

# The China Factor in France's Indo-Pacific Strategy

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## Abstract

This article assesses the rationale and fundamental tenets of France's Indo-Pacific strategy in context of its complex and transforming relationship with China. Tracing the evolution of Sino-French relations, it demonstrates how Paris has found engaging with Beijing to be a perilous exercise requiring delicate balancing between political and economic interests. It argues that Paris' most important task going ahead will be to strike a balance between its parallel perceptions of China as a systemic rival, economic competitor, and diplomatic partner. It contends that despite differences in their China approaches, and France's quest for greater strategic autonomy, Paris and Washington share several commonalities that can continue to drive cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. While the China challenge looms large, France will need to build deeper partnerships with middle powers such as India and Japan, and skillfully navigate complex geopolitical realities to emerge as a balancing and stabilizing Indo-Pacific power.

The Indo-Pacific has swiftly become a center of geopolitical activity. China's rise—accompanied by certain belligerent actions—have challenged the status quo and thrown the region into flux. Just as Europe's geopolitical fissures drew international powers to focus on the continent, similarly, tension-riddled fault lines—ranging from economic and environmental to geopolitical and geostrategic—have drawn extraterritorial states to the Indo-Pacific domain. As US-China great-power rivalry intensifies, external middle-power actors—including Europe—are seeking to cement their engagement with like-minded actors in the region. In recent years, the European powers—like France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom—are displaying a clear pivot toward the Indo-Pacific within their foreign and security policy outlooks.

France was the first EU member state to indicate its interest in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>1</sup> In 2018, President Emmanuel Macron expressed Paris' stake in the region and its intent to build a new relationship with Asia.<sup>2</sup> This was followed by the release of Indo-Pacific policy documents by the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs<sup>3</sup> as well as the Ministry for the Armed Forces, outlining the foreign and defense policies to be adopted by France in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>4</sup> In 2019, France sent an aircraft carrier strike group, led by the nuclear-powered *Charles de Gaulle*, on a mission to the Indo-Pacific, which included sailing through the contentious Taiwan Strait and holding joint naval drills with regional partners. Under Macron's leadership, France is proactively engaged in shaping the EU's strategy and vision for engagement in the Indo-Pacific. Building upon its island territories in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, France has sought to identify itself as a state of the Indo-Pacific and promote itself as a bridge between the two geographically distant continents.

Furthermore, post the formation of the Australia-United Kingdom-United States trilateral security pact (AUKUS), which led to the cancellation of the Franco-Australian submarine deal, France has led the calls for greater strategic autonomy for the EU. Here, *strategic autonomy* is defined as strengthening Brussels' capacity to defend its values and interests, boost its resilience and its preparedness for the threats and challenges it faces, and contribute to achieving peace and security at a global level. France's foremost priority as a leader within the EU, including its presidency of the Council of the European Union (January to June 2022), has been to build a stronger Europe that is capable of acting independently and defining the future agenda.<sup>5</sup> Essentially, Paris not only seeks to reduce the EU's dependence on the United States for security needs but also reduce economic reliance on China amid growing concerns about Beijing's economic authoritarianism and hegemonic ambitions.

This article outlines the rationale and fundamental tenets of France's Indo-Pacific strategy and, by extension, its approach toward China. It discusses how French engagement and outlook toward the region has evolved in recent years, especially since the establishment of the AUKUS trilateral. It explores how France-China bilateral ties have transformed over time and how China features in Paris' outlook for the Indo-Pacific region.

## France in the Indo-Pacific: Stakes and Strategy

France has both extensive territorial and military presence in the Indo-Pacific, making it a geopolitical reality and priority. French territories span from the eastern coast of Africa to the western coast of the Americas; they include Mayotte, Reunion, Scattered Islands, La Reunion, New Caledonia, Wallis & Futuna, French Polynesia, Clipperton Islands, and French Antarctic and sub-Antarctic territories and are home to over 1.6 million French citizens (see table 1). This necessitates a rather broad topographical definition of the Indo-Pacific, making it a better fitting geographical construct compared to the "Asia-Pacific" terminology.

**Table 1: French presence in the Indo-Pacific.** (Source: Compiled by the author based on data from the French Ministry for the Armed Forces.)

Territory/Country	# of French Nationals	EEZ (in square kilometres)
<b>Mayotte- Réunion- Scattered Islands</b>	1,100,000 inhabitants	1,026,037 sq. km.
<b>French Antarctic and Sub-Antarctic Territories</b>	-	2,070,343 sq. km.
<b>New Caledonia</b>	282,000 inhabitants	1,457,032 sq. km.
<b>Wallis &amp; Futuna</b>	12,000 inhabitants	263,422 sq. km.
<b>French Polynesia</b>	276,000 inhabitants	4,852,122 sq. km.
<b>Clipperton</b>	-	438,048 sq. km.
<b>China</b>	> 30,000 nationals	-
<b>India</b>	10,000–30,000 nationals	-
<b>Australia</b>	10,000–30,000 nationals	-
<b>Japan</b>	10,000–30,000 nationals	-

More importantly, these territories provide France with an 11 million square kilometers-large exclusive economic zone (EEZ)—the second-largest in the world after the United States. This constitutes 93 percent of France's total EEZ, with 14 percent exports and 17 percent of imports (excluding armaments) passing through the region. Additionally, France has more than 7,000 companies and holds €108 billion in foreign direct investment (FDI) in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>6</sup> Such

deep-rooted geographical and economic connections point to the region's vitality in France's international and financial outlook. As the Indo-Pacific emerges as a center of global economic activity, France's pivot toward the region is a logical development. Accordingly, Paris' trade engagement has grown steadily since 2008, to the tune of 75 percent (€320 billion) in FDIs in 2018.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, France's Indo-Pacific territories give it a significant military presence across the region, within three permanent areas of responsibility: the South Indian Ocean zone, New Caledonia, and French Polynesia.<sup>8</sup> With more than 4,000 personnel across its Indian Ocean territories and another 3,000 across its Pacific territories, more than 60 percent of France's total permanent military commitment overseas is in the Indo-Pacific region. See Table 2 for a breakdown of the strength and capacity of French forces in its Indo-Pacific commands.

**Table 2: French military presence in its Indo-Pacific commands (2019).** (Source: Compiled by the author based on data from the report 'France and Security in the Indo-Pacific' by the French Ministry for the Armed Forces)<sup>9</sup>

Military Base	Capacity
<b>North Indian Ocean</b> (United Arab Emirates and Djibouti)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Combat aircraft (6 Rafale in the UAE and 4 Mirage 2000 in Djibouti)</li> <li>• 8 helicopters</li> <li>• 1 tactical transport aircraft</li> </ul>
<b>South of the Indian Ocean</b> (La Réunion and Mayotte islands)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 surveillance frigates equipped with 1 helicopter each</li> <li>• 1 supply and support vessel</li> <li>• 2 patrol vessels (including 1 polar patrol vessel)</li> <li>• 2 tactical aircraft</li> </ul>
<b>Pacific Ocean</b> (New Caledonia and French Polynesia)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 surveillance frigates equipped with 1 helicopter each</li> <li>• 2 multi-dimensional ships</li> <li>• 3 patrol vessels</li> <li>• 2 multi-mission ships</li> <li>• 5 maritime surveillance aircraft</li> <li>• 4 tactical transport aircraft</li> <li>• 5 helicopters</li> </ul>

Building on its substantive regional territories, historical connections and economic stakes, France released its Indo-Pacific strategy in 2019, which was subsequently updated in 2021. Mainly, the Indo-Pacific strategy envisions France as a resident, "inclusive and stabilising power" to realize a "stable, law-based, multipolar" order in the region.<sup>10</sup> For this, France defines five primary objectives in the Indo-Pacific: (1) to protect and defend French territories, citizens and EEZ; (2) to promote security (including military) cooperation for the peace and stability of common spaces; (3) to preserve access to common domains in the Indo-Pacific; (4) to promote multilateral action for advancing strategic stability and military balance of power; (5) to tackle the security threats of climate change.<sup>11</sup>

In pursuit of these objectives, Paris aims to enhance its engagement in the region, through bilateral and minilateral initiatives with partner states as well as multilateral forums.<sup>12</sup> The Indo-Pacific faces urgent security challenges, ranging from maritime security, terrorism, and organized crime to climate change, and collaborative efforts are necessary for an effective response. Paris looks to strengthen strategic partnerships with like-minded powers such as India, Japan, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Notably, China remains incognito here. Though France's strategy mentions the importance of constructive dialogue with Beijing at high levels of the government,<sup>13</sup> there is a clear shift in French thinking away from China and toward middle-power partners such as India and Japan.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, France keeps "a network of 18 defense missions led by defense attachés, accredited in 33 countries, and about 15 liaison and cooperation officers"<sup>15</sup> that are critical for conducting diplomacy and military cooperation with like-minded partners. Such outreach has enabled France to forge a security continuum stretching from the eastern coast of Africa to the western Pacific.

Alongside enhanced bilateral ties, Paris aims to augment its presence and engagement with regional organizations to pursue multilateral solutions. This includes an increased role in organizations such as the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus and the Asia-Europe Meeting, the Indian Ocean Rim Association, and the Pacific Community. Greater participation in regional platforms can help France promote increased multilateral cooperation to achieve common goals in domains like climate change, blue economy, healthcare, digital technology, and high-quality connectivity infrastructure, which form priority areas of concern for both France and the EU.

France can therefore take advantage of its unique geographical positioning as a European state with a physical presence in the Indo-Pacific, to function as a bridge between the two regions and drive cross-continental collaboration in sectors from sustainable development to peace and stability, such through extensions of existing initiatives like the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy.

### **Assessing the China Factor**

The diversified geographical and economic connections are central to France's objective to be recognized as a local actor in the Indo-Pacific. However, its strategy toward the region can be understood in the context of its changing relationship with China. France's pivot toward the Indo-Pacific, and its endeavor to influence and shape the norms in the region, and contribute to building an inclusive, rules-based regional order, are drawn staunchly on China's growing presence.

### ***Tracing Evolving Sino-French Relations***

Historians trace the relations between France and China to the seventeenth century, between the Kangxi Emperor and King Louis XIV. Nevertheless, official relations between the two countries began on 27 January 1964, with Paris' recognition of China.<sup>16</sup> In 2004, China–France ties were upgraded to a “global strategic partnership.” Both countries regularly held high-level strategic dialogues, instituted in 2001, on international issues such as global economic governance reforms and climate change. In 2013, they also initiated high-level economic and financial dialogues to resolve bilateral trade issues and pursue mutual growth. A year later, in a sign of their growing partnership, France and China instituted high-level consultations on enhancing people-to-people exchanges, to help promote bilateral academic, scientific, and cultural interactions and human rights.<sup>17</sup>

In 2013, Sino-French bilateral ties made progress with frequent high-level interactions leading to stronger business ties and people-to-people exchanges.<sup>18</sup> Former French President François Hollande visited China for the first time and signed 18 agreements for mutual collaboration, including the sale of 42 A320 aircrafts, thus promoting bilateral industrial cooperation. This was supplemented by multiple in-person interactions between the French and Chinese prime ministers as well as their economic and foreign ministers in the same year.<sup>19</sup> In March 2014, Xi Jinping's visit to France saw both leaders decide to jointly “steer the China-France relationship into a new era”.<sup>20</sup> This was followed by Hollande's visit to China in early November 2015, a month before the Paris Climate Conference, and Xi's meeting with Hollande on the sidelines of the UN Climate Conference in end of November 2015. One of Hollande's primary goals at the time was to solicit Chinese support to mandate countries to raise their carbon emission cuts.<sup>21</sup> With China being the world's largest greenhouse gas emitter, Hollande believed Chinese support to be essential to reaching an effective climate deal.<sup>22</sup> This cooperation in the climate change domain continued with Macon's Beijing visit in November 2019, where leaders of both states affirmed their support for the Paris climate pact, despite US president Donald Trump's withdrawal. In the same year (March 2019), China and France inked 15 business agreements worth US\$15 billion spanning strategic investments in sectors like trade, tourism, health, aeronautics, energy, digital technology, and agriculture. Most significantly, these deals included a US\$34 billion order of 300 planes from Airbus; a €1 billion contract for French energy giant EDF to construct an offshore wind farm in China as part of cooperation on energy-saving efforts.<sup>23</sup>

Through the 1997 and 2010 France-China Joint Statements, the two countries renewed their framework for bilateral cooperation. They pledged to collaborate in

building a multipolar political and economic order that is prosperous, stable, secure, and balanced.<sup>24</sup> They also sought to jointly tackle shared challenges—including terrorism, disarmament, nuclear nonproliferation, and multitrade—and “oppose any attempt to dominate international affairs.”<sup>25</sup> Such a positive message was echoed again during Macron’s 2019 visit where he called for a strong Europe-China partnership based on “strong multilateralism” and a “fair and balanced” trade<sup>26</sup>—which remains the topmost priority for France’s policy vis-à-vis China. Sino-French bilateral trade has grown leaps and bounds over the past two decades, from US\$11.5 billion in 2000 to more than US\$68 billion in 2019—US\$45.2 billion in Chinese exports to France and US\$23.6 billion in French exports to China, pointing to a surplus of US\$32 billion for China.<sup>27</sup> With a market share of 1.4 percent, China ranks as France’s seventh-largest customer and second-largest supplier—demonstrating the significant economic asymmetry that persists in their bilateral trade.

For France, engaging with China has been nothing short of a perilous exercise in balancing mercantilist and political interests. Largely, France’s approach has been either of *adaptation* (and by extension, compliance) to China’s demands amid fears of gross economic retaliation or *reassertion*, which involves publicly criticizing Beijing on its democracy, human rights, and rule of law record.<sup>28</sup> An example of *adaptation* is the sale of six *La Fayette*-class frigates and 60 Mirage 2000-5s to Taiwan in 1991 and 1992, respectively.<sup>29</sup> This was considered a gross violation of territorial integrity by Beijing and an infringement of its One China policy. Beijing was so affronted that it forced the closing of the French consulate in Guangzhou. Sino-French relations normalized when Paris halted such sales in 1994. The former French president François Mitterrand (1981–1995) was unable to draw a politically and economically balanced China policy. His successor, Jacques Chirac, pushed unsuccessfully for a robust trade relationship grounded on strong political ties.<sup>30</sup> Unlike his predecessors, former president Nicolas Sarkozy attempted to delineate the economics from the politics by diversifying the French focus away from China and to its competitors, India and Brazil. Politically, Sarkozy criticized Beijing’s violence during the 2008 “Tiananmen crisis”-like unrest in Tibet, yet, economically, he leaned toward China’s stance on global financial governance. In this context, despite the sensitive implications for France’s national sovereignty, the Sarkozy administration welcomed Chinese investments in France<sup>31</sup> and even sought Beijing’s help in the EU’s debt crisis.<sup>32</sup> However, building a Chinese policy over the past decade has required Paris to not only juggle a triangular relationship with the United States and China but also spend considerable efforts to negotiate more stringent trade regulations, greater transparency in implementing Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects in Europe, a reciprocal

opening of China's markets, and a more standardized European approach toward China.

### ***France's China Challenge under Macron: Toward a Hard-line Stance***

France was still hoping for a comprehensive global partnership when Xi assumed leadership in 2013, as expressed in its 2013 white paper;<sup>33</sup> however, France–China relations have become increasingly strained in recent years given the strategic and economic upheavals caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Ever since the current President Macron turned the focus toward Indo-Pacific, there has been a marked shift in Paris' China approach. The 2021 Strategic Update of France's 2017 *Defence and National Security Strategic Review* framed China as a “systemic rival,” “economic competitor,” and “sometimes an important diplomatic partner.”<sup>34</sup> In 2019, even as Paris sought to engage with Beijing, there were perceptible tensions between the two states. Xi's visit to Europe saw President Macron lead a united European front in confronting Beijing on issues of critical importance to Brussels, such as China's unfair trade practices, sluggish pace of opening its markets for European corporations, lack of transparency financing deals under the BRI, and human rights infringements against minorities (such as the undermining of freedoms of expression, religion, and conscience in the Tibet and Xinjiang provinces).<sup>35</sup> These matters hampered a robust and synergetic Sino-French partnership, and by extension the EU–China relationship, yet a dissonance between the two countries has become all the more evident in recent years. This is evident particularly in the post-pandemic era, which has seen a much more belligerent and authoritarian Chinese power actively pursue its hegemonic designs.

Although China is vital to France's trade interests, economic frictions amid an unfair trade balance, political differences over divisive viewpoints on critical global issues, and human rights infringements have come to figure more prominently in their bilateral dynamics. On various occasions President Macron openly criticized Beijing, demonstrating France's frustrations and a real and increasing willingness to stand up to China. In March 2019, as the US–China trade war intensified, Macron stated at an EU summit press conference that the “time of European naïveté” with respect to China was over and called on Brussels to shift its strategic calculus vis-à-vis Beijing.<sup>36</sup> He argued that rather than viewing China primarily as a trade partner, the EU must assess and perceive it first through a geopolitical and strategic lens. Additionally, Paris warned its EU partners about China's distorted financing and investment practices under the BRI that present a risk to the sovereignty and strategic autonomy of regional states.<sup>37</sup> Macron also insisted that the EU resolve its internal divisions and pursue a more coordinated approach on China.

Macron criticized Beijing's suppression of political demonstrations in Hong Kong during Macron's October 2019 visit to China.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, despite remaining silent over human rights violations in Xinjiang, the French president called for a UN inquiry into the matter in 2020.<sup>39</sup> At the 46th session of UN Human Rights Council, the French representative categorically denounced China's "large-scale system of institutionalized surveillance and repression" of the Uighur minority, and pushed for EU sanctions against senior Chinese officials and halting of EU-China negotiations on the Comprehensive Agreement for Investment.<sup>40</sup> Notably, not only did France criticize Beijing's imposition of the National Security Law on Hong Kong but also terminated its extradition treaty with Hong Kong in a significant shift from its earlier stance.<sup>41</sup> In this context, France's posture vis-à-vis Hong Kong and Xinjiang has undoubtedly proved to be major point of contention in bilateral ties.

Furthermore, the matter of France selling arms to Taiwan resurfaced amid the COVID-19 pandemic when Taiwan announced that it was looking to once again buy defense equipment from France to upgrade the missile defense systems of the French warships bought in 1991 and 1992. Beijing expressed "serious concern" and urged Paris to refrain from any move that could potentially hamper Sino-French ties.<sup>42</sup> Yet, in the wake of Chinese air intrusions into Taiwanese air defense zone, a French delegation, led by former French defense minister Alain Richard, visited Taipei to meet with President Tsai Ing-wen.<sup>43</sup> The move was hugely symbolic of France's commitment to oppose China's unilateral aggression in the region, including pressure on Taiwan through its gray-zone warfare tactics, and overall commitment to peace, security, and stability in the Indo-Pacific.

The time of the pandemic also put China's aggressive diplomatic tactics on display for Europe, such as through Beijing's wolf warrior diplomacy. Under this strategy, Beijing attempted to frame itself as a benevolent global "savior" power, emphasizing its role as a global donor and supplier of critical medical equipment, while at the same time promoting fake news.<sup>44</sup> For instance, the Chinese embassy in France posted a series of scathing tweets, including publicly attacking independent French scholars, researchers, and policy makers, thus giving Paris a taste of China's wolf warrior diplomacy,<sup>45</sup> and forcing France to officially condemn the public stances of Chinese representatives.<sup>46</sup> In 2021, Chinese social media posts insulting a French academic who criticized China prompted Paris to issue a strong warning that it was not a "doormat" tolerating "threats and intimidation."<sup>47</sup> Such public spats have only added to political tensions between the two states and hampered China's image in France. Unfavorable views of China have risen by almost 30 percent over the past two decades, from 42 percent in 2002 to 70 percent in 2020.<sup>48</sup> An October 2021 government report paints Beijing's growing use

of “sharp power” via its influence operations—from public diplomacy to clandestine activities—as a “Machiavellian moment” in China’s hegemonic pursuit.<sup>49</sup> It identified Russian inspirations (and a certain degree of cooperation with Moscow) in Chinese operations and demonstrated such posture and actions had achieved several successes globally despite being overall strategic failures.

Such changing dynamics with Beijing have become a driving force for Paris’ Indo-Pacific strategy. France’s recent documents—such as the *Defence and National Security Strategic Review* 2017 and *Chinese Influence Operations* report 2021—clearly recognize that upheavals in the Indo-Pacific present a threat to France and Europe, and a show of military strength in the region is crucial to protecting and advancing French interests.<sup>50</sup> This threat perception of China is reinforced in the 2021 updated versions of France’s *Strategic Review*<sup>51</sup> and Indo-Pacific strategy.<sup>52</sup>

The contemporary security environment has stressed the need for modernization of French armed forces—as extrapolated in France’s Military Planning Law of 2018—to build a “coherent, agile and innovative armed forces model.”<sup>53</sup> Accordingly, in view of the China threat (in terms of its coercive policies, systemic challenges to the rules-based order, and growing military ambitions), Paris stepped up its military activities in the Indo-Pacific region. To demonstrate its capacity to deploy troops far from mainland France for sustained periods,<sup>54</sup> the *Charles de Gaulle* nuclear-powered aircraft carrier was launched in the Indo-Pacific for four months to conduct joint naval-air drills. Similarly, on an eight month-long Marianne mission, the *L’Emeraude* nuclear attack submarine was included in patrolling the South China Sea.<sup>55</sup> In 2021 France-led *La Pérouse* exercises in the Bay of Bengal (previously conducted with Japan, Australia, and the United States) included India against the backdrop of China’s rising assertiveness.<sup>56</sup> These developments come in addition to regular bilateral military-to-military exercises with India, Japan, Australia, and the United States.<sup>57</sup> Importantly, France has also emphasized significantly expanding its aerospace power capabilities in cooperation with like-minded partners.<sup>58</sup>

### *A Balancing Act*

Moving forward, Paris’ most important task will be to strike a strategic balance between its concurrent perceptions of China as a systemic rival, economic competitor, and diplomatic partner in tackling global challenges.<sup>59</sup> Such overlapping, if not contradictory, dimensions must be carefully balanced within France’s Indo-Pacific strategy and China outlook if Paris is to successfully achieve its regional objectives. This will mean that even as France looks to oppose human rights violations, unilateral aggression, and authoritarianism by China, it must stay engaged

with Beijing on global challenges (like climate change). At the same time, China will likely continue to be an important economic partner for France. Although several points of contention remain in their trade ties, the France–China economic partnership has been a solid backbone of their diplomatic relationship; sustaining their economic partnership will therefore be an important objective for France. Despite their obviously divergent political views on matters of great international import and stark difference in global values, Paris wants to ensure it can collaborate with China in areas where their interests align.

In the Indo-Pacific region too, France can look to work with Beijing in areas where the interests of both countries align, such as infrastructure and renewable energy. For instance, in February 2022, Paris and Beijing signed US \$1.7 billion pact to cooperate on infrastructure and environmental projects in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Eastern Europe. The agreement will bring together France's advanced manufacturing, environmental protection, and engineering construction expertise and China's infrastructure construction and energy equipment building expertise for third-party market cooperation.<sup>60</sup> This is an example of how the French government must navigate the China challenge through skillful diplomacy and statecraft, by continuing to collaborate with Beijing while also taking a stand against China's violations of international laws and norms. Paris must employ an innovative and expanded diplomatic toolkit—including economic, cultural, and exchange diplomacy—in dealing with China. Strategic partnerships will be an especially important aspect of this.

In addition to managing diplomatic strife and conflicts of ideas and interests between France and China, Paris' strategic balancing act must also extend to the intense US–China great-power rivalry that prevails in the trade, technology, and security domains in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. France is no doubt mindful of the fact that US–China competition can quickly encompass the military domain and descend into a conflict through uncontrolled escalation.<sup>61</sup>

Paris and Washington share several commonalities in their shared history and values and commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific. Yet, both have notable differences in their China approach. As French Minister of the Economy and Finance Bruno Le Maire stated, while the United States wants to confront China to protect its position as the world's preeminent power, the EU (and France) is interested in engaging it.<sup>62</sup> France's (and the EU's) top priority is not to directly challenge China but to acquire greater independence and strategic autonomy by bolstering its own defense capacity so as to adequately safeguard its interests and values while ensuring that it is not entirely dependent on the United States for its security needs (including access to technology). This disconnect between the French and US perceptions on China is most evident in the manner of AUKUS'

establishment and the diplomatic tensions that followed. For France, AUKUS was a sign that the United States was prioritizing a display of military strength with China in the region and looking to shore up its security alliances and joint military capabilities toward this. The incident only served to further complicate convergence on China and the Indo-Pacific between the transatlantic partners. It added credence to France's belief that its balancing act vis-à-vis China must be independent of its relationship with the United States.

Nevertheless, as Paris calibrates its own engagement strategy with China between competition and cooperation, it must continue cooperation with Washington in the Indo-Pacific to balance China's increasing influence.<sup>63</sup> France can work with the United States in areas like promoting democratic values and human security and driving region-wide collaboration in physical and digital connectivity, blue economy, climate change, and maritime security. As a bridge between Europe and the Indo-Pacific, France can leverage the EU's financial and normative power to balance Chinese financing and outreach. Partnering with the United States—through formats such as the EU-US Trade and Technology Council and dedicated transatlantic dialogues on China and the Indo-Pacific—can help Paris take more effective action in limiting China's influence operations.

### **Conclusion: A China Plus Strategy in the Indo-Pacific**

A bipolar global order characterized by a new US–China cold war, which holds the highest possibility of conflict and forces France to align with either the United States or China, is not in Paris' interest. It is hence essential that France navigate the complex geopolitical realities vis-à-vis China (and the United States) in the Indo-Pacific carefully, and act as a balancing and stabilizing power in the region. One key focus to sustain such a balance must involve building stronger and more robust strategic partnerships with middle-power regional actors—including India, Japan, and ASEAN—to realize the vision of an inclusive, multipolar, and rules-based Indo-Pacific order that safeguards freedom of navigation, the free flow of trade through the maritime domain, and the strategic autonomy of regional states.

Paris' Indo-Pacific vision fits well with the outlooks of India and Japan; both are accordingly key pillars in its regional outreach. With India, France's focus on the Indian Ocean as an island state of the domain gives it much room for cooperation on maritime security to limit Beijing's rapidly expanding footprint here. Notably, France and India also cooperate via a trilateral mechanism with Australia since 2020; although presently restricted to a handful of key focus areas, it can become an outcome-oriented arrangement for practical cooperation.<sup>64</sup> The trilateral can jointly draw and implement a "China Plus One" strategy in the economic

and supply-chain sector; intelligence sharing and joint naval exercises for maritime security; and other politico-diplomatic ventures for outreach to small island and littoral powers across the Indo-Pacific.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, France shares an “exceptional partnership” with Japan that encompasses areas like maritime security, climate change, quality infrastructure development, and healthcare.<sup>66</sup> In recent years, the Franco-Japanese partnership has found increasing synergy in the Indo-Pacific (both states agreed to beef up cooperation in January 2022 in response to shared concerns over China’s increasing clout in the East and South China Seas),<sup>67</sup> with talks underway to build a Paris-Delhi-Tokyo trilateral.<sup>68</sup>

In addition to enhancing bilateral relationships, emphasizing strategic partnerships in the Indo-Pacific can be a crucial tenet of Paris’ China strategy. France’s presence and pre-positioned capabilities in the region must be accentuated by a greater connect with regional formats such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), a strategic diamond comprising India, Japan, Australia, and the United States. France’s two-phase *La Pérouse* exercise, held for the first time in the Bay of Bengal in 2021, saw Paris collaborate with the Quad states for elaborate naval tactical maneuvers for surface warfare, antiair warfare, and air defense. In addition to such continued exercises, issues-based cooperation between France and like-minded Indo-Pacific states can be a pathway for achieving mutual objectives, including with regards to China. Providing vaccines to small littoral states in the region by mobilizing ample European resources; becoming a value-added partner in the Quad’s climate change and critical technology verticals; and collaboration with platforms such as the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative and the Blue Dot Network<sup>69</sup> on de-risking supply chains;<sup>70</sup> and enabling quality infrastructure connectivity investments respectively, can help balance Chinese clout that is a shared concern for both France and the Quad states.

Lastly, an important aspect of France’s China strategy has involved seeking a united front with the EU.<sup>71</sup> Given the rather stark difference between the size and capacity of France and China, working with the EU states and presenting a united front can give Paris more weight in negotiations with China. The fact that the exclusive competence on trade policy lies with the EU makes aligning Paris’ China policy with Brussels especially important. In February 2022, in its capacity as president of the Council of the EU, France took forward Europe’s Indo-Pacific agenda and actualized its role as a cross-continental bridge by organizing a *Ministerial Forum for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific* that brought together foreign ministers of EU states with those of more than 30 Indo-Pacific states, including key partners such as India, Japan, Indonesia, and South Korea, as well as small archipelago nations such as Comoros, Mauritius, Samoa, Fiji, Seychelles, and Maldives. As part of this forum, France helped mobilize EU resources and capa-

bilities to promote joint collaboration on central regulatory frameworks and quality, sustainable, secure, and resilient connectivity infrastructure projects in the region via its Global Gateway strategy.<sup>72</sup> Such outreach will not only help foster resilient global supply chains through better EU-Asia connectivity but also help Europe and its Indo-Pacific partners acquire greater strategic decision-making autonomy by making them less reliant on China for their financing needs. This came as a critical step in the right direction, and moving ahead, France must continue to build on its leadership role in the EU and its presence in the Indo-Pacific as a local actor, and cement its position as a bridge between the two regions.

Ultimately, it will be vital for Paris to drive an EU China policy that is in sync with France's strategic outlook on China. While the China challenge looms large over the Indo-Pacific and questions of European autonomy and sovereignty, France must use its leadership within Europe to formulate a cohesive approach on China. The French outlook on China must necessarily be rooted in the EU approach, which is currently ill-defined and characterized by deep-seated differences in outlooks of member states. After driving the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy, the next challenge for Paris must be to bring together EU member states to take up the issue of the EU-China partnership in a proactive, rather than a reactive, manner. For long, France has had little to gain from any direct confrontation with China and much to lose. However, even as Paris balances its equation between China and the United States, the Chinese pressure on Europe is growing exponentially; the case of Beijing's aggression vis-à-vis Lithuania in retaliation for its outreach to Taiwan demonstrates the unprecedented and intense economic coercion that China is increasingly and unhesitatingly employing to achieve its objectives. ★

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58. Aerospace power (especially space power) features prominently in France's Indo-Pacific strategy. For instance, the French Air and Space Force organized missions Pégase and Skyros with India. It also highlighted the importance of cooperating with France's Indo-Pacific partners in the space domain, particularly in Space Situational Awareness (SSA), through formats such bilateral space dialogues that Paris shares with New Delhi and Tokyo. See Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, *La stratégie de la France dans l'Indopacifique*, n. 11.

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