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When Secretary of Defense Mattis met with French Defense Minister, Florence Parly on 20 October, 2017 in Washington, General Mattis reiterated how "...France remains one of the United States military's strongest allies....and our security partner of choice." General Mattis' comments were firmly grounded on France's long and rich maritime history as a bona fide Indo-Pacific power. France has always been a staunch advocate for the freedom of navigation, specifically in the Indian Ocean which supports 25% of the world's traffic and 75% of EU exports. As a dominant economic power, China also views itself as a formidable "blue water" Navy. The People's Liberation Army-Navy (PLA-N) has been conducting counter-piracy operations off the Horn of Africa since 2008, and Beijing's new base in Djibouti further highlights China's intention to expand its presence in East Africa and the Indian Ocean. These events reinforce Beijing's strategy

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for global maritime influence, particularly when combined with their reclamation activities in the South China Sea and expanded naval presence in Pakistan. China's rising influence in Africa and the Indian Ocean has caused a level of concern in some capitals. In aggregate, Beijing's actions lead us to conclude that China is altering the geo-strategic balance around the Indian Ocean. This reality is obviously a point of contention for regional powers such as India and Australia.

However, I believe we should explore new opportunities and venues to engage with the PLA-N, especially in East Africa and throughout the Indian Ocean. United States and France are suitably positioned to build upon their enduring relationship to foster and nurture Paris' newly formalized strategic relationships with India, Australia and South Africa. Bolstering our maritime activities by partnering with these key Indian Ocean nations—focused on littoral and maritime security—is paramount to long-term stability in the Indian Ocean. A positive first step might be to extend an invitation to India and South Africa to observe and (eventually) to participate in exercise CUTLASS EXPRESS (CE). CUTLASS is a USAFRICOM-sponsored and U.S. Naval Forces Africa-executed exercise demonstrating partner nations' (Djibouti, Mauritius, Mozambique, Tanzania, Seychelles, and Uganda) commitment to maritime security and regional stability. Since France is already a key participant in CE, this exercise may facilitate an "open door policy" for maritime cooperation throughout the Indian Ocean between the U.S., France, India, and South Africa. The robust *esprit de corps* between the U.S. and France should be harnessed and operationalized throughout the Indian Ocean. Today's transnational, asymmetrical challenges (see below) require us to think innovatively and dynamically. A strategic alliance between our navies leads to improved coordination, supports confidence-building measures and strengthens the foundation of mutual trust between all of our countries. The strong relationship between the U.S. and France is a natural "fit" for us to lead and promote the tenets of maritime security and greater freedom of navigation throughout the Indian Ocean.

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