not taking sides on sovereignty matters, Paris has consistently sent its ships to the South and East China Seas in recent years, through the passing of the *Jeanne d'Arc* mission or the surveillance frigates based in New Caledonia. Last June, the aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* was dispatched to Singapore during the Shangri-La Dialogue. The French Minister of the Armed Forces, Florence Parly, then promised that French vessels would sail at least twice a year in the South China Sea and will continue upholding international law in a “steady, non-confrontational but obstinate way.”<sup>12</sup>

Thus, maritime security prevails in today's French Indo-Pacific approach. It has been so far embodied mostly by naval diplomacy though the dispatches of frigates or aircraft carrier groups to the region. But beyond the military dimension, other issues, such as the blue economy, are of interest for France.<sup>13</sup> The management of the large French EEZ in the region requires proper protection of the marine resources and a sustainable development of these resources. In addition, President Macron has identified the blue economy as an important engine for growth in the context of the COVID-19-induced economic crisis.<sup>14</sup> The security implications of environmental issues such as the depletion of resources (fisheries) and climate change are also core issues of concern. These kinds of risks, along with natural disasters, actually represent the primary threat to human lives in the Indo-Pacific area.

Therefore, France aims to develop its 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 islands states. Maritime domain awareness (MDA) is a requirement for better managing one's own sovereign territory and EEZ but also to ensure the safety of international waters, SLOCs, and FON. It is also instrumental to prevent crises resulting from environmental issues such as natural disaster or fishery depletion. Thus, it is possible to foster international cooperation on a crucial capacity (a shared MDA) but in a consensual, or nonconfrontational, manner (environmental crisis prevention). To concretize this project, France is building up on its strategic partnerships in the region.

## A Partnership-based Approach

To increase its leverage and compensate for limited capacities, France is putting a priority on strengthening relations with its partners and building up a network of strategic partnerships with India, Australia, and Japan, as well as Malaysia, Singapore, New Zealand, Indonesia, and Vietnam. Therefore, Paris has already initiated a dynamic cooperation with all members of the Quad and many of those envisioned as members of the Quad Plus.

During his visit to Australia in May 2018, President Macron referred to a “Paris-Delhi-Canberra axis,” bound to expand. The two key partnerships, with Australia and India, are founded upon common values and similar interests and are supported by defense equipment sales and concrete security cooperation (facilitated by acquisition and cross-servicing agreement [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. In March 2018, a logistics exchange memorandum of agreement, granting reciprocal access to each other’s bases.<sup>15</sup> Since then, the French frigate *Cassard* made a port call in the Mumbai harbor (January 2019) and in March 2020, despite the pandemic, an Indian Navy P-8 aircraft visited La Réunion to conduct a coordinated maritime patrol with French forces.<sup>16</sup> In Spring 2019, France and India held their biggest naval exercises, with a total of 12 warships and submarines, including the aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle*, patrolling off the coast of Goa for the annual Varuna exercises.

The two countries have signed a common strategic vision for their cooperation in the Indian Ocean, including maritime intelligence and protection and exchange of sensitive information. India and France are co-developing a constellation of satellites to monitor the Indian Ocean, in an effort to strengthen the MDA.<sup>17</sup> France was also the first country to send a liaison officer to the Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), created in Delhi in 2018. Finally, the two countries are deepening their coordination in multilateral settings, with New Delhi supporting Paris’s application to join the Indian Ocean Rim Association.

While maritime security in the Indian Ocean lies at the core of the Franco-Indian partnership, the cooperation extends beyond that, in the realm of climate change and global commons for example. France and India jointly launched the International Solar Alliance (ISA) at the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 21) in Paris, and the first ISA summit, dedicated to the promotion of solar energy, was held in March 2018—the ISA is the first international

organization headquartered in India. The ISA is now gathering 121 member countries. However, Quad Plus countries such as the United States, Vietnam, and Israel are still not part of this grouping. Promoting and enlarging the ISA to these countries and implementing projects under the ISA umbrella would be a way to feed the cooperation among these countries. India, as well as Australia, was among the few nonmember countries invited by President Macron to the G7 Summit in Biarritz last year, demonstrating that Paris considers New Delhi and Canberra as key players for global governance.

The strategic partnership with Australia has been concentrating more on the South Pacific region. The two countries, plus New Zealand, are part of the 1992 FRANZ arrangement, signed to coordinate their assistance for Pacific island nations during natural disasters. Paris and Canberra also coordinate with Washington and Wellington within the Pacific Quadrilateral Defense Coordination Group, which coordinates maritime security efforts in the Pacific. The partnership is also developing along the lines of an important industrial cooperation, after the French company Naval Group (formerly known as Direction des Constructions Navales or DCNS) won the bid in 2016 to provide 12 submarines to be phased into the Australian navy until 2050. This long-term deal implies that France will stay engaged in the region for the coming decades, and in 2017, the two countries signed a joint statement to set their cooperation in the years to come. France was the first partner of the 2018-founded Australian Space Agency, and the two partners cooperate on monitoring of climate change and sustainable development issues (biodiversity and fisheries) in the South Pacific.<sup>18</sup>

The French ambition is to develop regular trilateral discussions out of these two parallel partnerships. This has been done at the Track 1.5 level in 2019, and the first trilateral dialogue at the official level was held in September 2020. The talks focused on enhancing cooperation in the maritime sector, promoting global commons (climate, environment and biodiversity, health) and multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>19</sup> The Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region,<sup>20</sup> issued in March 2018, and the Vision Statement on the Australia-France Relationship,<sup>21</sup> released in May 2018, also mentioned the possibility to coordinate with third partners through trilateral dialogues and joint exercises. From this perspective, Japan appears as a key partner for France, as it has the capacity to help monitor the SLOCs and shares France's concern about keeping multipolarity in the region and avoiding Chinese hegemony. The bilateral security cooperation has expanded in recent years and has been gradually institutionalized. Beyond the annual 2+2 meeting (between the defense and foreign affairs ministers), an agreement on the transfer of defense equipment and technology, in force since December 2016, has opened way to a joint research

and development of new-generation underwater minesweeping technology. In July 2018, an ACSA was signed to allow the sharing of defense supplies and services, an important step to expand cooperation in peacekeeping and HA/DR operations and facilitate more ambitious joint exercises. So far, the bulk of bilateral cooperation has been focused on maritime security, mostly in Asia, where Japan is taking part in HA/DR joint training held by France in the South Pacific, for example, but also in the Gulf of Aden with participation in multinational antipiracy operations. A maritime dialogue has been launched with Tokyo in 2019, and a joint reflection to identify concrete areas of cooperation in the Indo-Pacific is ongoing.

Other identified partners to expand the network are Malaysia, Singapore (where a French liaison officer is dispatched at the Intelligence Fusion Center), New Zealand, Indonesia, and Vietnam. A deepening of the relations with the ASEAN countries is set as a priority. ASEAN Centrality is seen as a stabilizing factor, given that Southeast Asia is again a milieu for the Great Game between China and the United States. 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 to prevent or manage crises resulting from environmental issues, natural disaster, crimes at sea, or so forth.

While France does not share the confrontational and militarized approach that the Trump administration developed in the Indo-Pacific vis à vis China, the United States is also a powerful partner in the region. A French liaison officer is hosted in the US INDOPACOM, and naval exercises have provided opportunities to strengthen ties. Quadrilateral drills on amphibious operations held in Spring 2017 among Japanese, French, US, and British ships as part of France's *Jeanne d'Arc* mission near Guam. In May 2019, France led the *La Pérouse* exercises with the Japanese, US, and Australian navies, conducting their first joint exercises in the Bay of Bengal.<sup>22</sup> The progress in the Indo–Australia relations and the conclusion of a defense agreement could facilitate the organization of a joint trilateral exercises in the years to come.

Therefore, France maintains close and dynamic strategic partnerships with the four members of the Quad countries. However, France has so far refused to formally be associated with the Quad. This has to do with Paris trying to walk a fine line on China; while it is clear that France's Indo-Pacific strategy is motivated by China's 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.<sup>23</sup> This ambiguous approach generates frustrations internationally as well as domestically and so far has prevented France from joining initiatives that may have anti-China connotations. This position is also about maintaining France's strategic autonomy amid the growing rivalry between China and the United States.

### **Strategic Autonomy, EU Backing, and the Quad Plus**

Keeping its strategic autonomy will indeed be key to determine how France will navigate in the Indo-Pacific. An inclusive, multilateral approach is preferred, even if the reality of cooperation points toward more limited groups of like-minded countries to advance an agenda in an efficient way. Paris will promote flexible tools such as ad hoc, minilateral groups to tackle a specific issue and uphold common understanding and norms as a regime. France will also take advantage of its overseas territories to play as a local actor, nurture cooperation with regional partners, and maximize its military presence in the area. The focus will be on upholding principles, multilateralism, maritime security, and environmental matters.

In this perspective, the formation of the Quad Plus appears as a positive development. It encourages greater coordination between interested countries to work on a specific topic (the management of the COVID-19 crisis) rather than to cooperate “against” an actor. It encourages a minilateral initiative (the Quad) to expand into a more multilateral setting, without being institutionalized. However, seen from Paris, the Quad Plus also has some drawbacks—the more important one being that it came at the initiative of a Trump administration that was eager to shape the narrative on the initiative to make it a joint reaction to global crisis created by a China-originated virus. The United States also reportedly planned to use this format to launch its Economic Prosperity Network, aimed at accelerating the restructuring and relocation of supply chains out of China.<sup>24</sup> This American, or more precisely Trumpian, print on this initiative would make France very cautious to join if it were invited, especially as this Quad Plus was launched during the last months of the current US administration. Another concern is about the relevance of the group of countries that were gathered in the Quad Plus. In particular, when Secretary of State Mike Pompeo upgraded the session at the political level in May, he invited his counterparts from Brazil and Israel to join.<sup>25</sup> This grouping makes little sense in terms of Indo-Pacific strategy or COVID-19 crisis management but points again to a US-led initiative that may not be attractive to France. It is

worth noting that even the terminology Quad Plus stemmed from the media and analysts, not the participants' public diplomacy.

France will more likely go on with its own initiatives, emphasizing their inclusive nature (as long as partner countries share a basic understanding and principles). Paris will favor multilateral settings and, more importantly, is emphasizing the importance of a coordinated European approach in the region.

In the maritime security domain, 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 China Sea.<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, 52 British troops and their helicopters, as well as 12 officers from European countries and one EU official joined the French naval mission *Jeanne d'Arc* in 2017, and British ships sailed alongside the French naval group in 2018. In August 2019 at an informal meeting at Helsinki, EU defense ministers agreed to the concept of an EU Coordinated Maritime Presence. The aim is to ensure a coordinated presence at sea, based on a voluntary forces contribution by the EU member states, under national control. The first test is set up in the Strait of Hormuz with the European Maritime Awareness mission in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASOH) mission that started in February 2020. It provides a new flexibility for the EU to show the flag and set up a multinational naval presence outside of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) framework—thus, evading the necessity to reach consensus of all member states to act.<sup>27</sup> It also affirms European strategic autonomy vis à vis the United States. In the future, such a European Task Group could sail the South China Sea for political signaling, naval diplomacy, and information gathering. As for now, France can take advantage of the EU's already extensive experience in contributing to maritime security by combating piracy in the Horn of Africa and building MDA capabilities in the Western Indian Ocean over the past 12 years. The EU is expanding its cooperation to the Eastern Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia through the Critical Maritime Routes in the Indian Ocean (CRIMARIO) II program (2020–2023).<sup>28</sup>

While France was the first EU country to present an Indo-Pacific strategy and although views among EU member states on an Asia policy are still diverse, the Indo-Pacific narrative is gaining momentum in Europe. Distrust toward China has been growing in recent months, following the COVID-19 crisis, the fiasco of the mask diplomacy, the harsh rhetoric of several top Chinese diplomats in Europe, the realization of an excessive economic dependence vis à vis Beijing, and the shocking imposition of the Hong Kong security law. This growing consensus of an increasing caution regarding China came with a realization that Europe

should step up to better defend its interests in Asia too. Indeed, the COVID-19 crisis exemplifies the vulnerabilities of the supply chains as well as the importance of Asia for Europe's security. As a result, we have seen several declarations from the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, calling for the EU to diversify its supply chains and build up cooperation with Asian democracies.<sup>29</sup> Germany, once very cautious about not antagonizing China, published its own Indo-Pacific strategy on 1 September 2020.<sup>30</sup> Berlin also announced that it will send a frigate to the Indo-Pacific region soon. The Netherlands is also reportedly discussing cooperation in the region with other EU member states.<sup>31</sup> France has been instrumental in encouraging EU countries to step up their presence and commitments to the region.<sup>32</sup>

Diversification of partners and supply chains will be a key objective of this European approach to the region. A stronger strategic autonomy with regard to industrial and economic policy is indeed a core objective of the post-COVID recovery plan proposed by France and Germany and adopted at the EU level.<sup>33</sup> While Paris is likely to prioritize cooperation with the EU and European partners, this agenda regarding the diversification of value chains is similar to the Resilient Supply Chain Initiative that Japan pushes together with India and Australia and could provide a basis for expanded cooperation among the partners.<sup>34</sup> Another way to find synergies is on health cooperation. France wants to make a vaccine against COVID an international common good. The Coronavirus Global Response event back in May 2020 helped raise funding to achieve this goal. Japan was a co-convenor, along with France and other partners.<sup>35</sup> This kind of initiative could certainly be useful in developing the cooperation with other Quad Plus countries, providing that the next US administration is ready to commit again to multilateralism.

## **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-power competition in a key area for French interests. Thus, multipolarity and multilateral cooperation should be fostered. To achieve this vision, France relies on its strategic partnerships in the region and strives to build up a network to mutualize capacity and have a greater impact. Minilateral, 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 France will be able to mobilize additional assets to deploy in the

broad area. For now, Paris puts priority on keeping its flexibility and implements concrete initiatives to flesh out its vision.

So far, France has been insisting on maintaining its strategic autonomy in the region, hence pushing back against propositions to associate with the Quad, for example. This said, Paris has also been working to build up a network of partners in the region. Hence, multilateralism and minilateralism are both present in the French approach. The extent to which France can be associated or interested in working with the newly minted Quad Plus will certainly depend on the possibility of maintaining its strategic autonomy and walk a fine line between the United States and China, especially as the Sino–US rivalry worsens. This would not prevent a deepening of the bilateral relations with the members of the Quad Plus and ad hoc coordination on specific issues. ❁

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### Notes

1. Indrani Bagchi, "New alliances, grouping being created in response to Covid-19," *Times of India*, 14 May 2020, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com>.

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

3. The 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. The brochure was updated in 2019. See the Ministry of the Armed Forces' website: [www.defense.gouv.fr](http://www.defense.gouv.fr). Only 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* (Paris: French Ministry of European and Foreign Affairs, August 2018), [www.diplomatie.gouv.fr](http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr). The document has been updated in 2019: "Stratégie française dans l'Indo-pacifique: "Pour un espace indo-pacifique inclusif," August 2019, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/>.

4. "Defense and National Security Strategic Review," 2017, 26.

5. "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, available at: [www.elysee.fr](http://www.elysee.fr). See also Emmanuel Macron, *Speech at Garden Island Naval Base*, Sydney, 2 May 2018; Emmanuel Macron, Joint media briefing: Statement by the French President, New Delhi, 10 March 2018, <https://in.ambafrance.org/>; and Discours du Président de la République Emmanuel Macron sur la Nouvelle-Calédonie à Nouméa, 5 May 2018, <https://www.elysee.fr/>.

6. Discours du Président de la République à la conférence des Ambassadeurs, Paris, 29 August 2017, <https://www.elysee.fr/>.

7. MEFA brochure, 3.

8. MEFA brochure, 4.

9. MEFA brochure.

10. Admiral Christophe Prazuck, Chief of Naval Staff, France, “Raisina 2019 | Indo-Pacific: Ancient Waters and Emerging Geometries,” ORF, *YouTube*, 9 January 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/>.

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13. Discours du Président Emmanuel Macron à l’occasion des Assises de l’Economie Maritime à Montpellier, 3 December 2019, <https://www.elysee.fr/>.

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15. The 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.

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19. The Indo-Pacific: 1st Trilateral Dialogue between France, India and Australia, French Embassy in New Delhi, 11 September 2020, <https://in.ambafrance.org/>.

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

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