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## **France as an Indo-Pacific Player**

*By Jean-Mathieu REY*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Although a European power, France has overseas territories in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Given its stake in the emerging Indo-Pacific, France has been gradually contributing to the region's stability and security.*

### **COMMENTARY**

THANKS TO its overseas territories in the area, France is both a European and an Indo-Pacific nation. La Réunion and Mayotte in the Indian Ocean, New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna and French Polynesia in the Pacific Ocean firmly anchor France in the Indo-Pacific with more than 1.6 million inhabitants and nine million square kilometres of exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

Furthermore, France is the only European Union member to maintain permanent military assets in the Indo-Pacific, with more than 7,000 soldiers and two joint regional commands respectively in charge of the Indian Ocean (ALINDIEN) and the Pacific Ocean (ALPACI). In addition, three joint commands are based in Djibouti, La Réunion and New Caledonia, dedicated to local sovereignty and regional cooperation. This gives ALPACI the responsibility of planning and conducting the French military operations in this strategic and rapidly changing Asia-Pacific area, within the framework of the 2019 French Defence strategy in the Indo-Pacific.

### **France's Concerns in Asia-Pacific**

First ALPACI, or the French Pacific Command, is involved on a permanent mission of sovereignty. Protecting French citizens, territories, resources and interests remains its main mission, which could be a challenge given the isolation of some Pacific islands and the size of the expansive oceans.

As an example, French Pacific islands are surrounded by some of the world's largest tuna resources, which are vital to Polynesians and Melanesians; close control of the French EEZ is essential to deter the numerous longliners operating in its vicinity from crossing the maritime border.

However, French focus in the Pacific is not limited to French archipelagos but also aims at contributing to the regional security and stability. France has been observing major changes in the regional security context for more than a decade, with the reconfiguration of strategic balances increasing uncertainty.

Sino-American competition superimposed on a mosaic of existing tensions: territorial conflicts; global rearming effort; climate change and its consequences; transnational threats such as illegal trafficking, piracy, terrorism and illegal migration, which highly contribute to destabilizing this vast area.

Among those tensions, two dimensions deserve special attention: threats against freedom of navigation – and, more broadly, the issue of international rules-based order – and nuclear proliferation in North Korea.

The COVID-19 crisis has seriously worsened all these tensions. Frequent use of global commons, such as outer space and the cybersphere, is also a concern for Asian countries.

### **French Contribution to Regional Stability**

As a permanent member of the United-Nations Security Council, a nuclear power, and a nation of the Indo-Pacific, France is in a position to promote and defend freedom of movement, at sea and in the air in the area. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) gives every state the right to sail and operate outside territorial waters and in the international straits. France's naval commitments across the Pacific are in accordance with this right. French vessels do not, however, conduct dedicated operations such as FONOPS.

As part of the 1968 Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, France is deeply concerned by the situation in North Korea. The United Nations Security Council has issued strong resolutions, which have to be implemented by voluntary nations. France is one of them with its Navy warships and aircraft patrolling in the area.

French military assets engaged in missions in the Indo-Pacific could be permanent-based Pacific assets, or units coming from mainland France, which include the Carrier Strike Group, submarines, amphibious groups, destroyers, and maritime patrol aircraft. Beginning 2021, six different warships have operated in the area.

A nuclear submarine and a support ship have conducted an important deployment departing from their homeport of Toulon to operate up to the Philippine Sea and the South China Sea in January and February 2021. Two frigates, coming from the French bases in the Pacific conducted two successive patrols in the East and South China Sea from January to March.

Finally from April to June, the amphibious and cadet training group, *Jeanne d'Arc*,

operates in the area participating in various activities among which an amphibious exercise named ARC21 in Japan with Japanese, American and Australian armed forces.

## **Cooperation and Partnership**

France's action is also based on a tradition of cooperation, both multilateral and bilateral. France participates in most of the regional organisations such as the South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting, the Pacific Quadrilateral Coordinating Group, the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) and the Indian ocean Naval Symposium (IONS).

French commanders work closely with their Pacific partners on environmental security, as shown by France's leading role in sponsoring a [report](#) on the "Implications of climate change on Defence and Security in the South Pacific by 2030", endorsed by the group of South Pacific nations at a 2019 meeting in Fiji.

France is fully engaged in the Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), especially through the Information Fusion Centers (IFC) in Singapore, India or Madagascar, where French liaison officers have been positioned since their respective creation.

There is a French inter-agency model of cooperation called the Action of the State at Sea, based on an authority coordinating the different agencies instead of a dedicated coast-guard force. This is of special interest for countries wishing to develop their maritime approach in a pragmatic way. ALPACI is in a position to share French expertise on law enforcement at sea.

French actions include support for the Pacific islands countries, through Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) cooperation with mechanisms like the France, Australia, and New Zealand Agreement (FRANZ) or some joint and combined exercises in the Pacific Ocean.

France has also a French liaison officer in the Regional Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Coordination Centre (RHCC) in Singapore.

Eventually, ALPACI and the four other joint commands in the area maintain strategic partnerships with the Indo-Pacific countries such as Australia, India, Japan and Singapore and the United States to preserve regional stability and prevent unilateral action by regional powers. Multilateral exercises like *La Pérouse* allow partners to train together and to enhance their interoperability.

In 2018, French president Emmanuel Macron highlighted in his 'Garden Island' speech during a visit to Sydney the French commitment to Indo-Pacific security, relying on peaceful conflict resolution, state sovereignty and strong actions against climate change. France, as a nation of the Indo-Pacific and a global power is ready to play its role in the area alongside its partners.

France is also an EU member. As many European countries show a growing interest in the Indo-Pacific area, France is ready to share its experience in the Indo-Pacific as a robust cornerstone for the build-up of a common European strategic vision.

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