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France to Emphasise its Engagements with South Asia

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SYNOPSIS

According to the French [presidency](#), Emmanuel Macron “has in the past six months done more about South Asia than in a decade”. Indeed, after the G20 in New Delhi (10-11 September), the French President flew directly to neighbouring Bangladesh for a two-day visit. A few weeks earlier, Emmanuel Macron had made a historical trip to Sri Lanka (28 July), and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was honoured during France's Bastille Day celebrations (14 July). This series of high-level engagements confirms France's growing commitments in the South Asian region to consolidate its Indo-Pacific strategy.

COMMENTARY

Since 2018, France has formalised an Indo-Pacific strategy to enhance its assets in the region. This strategy partly relies on intense partnerships and high-level engagements with multiple countries throughout the region. Following the AUKUS pact that led to a [political crisis](#) between France, Australia, and the United States, Paris's policy in the region is now significantly leaning towards the Indian Ocean, specifically India, as the cornerstone of its foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific. The French diplomacy is also seeking to build new relationships with middle powers in the area. In addition to its traditional influence in the western Francophone islands of the Indian Ocean, France is now making a diplomatic push towards South Asia.

A secular influence in the region

The French Monarchy, like other European states, pursued the ambition of building an empire in South Asia from as early as the 15th century. First limited to the Mozambique channel, France's colonial project rapidly expanded economically and territorially into the South Asian region from the 17th through the 19th centuries. While the defeat of the Seven Years' War (1756-1763) abruptly ended this colonial ambition, France had established an enduring influence in the South Asian region, with its five historical "Comptoirs" under French sovereignty until 1954.

Regarding its more recent endeavours in South Asia, France has been observed to foster deep political relations with India since India's independence, evident in the mutual respect expressed between their respective heads of state. France was one of the few countries who did not condemn Indian nuclear tests in 1998 and supported India in its objective of becoming a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Both countries have been [seeking strategic autonomy](#) in the conduct of their international relations, largely reflected in their respective Indo-Pacific strategies.

Additionally, France has a good reputation in Bangladesh since André Malraux, France's first cultural affairs minister, voiced international support for the country's independence in 1971. France was also active in providing aid to Sri Lanka after the devastating tsunami in 2004. Since then, France has remained Sri Lanka's fourth-largest creditor after China, India, and Japan.

A resident power

Beyond its bilateral commitments, France seeks to legitimise its position as an Indian Ocean resident power through territorial and multilateral engagements. Territorially, the several islands in the region, including the island of Mayotte and La Réunion, are under French sovereignty. La Réunion has become a central territorial asset of the French Indo-Pacific strategy towards the South Asian region.



The several islands in the region, including the island of Mayotte, the island of La Réunion, the scattered islands, and the southern lands, are under French sovereignty, legitimising France's position as an Indian Ocean resident power. *Image by the author.*

France has also been particularly active in developing its multilateral engagements as the largest financial contributor to the intergovernmental Indian Ocean Commission (IOC). Furthermore, France became a full member of the major multilateral Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) in 2020. At the military level, France is a member of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), an annual meeting between the different chiefs of staff of the region's navies, and assumed presidency of the organisation from 2021 until 2023. As part of its diplomatic support missions, French aircraft carrier "Charles De Gaulle" conducted several deployments in the Indian Ocean over the past 10 years, escorted by no less than 12 different national navies.

Economic engagement

Economically, France is also part of several collaborations across the South Asian region. India is the main importer of French military equipment, and multiple collaborations between the two – over maritime security, supply chains, sustainable development, and nuclear energy aerospace – are already operational. In Bangladesh, Macron has also secured the purchase of 10 Airbus A350 and announced space, digital technologies, and cyber cooperation with the country.

For a decade, France has been actively providing development aid in the region. The public financial institution L'Agence Française de Développement (AFD) is one of the major bilateral creditors in South Asia, specifically for [Bangladesh](#) (EUR 1.1 billion in loans since 2021) and [Sri Lanka](#) (EUR 625 million since 2013). As Sri Lanka is going through the worst economic crisis in its history with its central bank announcing a

default on debt in April 2022, France has [launched a common platform](#) to actively support the debt restructuring process of the island nation, alongside Japan and India.

The singularity of the French Indo-Pacific narrative is to promote environmental protection and tackle the effects of climate change. Following the diplomatic success of the Conference of the Parties ([COP 21](#)) in 2015 and the [Paris Summit for a new global finance pact](#) in 2023, which were endorsed by all the South Asian countries, France has been very active in supporting South Asian countries towards achieving sustainable development goals, including supporting sustainable urban development and the protection of biodiversity. AFD has also invested 70% of its regional projects to fight the effects of climate change. From 2013 and 2020, France has financed more than EUR [4.8 billion](#) to this cause.

A French “Third Way” in the Region?

To varying extents, South Asian countries are characterised by their economic ties with China while being increasingly courted by the United States. This regional context presents an opportunity for the French President to promote a so-called French “Third Way”, that is, to be free from Chinese coercion while not being systematically aligned with the United States. In its Indo-Pacific rhetoric, France has voluntarily adopted a more neutral and inclusive position towards China. This “Third Way” posture was derived from Macron’s [comments](#) after meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping in June 2023: “Is it in our interest to accelerate a crisis on Taiwan? No. The worst thing would be to think that we Europeans must become followers on this topic and take our cue from the U.S. agenda and a Chinese overreaction”. These comments were widely criticised by the West, including [Brussels](#) and [Paris](#), as this concept of a third way is perceived to be Macron’s arrogant attempt to establish France as an equal to Beijing and Washington. Nevertheless, Macron persisted during his [ambassador’s conference speech](#) and [his Bangladesh trip](#) that stakeholders “understand clearly that [this third way] is effective”.

The French Indo-Pacific rhetoric often encompasses [concepts](#) like “strategic autonomy”, “balancing power”, or “freedom of sovereignty”. This realistic and pragmatic posture, which harks back to France’s traditional international stance, has raised criticism and confusion in the West. However, President Macron’s conceptual framework seems better understood by Indo-Pacific actors in the South Asian region. Sheik Hasina, Bangladesh’s Prime Minister, [stated](#) during Macron’s visit that France’s “push for strategic autonomy aligns with our foreign policy ... We find [Macron] to be a breath of fresh air in international politics”. Sri Lanka President Ranil Wickremesinghe also earlier [praised](#) France’s “significant role in global affairs and matters related to the Indo-Pacific region”. Recent engagements also demonstrate that Macron’s “Third Way” approach is consistent with India’s multi-alignment policy. A Franco-Indian [joint communique](#) published after the G20 acknowledges that “the strength of India-France partnership [is] founded in deep trust, shared values, belief in sovereignty and strategic autonomy”.

Though France will have to manage criticism from the West, its generally positive regional assessments of the French Indo-Pacific strategy will ultimately enhance France’s engagement in the South Asian region.

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