



**CNA Roundtable Proceedings:**  
**France's Strategic Interests in the Indian Ocean**  
**Rapporteur: Mary Ellen Connell**  
**January 18, 2018**

On January 18, 2018, CNA convened a roundtable to discuss France's strategic interests in the Indian Ocean. **Nilanthi Samaranayake, Director of CNA's Indian Ocean and South Asia Security Program**, framed the discussion by noting the expanding role of extraregional actors operating in the Indian Ocean, including Japan, China, and France. The United States, Japan, India, and Australia have revamped their "Quad" discussions over the past year. However, Ms. Samaranayake noted, France has a range of territorial, economic, and security interests in the Indian Ocean, and the roundtable offered an opportunity to examine those interests and potential opportunities to deepen U.S.-French cooperation in the region.

**Admiral James Foggo, Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Europe and Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Africa**, was not able to participate personally in the roundtable but he sent remarks highlighting the strategic alliance between the U.S. and French navies and urging that the existing robust "*esprit de corps*" be harnessed to promote maritime security and regional stability in the Indian Ocean. ADM Foggo advanced several specific suggestions for U.S.-French naval cooperation in the region, including exploring new opportunities and venues to engage with China's navy, especially in East Africa and the wider Indian Ocean; inviting India to observe (and later participate in) the CUTLASS EXPRESS exercise sponsored by U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) and executed by U.S. Naval Forces Africa; and building on France's newly formalized strategic relationships with India, Australia, and South Africa. ADM Foggo's statement follows.

The principal speaker at the January 18 CNA roundtable was French security policy expert **Dr. Iskander Rehman, Senior Fellow for International Relations at the Pell Center for International Relations and Public Policy at Salve Regina University** in Rhode Island. Dr. Rehman's paper concludes this document.

As Dr. Rehman explained, among the growing number of states with a presence in the Indian Ocean, France has a fairly unique position as a European Union member which is also a nation of the Indian Ocean Rim. La Réunion and Mayotte, former colonies of France acquired in the late 17th century / early 18th century, are now departments of France. Today, more than 1.5 million French citizens and 130,000 French expatriates live in the Indo-Pacific region, where France has significant commercial and strategic interests. Dr. Rehman noted that French investment capital in the Indo-Pacific is four times greater than Asian investments in France.

In the Indian Ocean, France delineates two strategic theaters: the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Aden; and the Southwest Indian Ocean. From inter-service military bases in Djibouti and Abu Dhabi, France pursues a range of missions, including: countering terrorism; fighting ISIS; containing Iran's ambitions; fulfilling informal security guarantees to Gulf state partners; ensuring the free flow of shipping; and projecting force into the Indian Ocean. In the Southwest Indian Ocean, France seeks to defend French national territory and French citizens in La Réunion and Mayotte and a vast exclusive

economic zone associated with uninhabited island territories in the Mozambique Channel and the remote Southern Ocean.

As a middle power with global outreach, France is committed to contributing to the security of the region. Key roles in the Indo-Pacific which the French military exercises alone and in coordination with the United States include:

- Shaping the regional balance of power through capacity building and strategically driven arms sales
- Conducting maritime rescue and disaster relief
- Upholding informal security guarantees to certain Gulf States vis-à-vis Iran
- Bolstering U.S. counterterrorism, intelligence, and counter-proliferation efforts along an arc of instability from Dakar to Peshawar
- Helping secure critical straits and chokepoints, including the Mozambique channel

Dr. Rehman pointed out that, with over 30,000 troops deployed and ongoing operations in a number of theaters, France's operational ability was currently stretched thin. The French fleet is homeported in Toulon and Brest, thousands of kilometers from the Indian Ocean littoral. The French Navy depends on frigates and multi-purpose warships permanently based in La Réunion in the Indian Ocean and at New Caledonia and French Polynesia in the Pacific. French maritime task forces sail from Toulon on three- and four-month-long deployments to ports in the Western Pacific. To augment its regional presence, France has sought to establish a series of ambitious strategic partnerships—the most significant of which is with India. In recent years, Dr. Rehman noted that France has shown a greater willingness to criticize China's regional behavior, while elevating its relationship with Japan and embarking on a newly enhanced partnership with Australia.

Commenting on Dr. Rehman's presentation, **CNA analyst Mary Ellen Connell** noted that the Southern Indian Ocean—once so important to the United States in the early years of the republic—is now a maritime space less frequented by U.S. naval vessels. But ship traffic on the Cape of Good Hope's southern route to Asia has increased substantially; ships are loaded with cargos of raw materials from South America and West Africa destined for Asian ports. The presence of the French Navy in the Southern Indian Ocean undoubtedly enhances regional maritime security. **CNA Senior Fellow RADM Michael McDevitt, USN, Ret.**, highlighted the value of the French deployments in the northern Indian Ocean in the fight against ISIS and counterpiracy. Citing ADM Foggo's proposal that France and the United States seek ways of engaging the Chinese navy in the Indian Ocean, McDevitt estimated that by 2020 China will have 100 ships capable of operating anywhere in the Indian Ocean.

Asked to compare the Indian military and defense officials' views of France and the United States, Dr. Rehman observed that, on some level, Indians feel their strategic mindset is perhaps more closely aligned with that of France—with both powers traditionally evincing a strong belief in the virtues of strategic autonomy (even though both nations interpret this concept in very different ways). India's relationship with Paris gives New Delhi strategic flexibility, and France has weapons systems such as diesel-electric submarines, which the United States cannot provide. Asked about the prospect of trilateral U.S.-France-India cooperation in promoting maritime security in the Indian Ocean region, Dr. Rehman suggested that bilateral efforts could exist in parallel and complement each other, but questioned whether a trilateral framework would necessarily be in Paris's interests. He noted an increasing tendency toward policy coordination between Paris and the Washington in the wider Indo-Pacific region—a trend which he depicted as a highly positive and encouraging development.



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## **Statement by Admiral James G. Foggo, III on U.S. – France Naval Cooperation Center for Naval Analyses Roundtable**

Commander, Allied Joint Forces Command Naples  
Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Europe  
Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Africa

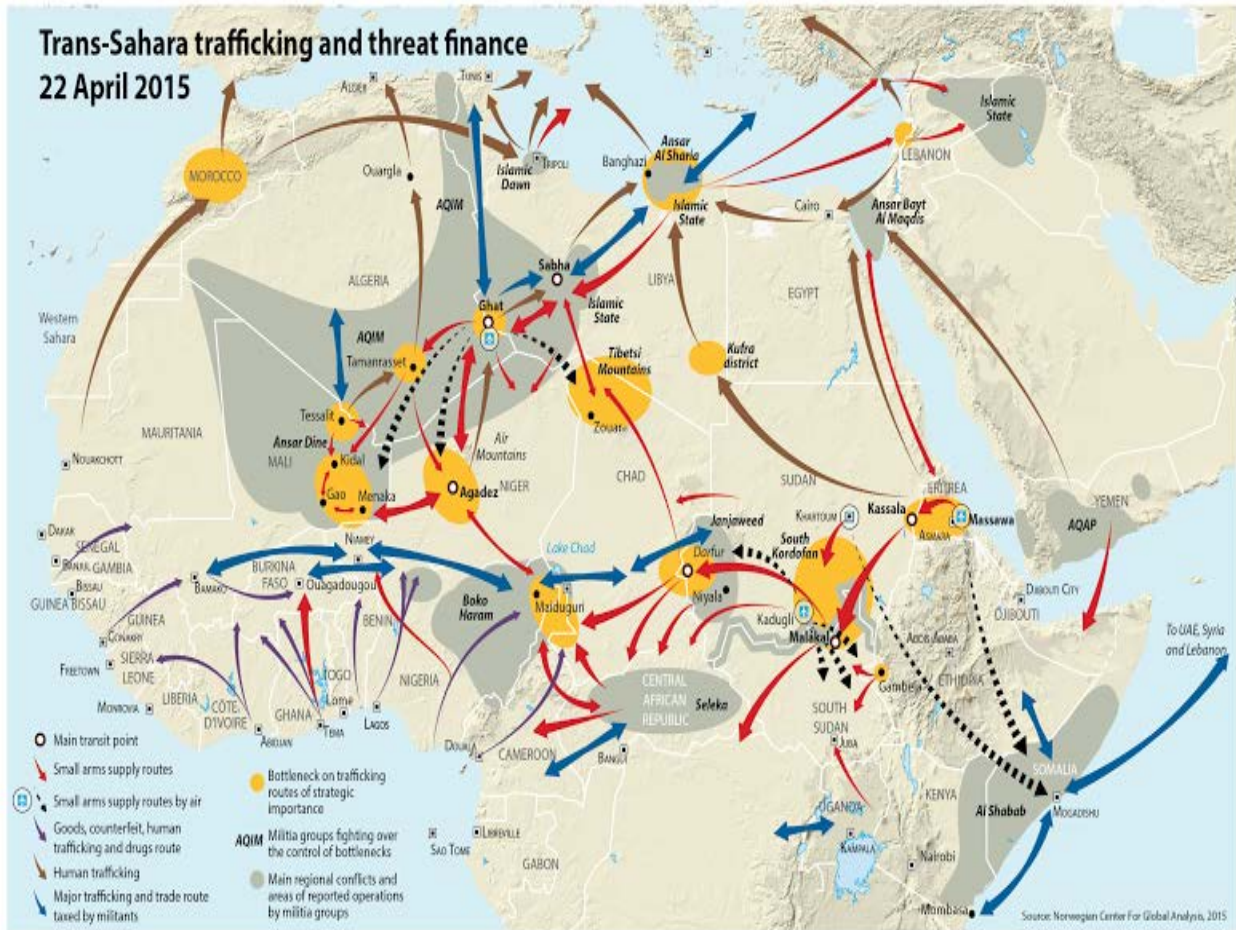
When Secretary of Defense Mattis met with French Defense Minister Florence Parly on 20 October 2017 in Washington, General Mattis reiterated how “...France remains one of the United States military’s strongest allies....and our security partner of choice.” General Mattis’ comments were firmly grounded 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 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. The 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 the commitment of partner nations (Djibouti, Mauritius, Mozambique, Tanzania, Seychelles, and Uganda) 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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Source: RHIPTO/Riccardo Pravettoni

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# The Indian Ocean in France's Global Defense Strategy

**Iskander Rehman**, Senior Fellow for International Relations at the Pell Center for International Relations and Public Policy at Salve Regina University

## Introduction

When the former French defense minister—and now French foreign minister—Jean-Yves le Drian delivered his speech at the 2016 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, many observers were somewhat taken aback by its tenor.<sup>1</sup> The minister, a dour technocrat with a reputation for dogged competence, gave a particularly strong defense of freedom of navigation, even going so far as to suggest jointly coordinated European “presence patrols” in the South China Sea.<sup>2</sup> Yet perhaps observers should not have been as surprised by the unswerving nature of Paris’s position on such issues.<sup>3</sup> France is, after all, a resident Indo-Pacific power, with a longstanding presence in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans. In recent years, the French Ministry of Defense has repeatedly alluded to the challenges posed to the international system by the return of the “Etat puissance”—a term which could be loosely translated as “great power actor.” Certain of these “emerging great power actors,” argued General de Villiers, France’s former chief of defense staff (CDS), in 2016, aim

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<sup>1</sup> See Yo Jung-Chen, “South China Sea: The French Are Coming,” *The Diplomat*, July 14, 2016, available at <http://thediplomat.com/2016/07/south-china-sea-the-french-are-coming/>

<sup>2</sup> See “The Challenges of Conflict Resolution: Speech by Minister of Defense Jean-Yves Le Drian at the Shangri-La Dialogue, Shangri-La Hotel, Singapore, June 05, 2016,” available at <http://www.ambafrance-eau.org/Speech-Mr.-Jean-Yves-Le-Drian-Minister-of-Defence-at-the-Shangri-La-Dialogue>

<sup>3</sup> For an example of France’s determination to play a leading role in upholding the rules-based order in Asia, see Valerie Niquet, *Securite Maritime en Asie: L’Impossible Indifference de L’Europe* (Paris: Fondation pour La Recherche Strategique, 2017), available at <https://www.frstrategie.org/publications/notes/securite-maritime-en-asie-l-impossible-indifference-de-l-europe-01-2017>

to extend their influence via graduated, coercive strategies.<sup>4</sup> “There is a major risk,” he stated, “in ignoring or underestimating how destabilizing such behaviors can be.”<sup>5</sup> More recently, during a state visit to China, President Emmanuel Macron relayed France’s concerns over certain aspects of Beijing’s much-touted Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), warning:

After all, the ancient silk roads were never only Chinese. (...) By definition these roads can only be shared. If they are roads, they cannot be one-way. These roads cannot be those of a new hegemony, which would transform those that they cross into vassals.

Only a few weeks later, his defense minister Florence Parly delivered a stinging rebuke of China’s policy of “fait accompli” in its near seas.<sup>6</sup>

For many in the U.S. national security establishment, such a clearheaded appraisal by a key ally of the deterioration of the international security environment and of the risks posed by Beijing’s blend of strategic ambiguity and economic coercion is to be welcomed—particularly at a time when the localized correlation of military strength in Asia seems to be shifting in China’s favor.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, as a result of Brexit, France will soon be the only U.S. ally in the European Union (EU) with a global presence and robust expeditionary capabilities. It will also be the only European ally with an independent nuclear deterrent and a fleet of SSNs with the ability to operate within Asia’s increasingly crowded and contested underwater environments.<sup>8</sup> Despite all of this, there is a surprising dearth of material in the English language on France’s role and strategy in the Indian Ocean, or in the

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<sup>4</sup> “Allocution du General D’Armee Pierre de Villiers a l’Occasion du Colloque du SGDSN, Maison de la Chimie, November 23, 2016,” available at <http://www.defense.gouv.fr/ema/chef-d-etat-major-des-armees/discours/allocution-du-ge-ne-ral-d-arme-e-pierre-de-villiers-en-conclusion-du-se-minaire-de-la-communaute-militaire-des-ope-rations>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Tallaluh Lutkin and Togo Shiraishi, “France and Japan to Scale Up Military Exercises to Deter China,” *Nikkei Asian Review*, January 25, 2018, available at [https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics-Economy/International-Relations/France-and-Japan-to-scale-up-military-exercises-to-deter-China?n\\_cid=NARAN012](https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics-Economy/International-Relations/France-and-Japan-to-scale-up-military-exercises-to-deter-China?n_cid=NARAN012)

<sup>7</sup> The most detailed recent assessment of the shifting military balance is Eric Heginbotham et al., *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996-2017* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015), available at [http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR392.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR392.html)

<sup>8</sup> As of October 2016, the IHS Jane’s Naval Inventories database indicated that approximately 223 undersea warfare platforms are active in the Indo-Pacific. See, “Underwater Schoolhouse: Asian Submarine Operators Ramp Up Operational Training,” *Jane’s International Defense Review*, October 03, 2016.

Indo-Pacific more broadly. There is also little reflection on what role French military forces could play in the event of a high-intensity Sino-U.S. conflict in Asia.

This paper—written for the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA)—is a first attempt at filling such a gap in the literature. Relying largely on French government and think tank sources, it is structured in three parts. The first section details how France, a middle power with global responsibilities, views Asia. The paper then examines what role the Indian Ocean plays in Paris’s defense strategy. It is argued that there are two main zones of strategic priority for France in the Indian Ocean: the Persian Gulf and the Southwest Indian Ocean. These sub-regional prioritizations are reflected in French military deployments and overseas basing arrangements. In a third and final section, the paper points to an evolution of France’s defense policy, which has become more Indo-Pacific and holistic in its appraisal of emerging security challenges in Asia. As we shall see, France has also been engaging in a more vigorous form of counter-hegemonic balancing – an effort, which, in many ways, complements that of its American ally. Indeed, it has become evident over the past few years that Paris has established a hierarchy of sorts in its regional relationships, which are increasingly structured around a core grouping of democratic partners. The paper concludes by tentatively exploring the role France’s military could play in the event of a militarized Sino-U.S. crisis in Asia.

## A middle power with global responsibilities

### A hyperactive military

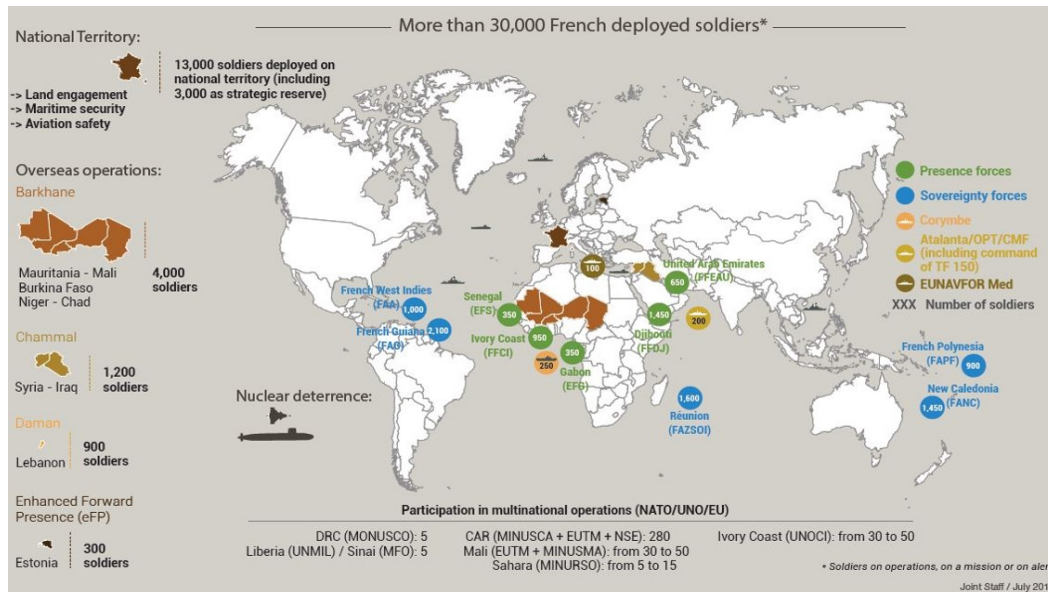
It is important, first of all, to note that although France views itself as a middle power, it also views itself as a global power, with an independent nuclear deterrent, a blue-water navy capable of operating along the spectrum of conflict, the world’s third largest diplomatic network, and a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council.<sup>9</sup> At the time of writing, Paris has close to 30,000 troops on active operational deployments spanning the globe, from Sub-Saharan Africa to the Indian Ocean, to the forces currently engaged in the struggle against the so-called Islamic State in the Levant. These forces comprise both permanently prepositioned forces and those taking part in specific external military operations (see Figure 1). There are approximately 20,000 men and women prepositioned at all times outside of French

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<sup>9</sup> The 2013 Defense White Paper describes France as a “European power with global reach.” See *French White Paper: Defense and National Security 2013* (Paris: French Ministry of Defense, 2013), available in its English translation at <http://www.rpfrance-otan.org/White-Paper-on-defence-and>

metropolitan territory. These troops are divided between what France calls “sovereignty forces” (*forces de souverainete*), which shield the resources and approaches to France’s overseas territories, and “presence forces” (*forces de presence*), which engage in foreign internal defense (FID) activities and contribute to the security of friendly foreign nations.<sup>10</sup> Both sovereignty and presence forces are regularly called upon to provide logistical support and/or “back up” France’s expeditionary assets.

Figure 1. Current Operational Deployments of the French Armed Forces



Source: French Etat-Major and U.S. Joint Staff, July 2017

With major military operations currently underway in both the Sahel and the Levant, the French military is currently operating—to quote the former CDS De Villiers—“at full throttle.”<sup>11</sup> Since the beginning of the campaign against ISIS (*Operation Chammal*), France has conducted (at the time of writing) close to 7,388 sorties involving over 1,431 strikes on 2,219 objectives.<sup>12</sup> These strikes have been conducted

<sup>10</sup> *Les Forces Francaises Prepositionnees* (Paris: French Ministry of Defense, last updated May 2016), available at <http://www.defense.gouv.fr/ema/forces-prepositionnees/actualites>

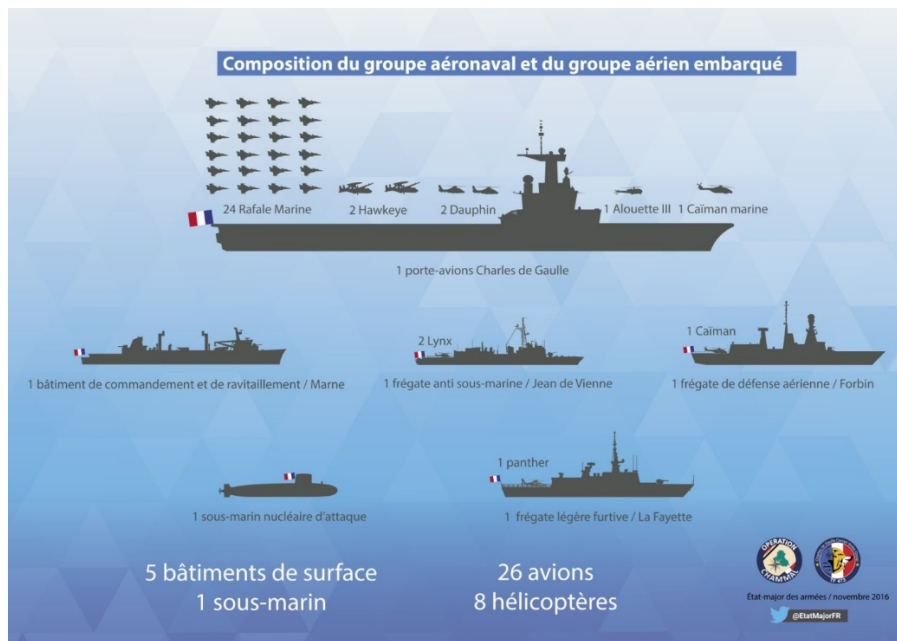
<sup>11</sup> Quoted in *The Military Balance 2017* (London: Institute for International and Strategic Studies, 2017), p. 78.

<sup>12</sup> See “Point de Situation des Operations du 26 Janvier 2018,” Ministere des Armees, January 26, 2018, available at [https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/operations/points-de-](https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/operations/points-de)



from airbases spread across the region, and from the deck of France’s nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, the *Charles de Gaulle*, which has been deployed, along with its accompanying task force, on two separate rotations to the Eastern Mediterranean (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. The Composition of the Charles de Gaulle Carrier Strike Force



Source: French Etat-Major, November 2016

In addition to *Operation Chammal*, Paris has deployed a force of about 3,500 troops to combat jihadi elements in the Sahel. Despite being highly mobile—with a heavy focus on heliborne operations and light armor—these forces are increasingly overstretched due to the sheer vastness of the almost transcontinental theater of operations, which extends over 5 million square kilometers (about 1.9 million square miles).<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, France has also had to contend with the spillover effects of the

[situation/point-de-situation-des-operations4](#) and Frederic Lert, “Situation Report: French Air Force Strikes Hard From Jordan,” *Jane’s Defense Weekly*, February 15, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> *The Military Balance 2017* (London: Institute for International and Strategic Studies, 2017), p. 79. On France’s “way of war” in the Sahel, see Christopher S. Chivvis, *The French War on Al Qa’ida in Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), and Michael Shurkin, *France’s War in Mali: Lessons for an Expeditionary Army* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2015), available at [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR770.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR770.html)

ongoing turmoil in the Middle East. In addition to the challenge of managing a steady flow of refugees, this has led to a heightened internal security threat following a series of deadly terrorist attacks. The country has only recently exited a state of emergency, which had been in place for almost two years, and the French military remains obliged to deploy large numbers of troops on its own soil.<sup>14</sup> From a high of 13,000 immediately after the attack on the Bataclan, this number has now been reduced to about 7,000. Despite these reductions, this still represents a disproportionately large chunk of the French military's actively deployed personnel, and an enormous burden to bear.<sup>15</sup> All this raises the question of overextension. Granted, the past two years have witnessed a rise in defense expenditure, and reinvigorated efforts in terms of recruitment. There is a new focus on building up the nation's reserves, with plans to establish, in addition, some form of a national service.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, the army's combat strength, initially planned at 66,000, is now projected to undergo a significant increase, up to 77,000.<sup>17</sup> Last but not least, and despite a particularly ugly civil-military spat over the issue of military funding last summer, President Macron appears fully committed to significantly raising France's defense expenditure.<sup>18</sup> An unexpectedly strong cycle of economic growth may help buoy this increase in the defense budget, and further ring-fence it from any inter-ministerial attempts to stall its growth. The full extent of the projected multi-year increase, however, will only become apparent with the release of the *Loi de Programmation Militaire* (LPM) 2019-2025, or Military Funding Law, which will be presented to parliament in the first half of 2018.

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<sup>14</sup> The state of emergency was lifted on October 30, 2017, after having been in place since November 14, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Elie Tenenbaum, *La Sentinelle Egaree? L'Armee de Terre Face au Terrorisme* (Paris: Institut Francais des Relations Internationales, 2016), available at <http://www.ifri.org/fr/publications/etudes-de-lifri/focus-strategique/sentinelle-egaree-larmee-de-terre-face-terrorisme>

<sup>16</sup> There is some concern, however, over the perceived astronomical costs associated with a renewed form of national service. See Marie-Christine Corbier, "Le Rapport qui Accable le Service National," *Les Echos*, February 05, 2018, available at <https://www.lesechos.fr/politique-societe/societe/0301244116794-le-rapport-qui-accable-le-service-national-universel-2150599.php>

<sup>17</sup> *Projet de Loi de Finances 2016* (Paris: French Ministry of Defense, 2016), available at <http://www.defense.gouv.fr/actualites/articles/projet-de-loi-de-finances-plf-2016>

<sup>18</sup> France's defense budget in 2018 amounts to 34.2 billion euros (42.3 billion dollars), a 1.8 billion euro increase over 2017. With the inclusion of funding for veteran affairs, dual research, and military pensions, total defense spending is closer to 45.7 billion euros, or 56.6 billion dollars. See "France: Defense Budget," in *Jane's Defence Budgets* (last updated January 26, 2018), available at <https://janes.ihs.com/>

Despite these encouraging developments, there is growing evidence that the French military is overstretched, that its equipment and enlisted personnel are burnt out, and that its readiness rates and training efforts have suffered as a result.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, in order to maintain its current operational tempo in Africa and the Middle East, Paris has already been forced to reduce its participation in other foreign ventures, such as NATO presence operations in Eastern and Northern Europe.<sup>20</sup> As a means of alleviating its military burden somewhat, Paris has been developing new models of partnerships, and cobbling together new “minilateral” or “plurilateral” military arrangements.<sup>21</sup> A prime example of this more cost-effective, “Neo-Nixonian” approach would be France’s strenuous efforts to fast-track the development of the G5 Sahel—a grouping of five African countries (Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad)—with the hope of eventually transferring the bulk of French counterterrorism and stabilization efforts to local actors.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to its conventional challenges, France has also embarked upon a major modernization of the two legs of its nuclear deterrent. The costs of this modernization are projected to rise over the course of the next decade, until they reach almost 6 billion euros per annum in the mid-2020s.<sup>23</sup> In short, absent an even more substantive boost in defense spending, it may prove challenging for Paris to maintain as active a global military posture, all while preserving a competitive edge in both its conventional and nuclear capabilities.

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<sup>19</sup> See *Revue Annuelle de la Condition Militaire* (Paris: Haut Comite d’Evaluation de la Condition Militaire, 2017), available at <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/portail/vous-et-la-defense/evaluation-de-la-condition-militaire/hcecm/actualites>

<sup>20</sup> *The Military Balance 2017* (London: Institute for International and Strategic Studies, 2017), p. 79.

<sup>21</sup> For a good, nuanced, view of France’s evolving attitudes toward military alliances and partnerships, see Alice Pannier, “Between Autonomy and Cooperation: The Role of Allies in France’s New Defense Strategy,” *War on the Rocks*, November 02, 2017, available at <https://warontherocks.com/2017/11/between-autonomy-and-cooperation-the-role-of-allies-in-frances-new-defense-strategy/>

<sup>22</sup> On the challenges associated with the creation of the G5, see *Finding the Right Role for the G5 Sahel Joint Force* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, December 2017), available at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/burkina-faso/258-force-du-g5-sahel-trouver-sa-place-dans-lemboteillage-securitaire>

<sup>23</sup> For an excellent overview (in French) of France’s nuclear modernization programs, see Corentin Brustlein, “Forces Nucleaires Francaises: Quel Renouveau?” *Politique Etrangere*, 82, No.3, 2017, pp.113-124.

## France as an Asian power

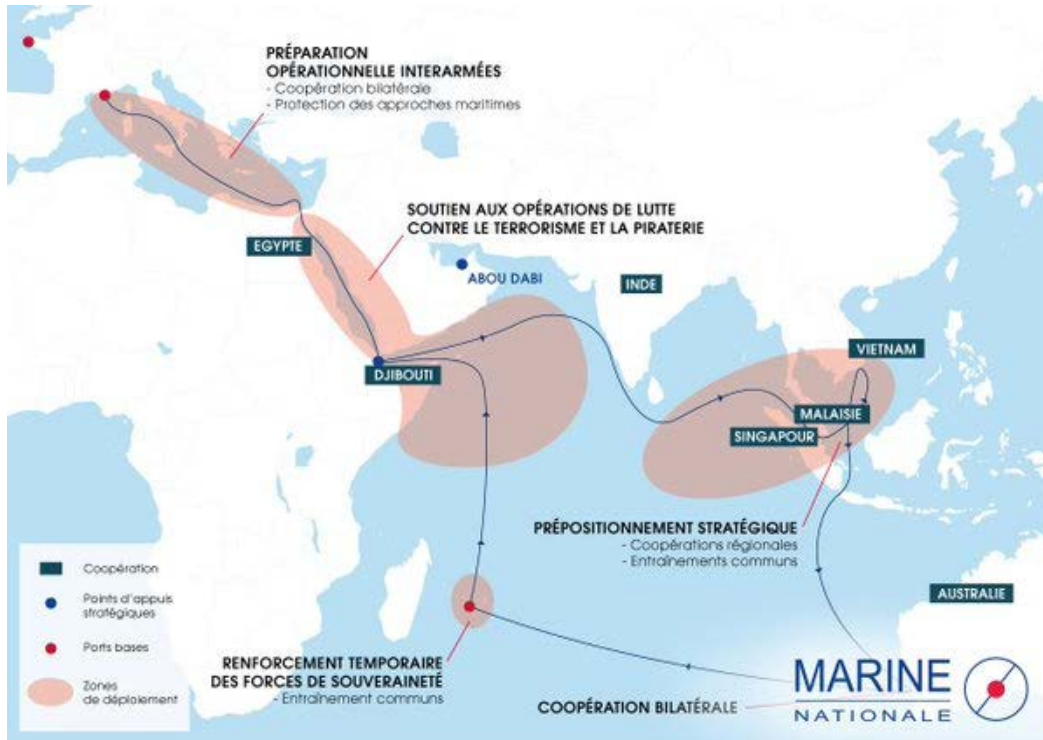
Despite these travails, and its current bout of expeditionary hyperactivity, France remains committed to ensuring its military presence in the Asia-Pacific. In addition to the forces already prepositioned in the region, it regularly deploys high-end assets and frontline naval combatants from mainland France. One of the most visible manifestations of French naval presence is the annual Jeanne d'Arc mission, a large-scale deployment for French naval officer trainees which has progressively morphed from a simple training exercise into a large-scale “operational deployment with a training element.”<sup>24</sup> The Jeanne d'Arc missions, composed of a large naval task force centered around a 21,500-ton *Mistral* landing platform dock (LPD), routinely traverse the Indian Ocean, as well as the contested waterways of the South China Sea (see the official itinerary depicted in Figure 3). As a sign of France's growing emphasis on partnering with its democratic allies, this year's deployment recently hosted, for the first time, small contingents of personnel from the U.S. Marine Corps, Japan Self-Defense Forces, and British Royal Navy aboard the *Mistral*.<sup>25</sup> In addition to these “showing the flag” initiatives, France enjoys, as we shall see, a number of close defense relationships with Asian countries, and carries out bilateral or multilateral military exercises with its regional partners on a regular basis.

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<sup>24</sup> Richard Scott, “Interview: Capitaine de Fregate Claire Pothier, Commanding Officer, FLF Guepratte, French Navy,” *Jane's Navy International*, November 04, 2016.

<sup>25</sup> “Mission Jeanne D'Arc: Discours Guerrier du CEMM sur le BPC Mistral,” *Le Marin*, February 28, 2017, available at <http://www.lemarin.fr/secteurs-activites/defense/27871-mission-jeanne-darc-discours-guerrier-du-cemm-sur-le-bpc-mistral>

Figure 3. The Itinerary and Principal Deployment Zones of the 2017 Jeanne D'Arc Mission



Source: French Navy, 2017

The attention lavished on Asia can be explained by a simple fact: France is already an Indo-Pacific power, with a longstanding presence dating back to the late 17th and early 18th centuries. As one French diplomat has noted, the island of La Reunion was French before Nice, Corsica, the Savoie, or Alsace-Lorraine.<sup>26</sup> Nowadays, approximately 1.5 million French citizens live in island territories scattered across the Pacific and Indian Oceans. More French expatriates (about 130,000) now live in Asia than in Africa. France's Asian overseas territories have bestowed on it the second largest maritime exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the world after the United States. A large portion of this EEZ is located in the Pacific (about 62%), and the Indian

<sup>26</sup> *La Place de la France dans L'Océan Indien: La France a Madagascar* (Tananarive: French Embassy, 2011), available at <http://www.ambafrance-mada.org/La-place-de-la-France-dans-l-Océan>

Ocean (about 24%).<sup>27</sup> This is both an enormous source of wealth, and an immense challenge in terms of monitoring and policing.

Meanwhile, the portion that the Asia-Pacific represents in France's non-EU trade has risen from 14% in 1985 to 24% in 2000 and 32% today.<sup>28</sup> As one analyst at the French Ministry of Defense has noted, French investment capital in Asia now surpasses 80 billion USD, which is the quadruple of Asian investment in France.<sup>29</sup> France's 2013 Defense White Paper describes Asia as a source of both challenges and opportunities, stating, for example, that

Asia (...) plays a vital role in globalization. Today it is the main driver of growth worldwide, but also a region where the risks of tension and conflict are among the highest in the world.<sup>30</sup>

The White Paper stresses the interconnected nature of today's globalized world, and the impossibility of insulating oneself from the ripple effects of great power rivalries in seemingly remote theaters, noting, for example, that

Europeans cannot afford to ignore the unstable world around them and to which they are inextricably linked. Both stakeholders in and major beneficiaries of the globalisation process, they have to deal with a systematic increase in major risks and the vulnerability of the European Union to threats from beyond its borders. For example, a major crisis in Asia would have considerable economic, commercial and financial consequences for Europe.<sup>31</sup>

This point was subsequently reiterated a year later by Philippe Errera, the director of strategic affairs at the French MOD, when France released its first publicly available

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<sup>27</sup> *France and Security in the Asia-Pacific* (Paris: French Ministry of Defense, 2014), available in its English translation at <http://www.defense.gouv.fr/dgris/la-dgris/evenements-archives/presentation-de-la-politique-de-defense-et-de-securite-de-la-france-en-asie-pacifique-10-avril-2014/presentation-de-la-politique-de-defense-et-de-securite-de-la-france-en-asie-pacifique-10-avril-2014>

<sup>28</sup> Nicholas Regaud, *France and Security in the Asia-Pacific: From the End of the First Indochina Conflict to Today* (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2016), available at <https://www.aspi.org.au/publications/france-and-security-in-the-asiapacific-from-the-end-of-the-first-indochina-conflict-to-today>

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> See *French White Paper: Defense and National Security 2013* (Paris: French Ministry of Defense, 2013), available in its English translation at <http://www.rpfrance-otan.org/White-Paper-on-defence-and>

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.



These forces are divided into two main, tri-service commands: France's Indian Ocean Command ALINDIEN, now headquartered in Abu Dhabi; and its Pacific Ocean Command, ALPACI, stationed on the island of Papeete, in French Polynesia. Although France is seeking to up its profile and presence across the Asia-Pacific region, the Indian Ocean has traditionally been prioritized over the Pacific Ocean. In some ways, French defense planning is the reverse reflection of that of the U.S., which has—for its part—historically privileged the Western Pacific theater of operations (WPTO) over the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).<sup>33</sup>

## The Indian Ocean in France's defense strategy

The importance of the Indian Ocean as a “middle space” and maritime highway connecting Asia with metropolitan France is clearly laid out in the 2013 Defense White Paper, which also emphasizes the criticality of the strategic partnership between France and New Delhi. Indeed, the relationship in-between the two democracies has been described as one of “France's closest relationships outside of NATO.”<sup>34</sup> The White Paper states:

The security of the Indian Ocean, a maritime access to Asia, is a priority for France and for Europe from this point of view. As a transit region for international trade, the Indian Ocean is at the heart of world strategic challenges, as illustrated by the permanent presence of the US, Asian and European navies. The fact that the European Union's first large-scale naval operation was the Atalanta operation against piracy clearly illustrates the importance of the Indian Ocean, not only for France but for Europe as a whole. As a neighboring power in the Indian Ocean, France plays a particular role here, reinforced by the development of privileged relations with India. A strategic partnership signed in 1998 enables cooperation in areas that concern the major interests of both countries. France

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<sup>33</sup> For the Indian Ocean as a “middle space,” see Luis Simon, “Europe, the Rise of Asia, and the Future of the Transatlantic Relationship,” *International Affairs*, 91, No. 5, 2015, pp. 969-989.

<sup>34</sup> Isabelle Saint-Mezard, *The French Strategy in the Indian Ocean and the Potential for Indo-French Cooperation* (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2015), available at <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/the-french-strategy-in-the-indian-ocean-and-the-potential-for-indo-french-cooperation/>



supports a reform of the United Nations Security Council that would create a place for new permanent members, including India.<sup>35</sup>

This partnership has grown arguably even closer over the past few years, with the signing of a number of landmark defense deals—such as the recent Indian purchase of Rafale aircraft. The Indo-French strategic dialogue is now broad and wide-ranging, and the annual joint military exercises held each year between each country’s three armed services have progressively grown more elaborate. Cooperation in the maritime domain has become particularly dynamic, with India and France recently signing an important pact on maritime information sharing. Both countries had already agreed in 2015 to cooperate in the field of radar systems for purposes of maritime domain awareness. With the signing of this White Shipping Agreement, they will now more routinely share data from their respective maritime surveillance systems.<sup>36</sup> These developments, along with a history of mutual respect and bonhomie, have led some leading Indian strategic thinkers to describe France as India’s “most trusted international partner.”<sup>37</sup>

Where the two maritime powers differ, however, is in their “mental maps” of the Indian Ocean.<sup>38</sup> Whereas, India’s vision—by virtue of the nation’s geographic centrality and peninsular formation—is one that encompasses the entirety of the

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<sup>35</sup> See *French White Paper: Defense and National Security 2013* (Paris: French Ministry of Defense, 2013), available in its English translation at <http://www.rpfrance-otan.org/White-Paper-on-defence-and>

<sup>36</sup> Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, “India, France Sign Pact on Maritime Information Sharing in Indian Ocean Region,” *The Economic Times*, January 24, 2017, available at <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-france-sign-pact-on-maritime-information-sharing-in-indian-ocean-region/articleshow/56762456.cms>

<sup>37</sup> As this author noted in an earlier publication, “Even at the height of the Cold War, when India’s rapport with NATO was frequently colored by mistrust, relations between Paris and New Delhi remained relatively cordial. Although French security elites were discomfited by India’s rapprochement with the Soviet Union in the 1970s, their own cherished concept of strategic autonomy provided them with a degree of empathy for India’s quest for maneuverability within a polarized international system. France was one of the first Western countries to lift the arms embargo that hit both India and Pakistan in the aftermath of the 1965 conflict. Similarly, during the 1971 war, Paris was one of the only Western capitals to comment on the legitimacy of India’s concerns vis-à-vis the refugee crisis in its border regions with Bangladesh. Perhaps most importantly, France refused to sermonize India after the 1998 nuclear tests, and publicly opposed U.S. sanctions.” See Iskander Rehman, “India-France Relations: Look to the Indian Ocean,” *The Diplomat*, June 4, 2015, available at <http://thediplomat.com/2015/06/india-france-relations-look-to-the-indian-ocean/>. For “most trusted international partner,” see C. Raja Mohan, “Raja Mandala: A Most Exceptional Friendship,” *The Indian Express*, January 26, 2016, available at <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/raja-mandala-a-most-exceptional-friendship/>

<sup>38</sup> On “mental maps,” see Henry Steele Commager, *The Search for a Usable Past and Other Essays in Historiography* (New York: Knopf Books, 1967).

Indian Ocean basin, France has a somewhat narrower ordering of its zones of strategic priority.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, according to one former commander of ALINDIEN, there are “two major focal points of military interest for France”—the Arabo-Persian Gulf, and the Southwestern Indian Ocean.<sup>40</sup>

## The Arabo-Persian Gulf

With two major interservice bases located in Abu Dhabi and Djibouti, France maintains a permanent military presence in the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Aden. Paris has enjoyed the use of military facilities in Djibouti since 1977, but the base in Abu Dhabi is much more recent.<sup>41</sup> When it was inaugurated in 2009, it was considered by some to be a watershed moment in French external security policy. Indeed, prior to the opening of the base on Emirati territory, France had never permanently positioned troops in the Gulf.<sup>42</sup> French warships of all categories can now be berthed at the port of Mina Zayed, while a French airbase now hosts squadrons of Rafale and Mirage 2000 aircraft. Last but not least, a ground forces installation has been established in the midst of the desert, at Zayed. This allows French troops and Special Forces Operatives (SOF) to train alongside their Emirati counterparts in desert and urban warfare. Since November 2014, France has also been invited to use a forward air base in Jordan. This smaller facility currently hosts between 350 and 400 personnel, about 40 Air Force SOF, and eight Rafale aircraft.<sup>43</sup> French forces have also carried out strikes from facilities in Qatar, Kuwait, and Iraq—in addition to those conducted from the deck of the *Charles de Gaulle*, currently in the midst of a major refit (see Figure 5).

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<sup>39</sup> On India’s view of the Indian Ocean, see David Brewster, *India’s Ocean: The Story of India’s Bid for Regional Leadership* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

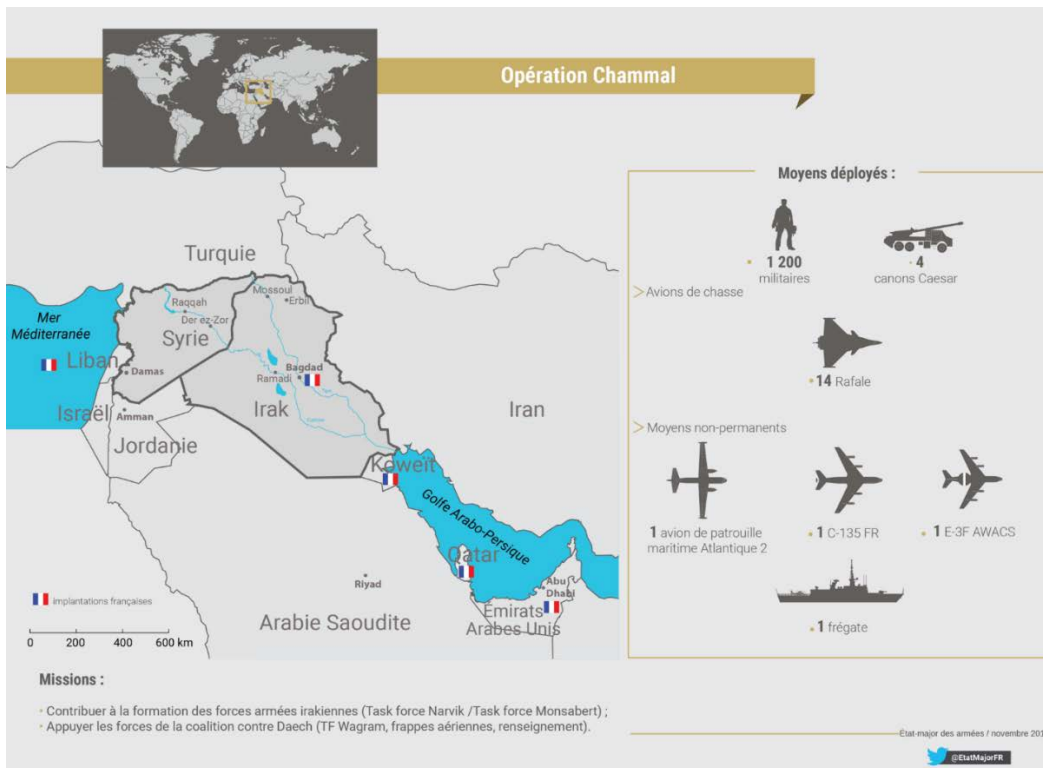
<sup>40</sup> Admiral Jean Dufourcq, “La France et les Enjeux Strategiques de l’Ocean Indien,” *Herodote*, no.145, 2012.

<sup>41</sup> Camp Lemonier in Djibouti hosts a world-renowned French desert survival training school. For details on this training, see Staff Sgt. R.J. Biermann, *To Hell and Back: French, U.S. Service Members Weather Intense Combat Training* (Washington, DC: U.S. Air Force, 2011), available at <http://www.af.mil/News/Commentaries/Display/tabid/271/Article/141444/to-hell-and-back-french-us-service-members-weather-intense-combat-training.aspx>

<sup>42</sup> On the significance of the establishment of the Abu Dhabi base, see Marie Tyl, *Presence Militaire Francaise et Strategie de Defense dans l’Ouest de l’Ocean Indien: Quelles Orientations Pour le XXIeme Siecle?* (Paris: Centre D’Etudes Superieures de la Marine, 2013), available at [http://cesm.marine.defense.gouv.fr/images/Cargo/2013/CARGO2013-3\\_Ouest-ocean-indien.pdf](http://cesm.marine.defense.gouv.fr/images/Cargo/2013/CARGO2013-3_Ouest-ocean-indien.pdf)

<sup>43</sup> Frederic Lert, “Situation Report: French Air Force Strikes Hard From Jordan,” *Jane’s Defense Weekly*, February 15, 2017.

Figure 5. French Forces Deployed Under the Aegis of Operation Chammal



Source: Etat-Major des Armees, November 2017

France's regional objectives, however, extend beyond its counterterrorism campaign against ISIS and jihadi elements in the Horn of Africa. The opening of the base in Abu Dhabi was also a clear signal to Iran—a nation with which France has long had a tense relationship—and the physical manifestation of France's informal security guarantee to Arab partners in the region.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, certain Gulf states have long viewed France as a reliable external balancer, intelligence partner, and supplier of weaponry. According to some unofficial but well-informed accounts, France's 2009 defense agreement with the UAE (which remains largely confidential), contains a particularly strong French pledge to defend its Arab partner with "all the means at its disposal" in the event of Iranian aggression.<sup>45</sup> Last but not least, Paris wishes to

<sup>44</sup> Matthew Saltmarsh, "France Opens First Military Bases in the Gulf," *The New York Times*, May 26, 2009, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/27/world/europe/27france.html>

<sup>45</sup> Marie Tyl, *Presence Militaire Francaise et Strategie de Defense dans l'Ouest de l'Ocean Indien: Quelles Orientations Pour le XXIeme Siecle?* (Paris: Centre D'Etudes Superieures de la Marine,

maintain a strong presence in the region in order to help protect the free flow of energy and shipping along the straits of Hormuz and Bab-el-Mandeb. Such threats of disruption, whether by Iran or its hybridized proxies in Yemen, are taken increasingly seriously in French government circles.<sup>46</sup>

## The Southwest Indian Ocean

The second region of strategic priority is the Southwest Indian Ocean, where France possesses important overseas territories, continues to exert significant diplomatic and cultural influence, and helps to secure the Mozambique channel. In 2011, France released the Southern Indian Ocean Blue Book, which emphasized the need to promote the “blue economy” of the overseas territories of La Reunion and Mayotte, where reside over a million French citizens. Sixteen hundred French troops are permanently stationed in this sub-region, which hosts assets from all three services and detachments of elite units such as the navy parachutists (2eme RPIMA) or soldiers from the French Foreign Legion. Whereas France’s units stationed in the Northwestern Indian Ocean are often engaged in high-end combat operations, the troops in the Southwestern Indian Ocean are “sovereignty forces,” whose principal objective is to protect and monitor maritime and air approaches to French territory, as well as police its vast EEZ. Other missions include humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), search and rescue (SAR), and regional capacity building—particularly in the domain of MDA. Two training centers—the *Centre d’Aguerrissement Tropical de la Reunion* (CATR), and the *Centre d’Instruction et D’Aguerrissement Nautique* (CIAN) in Mayotte provide elite training to French and partner nation forces in tropical and littoral warfare.<sup>47</sup>

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2013), available at [http://cesm.marine.defense.gouv.fr/images/Cargo/2013/CARGO2013-3\\_Ouest-ocean-indien.pdf](http://cesm.marine.defense.gouv.fr/images/Cargo/2013/CARGO2013-3_Ouest-ocean-indien.pdf)

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, the French MOD’s policy planning unit’s recent report on the effect of a closure of a major maritime strait on the French economy, *Impacts Sur L’Economie Francaise de la Fermeture D’un ou Plusieurs Detroits Maritimes Majeurs* (Paris: Direction Generale des Relations Internationales et de la Strategie, French Ministry of Defense, 2016), available at <http://www.defense.gouv.fr/dgris/recherche-et-prospective/etudes-prospectives-et-strategiques>

<sup>47</sup> See *Les Forces Armees dans la Zone Sud de l’Ocean Indien* (Paris: Etat-Major des Armees, last updated September 20, 2016), available at <http://www.defense.gouv.fr/ema/forces-prepositionnees/la-reunion-mayotte/dossier/les-forces-armees-dans-la-zone-sud-de-l-ocean-indien>

## Towards an Indo-Pacific strategy?

### Towards a more holistic appraisal of Asian security challenges?

Much like the United States, France has struggled to develop a truly coherent strategic framework for Asia. Back in 2011, in a much discussed article in *Foreign Policy*, then secretary of state Hillary Clinton recognized that

How we translate the growing connection between the Indian and Pacific oceans into an operational concept is a question that we need to answer if we are to adapt to new challenges in the region.<sup>48</sup>

As of now, this intellectual process remains something of an ongoing effort, both in Paris and in Washington.<sup>49</sup> Part of the challenge in the United States, notes Ashley Tellis, is that American strategic planners have traditionally viewed the Indian Ocean more as a zone between regions, or an “inter-region,” than as a truly unified area of operations.”<sup>50</sup> For French security managers, on the other hand, the Indian Ocean has always been viewed in strategic terms, and as more than just a thoroughfare—but this thinking has largely centered on the two sub-regions identified above. French Asia hands have thus increasingly been urging their government to implement a more holistic Indo-Pacific strategy that does a better job at connecting the nation’s interests and assets placed under ALINDIEN and ALPACI.<sup>51</sup> This would entail a greater focus on the Bay of Bengal, on the Southeastern Indian Ocean, and on the waterways connecting the two oceans. The French Ministry of Defense has recently conducted a thorough review of its Indian Ocean strategy. Although, at the time of

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<sup>48</sup> Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century,” *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011, available at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/11/americas\\_pacific\\_century](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/11/americas_pacific_century)

<sup>49</sup> For some theorists, such as Barry Buzan, the Indian Ocean does not qualify as a regional security complex, but rather forms a disparate assemblage of sub-regions. See Barry Buzan, “Naval Power, the Law of the Sea, and the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace,” *Marine Policy*, 5, No.3, 1983, pp.194-204.

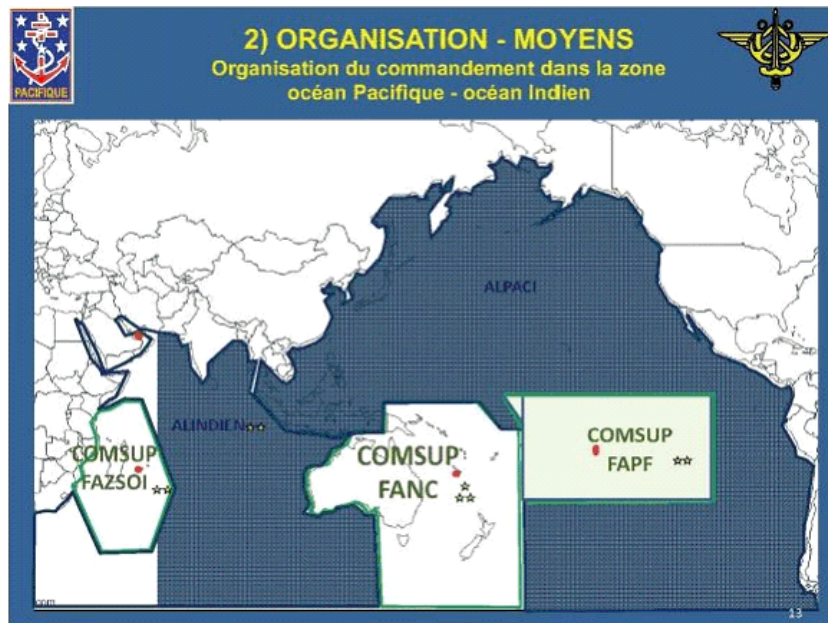
<sup>50</sup> Ashley J. Tellis, “The Indian Ocean and U.S. Grand Strategy,” Keynote Speech, organized by the National Maritime Foundation, at the India International Center, New Delhi, January 17, 2012, transcript available at <http://www.maritimeindia.org/Eminent%20Person/Lecture-by-Ashley.html>

<sup>51</sup> See *Rapport—Australie: Quelle Place Pour La France Dans Le Nouveau Monde?* Rapport d’information no. 222 (2016-2017) de M. Christian Cambon, Mme. Marie-Francoise Perol-Dumont, MM. Robert Laufouaulu, Andre Tillard, et Christian Namy. (Paris, Commission des Affaires Commission des Affaires Etrangères, de la Defense, et des Forces Armees du Senat, 2016), available at <https://www.senat.fr/notice-rapport/2016/r16-222-notice.html>

writing, the study remains classified, there is a possibility that a publicly available version will be released in the near future. Going forward, it will be interesting to see whether this document reflects the desire expressed in some quarters for a more holistic and less regionally bifurcated approach to France’s Asian security policy.

Indeed, the difficulties posed by an outdated bureaucratic fracturing of the Indo-Pacific are not unique to the U.S.<sup>52</sup> French commentators have noted that France’s complex system of regional military commands (see Figure 6) “lacks legibility for our partners,” and have argued in favor of a “reevaluation” of this organizational approach.<sup>53</sup>

Figure 6. France’s Overlapping Command Structures in the Indo-Pacific



Source: French Senate, 2016

<sup>52</sup> For example, at the U.S. Department of Defense, the Indian Ocean is segmented between CENTCOM, PACOM, and now, since 2007, AFRICOM; whereas at the U.S. State Department, the Indian Ocean is split between the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, and the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs.

<sup>53</sup> *Rapport—Australie: Quelle Place Pour La France Dans Le Nouveau Monde?* Rapport d’information no. 222 (2016-2017) de M. Christian Cambon, Mme. Marie-Francoise Perol-Dumont, MM. Robert Laufouaulu, Andre Tillard, et Christian Namy. (Paris, Commission des Affaires Commission des Affaires Etrangeres, de la Defense, et des Forces Armees du Senat, 2016), available at <https://www.senat.fr/notice-rapport/2016/r16-222-notice.html>

## Counter-hegemonic balancing “à la française”

Despite these lingering organizational and ideational challenges, one can clearly detect a coherent long-term French strategy in Asia, which extends far beyond counterterrorism, anti-piracy, and custodial duties. This can best be described as an increasingly robust policy of counter-hegemonic balancing, and a desire to positively shape the regional balance of power. France plays a very active role in terms of defense engagement and defense diplomacy in Asia, where it has a number of close defense partnerships, and an impressive network of defense attaches. These attaches, are—from this author’s experience—often remarkably well versed in Asian languages, politics, and geopolitics. Around 100 Asian officers are trained in French military institutions every year, and, through multinational and bilateral military exercises, French military forces continue to play an important capacity building role in Asia (see Figure 4).<sup>54</sup> The 2013 Defense White Paper stresses the importance of state sovereignty, noting that

International order requires every State to guard its sovereign territory, not just on behalf of its own people, but on behalf of the international community as well. When dealing with threats and risks, the State is the first line of defense, the first level of response. If that level is found wanting, if it is breached, then the problem immediately takes on a new, much less manageable dimension.<sup>55</sup>

One of Paris’s first priorities has thus been to shore up the “sovereignty capabilities” of weaker Asian states.<sup>56</sup> This explains France’s commitment to the EU Critical Maritime Routes in the Indian Ocean (EU CRIMARIO) program, with the goal of enhancing MDA in the Indian Ocean through technical training programs, and the creation of maritime information fusion centers. One such example is the establishment of the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Center in Madagascar,

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<sup>54</sup> See *France and Security in the Asia-Pacific* (Paris: French Ministry of Defense, 2014), available in its English translation at <http://www.defense.gouv.fr/dgris/la-dgris/evenements-archives/presentation-de-la-politique-de-defense-et-de-securite-de-la-france-en-asi-pacifique-10-avril-2014/presentation-de-la-politique-de-defense-et-de-securite-de-la-france-en-asi-pacifique-10-avril-2014>

<sup>55</sup> See *French White Paper: Defense and National Security 2013* (Paris: French Ministry of Defense, 2013), available in its English translation at <http://www.rpfrance-otan.org/White-Paper-on-defence-and>

<sup>56</sup> “Discours de M. Philippe Errera, Directeur charge des Affaires Strategiques du Ministere de la Defense: Presentation de la Politique de Defense et de Securite de la France en Asie-Pacifique, Hotel de la Marine, Paris, April 10, 2014,” available at <http://www.defense.gouv.fr/dgris/la-dgris/evenements-archives/presentation-de-la-politique-de-defense-et-de-securite-de-la-france-en-asi-pacifique-10-avril-2014/presentation-de-la-politique-de-defense-et-de-securite-de-la-france-en-asi-pacifique-10-avril-2014>

which recently became operational, and is slated to play an essential role in combating illegal activities in the Southwestern Indian Ocean. At the higher end of spectrum, it can involve strengthening smaller partner nations' asymmetric military capabilities, whether in the field of anti-submarine warfare (ASW) or elsewhere.<sup>57</sup>

Although there is clearly an element of commercial rivalry between French and U.S. arms firms in Asia, there are also signs of greater cooperation on a grander strategic level. A growing proportion of French arms sales are to U.S. allies and partners in Asia—with one of the recent and most significant examples, of course, being the sale of oceanic conventional submarines to Australia.<sup>58</sup> Such sales are motivated by geopolitical, as well as commercial, imperatives.<sup>59</sup>

Indeed, one French Foreign Ministry official has suggested that France could play an important role in encouraging the development of an “anti-hegemonic regional order,” by strengthening its defense technology relationships with both India and Australia.<sup>60</sup> And indeed, over recent years French security managers have been vigorously crafting such an order—an order that can best be viewed as a series of concentric and occasionally overlapping circles with maritime democracies such as Australia and India (and, to a lesser extent, Japan) positioned at its core. This has been reflected not only in official documents such as the French *Strategic Review*, or in joint statements with each country calling for the need to enhance cooperation with third parties, but also on a more unofficial level—for example, with the organization of a Track 1.5, involving Australian, French, and Indian academics, think tankers, and government officials.<sup>61</sup> In addition to this multi-pronged effort, a strategic dialogue is

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<sup>57</sup> For example, in March 2016 France conducted a complex ASW exercise with the Royal Malaysian Navy in the South China Sea. Kelvin Wong, “French Navy Puts Second FREMM Frigate to the Test With Inaugural Deployment,” *Jane’s International Defense Review*, March 06, 2016.

<sup>58</sup> See Bruno Tertrais, “In French-Australian Submarine Deal, Broader Political and Strategic Context Mattered,” *The Lowy Interpreter*, April 28, 2016, available at <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/french-australian-submarine-deal-broader-political-and-strategic-context-mattered>

<sup>59</sup> As one recent Australian think-tank report noted, “...the submarine program is as much the result of a convergence in our two national strategies as a cause of it.” See Jacinta Carroll and Theodore Eli, eds., *More than Submarines: New Dimensions in the Australia-France Strategic Partnership* (Canberra, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2017), available at <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/australia-france-strategic-partnership>

<sup>60</sup> Frederic Grare, quoted in *Rapport—Australie: Quelle Place Pour La France Dans Le Nouveau Monde?* Rapport d’information no. 222 (2016-2017) de M. Christian Cambon, Mme. Marie-Francoise Perol-Dumont, MM. Robert Laufouaulu, Andre Tillard, et Christian Namy. (Paris, Commission des Affaires Commission des Affaires Etrangeres, de la Defense, et des Forces Armees du Senat, 2016), available at <https://www.senat.fr/notice-rapport/2016/r16-222-notice.html>

<sup>61</sup> See *Joint Statement of Enhanced Strategic Partnership Between Australia and France* (Canberra: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, March 03, 2017), available at



now held on a regular basis between France and the United States on the issue of arms sales, and on how best to coordinate the two states' respective capacity-building efforts in Asia.

Perhaps most importantly, France has taken on an even more proactive normative role in Asia—not only on the issue of human rights, but also working to maintain the maritime commons, and the global commons more broadly, free from policies of enclosure, coercion, and expropriation. The Macron administration, as mentioned in the introduction of this paper, has been particularly robust in its public diplomacy. Most recently, in a major speech to the French armed forces, President Macron alluded to the risks induced by the “reaffirmation of great power politics, which has been accompanied by an increased militarization of international relations—all to the detriment of multilateralism.” Although he did not name those two countries explicitly, it was clear that he was referring to Russia and China.<sup>62</sup> A juxtaposition of sections of the most recent U.S. National Security Strategy alongside portions of the 2017 French Strategic Review provides a telling indicator of the extent to which both Western democracies' Asian grand strategies are now in sync (see Table 1). Both nations openly talk about the necessity to preserve a stable balance of power in the region, and one that—to paraphrase Condoleezza Rice—favors the forces of freedom.<sup>63</sup>

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<http://dfat.gov.au/geo/france/Pages/joint-statement-of-enhanced-strategic-partnership-between-australia-and-france.aspx>

<sup>62</sup> See “Discours du President de la Republique, Emmanuel Macron, Voeux aux Armees,” January 23, 2018, available at <http://www.elysee.fr/declarations/article/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-emmanuel-macron-v-ux-aux-armees/>

<sup>63</sup> For “a balance of power that favors freedom,” see “2002 Wriston Lecture: A Balance of Power that Favors Freedom,” a speech given by Dr. Condoleezza Rice in New York, at the Manhattan Institute, October 01, 2002. Transcript available at <https://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/2002-wriston-lecture-balance-power-favors-freedom-5566.html>

Table 1. Franco-American Normative Convergence in the Indo-Pacific

<b>National Security Strategy of the United States of America</b> (December 2017)	<b>French Defense and National Security Strategic Review</b> (November 2017)
“Sustaining favorable balances of power will require a strong commitment to close cooperation with allies and partners because allies and partners magnify U.S. power and extend U.S. influence. (...) A geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order is taking place in the Indo-Pacific region.”	“As the only European nation to have a permanent military presence in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans, France is strengthening its relations with the major democracies in the region that share its vision of international security. These ties ensure that France is able to understand and act appropriately in a region where the strategic balance is rapidly shifting.”

Source: Iskander Rehman

## What role in the event of a major Sino-U.S. confrontation?

The question of what role one might expect French forces to play in the event of a major Sino-U.S. confrontation is an important one, yet seldom addressed. Naturally, much would depend on the nature of the conflict in question. France’s Defense White Paper remains circumspect on this issue, simply stating that

Alongside its allies, France would in the event of an open crisis, make a political and military contribution at the appropriate level.<sup>64</sup>

Although France is a mid-ranking power, it is also an Asian power, and a treaty ally of the United States. It retains a full-spectrum and globally engaged military, with a

<sup>64</sup> *French White Paper: Defense and National Security 2013* (Paris: French Ministry of Defense, 2013), available in its English translation at <http://www.rpfrance-otan.org/White-Paper-on-defence-and>

small, but exquisite suite of niche capabilities—such as in special or cyber operations, for example—that few other nations possess.

One might expect France to provide the United States with logistical support, intelligence, and—if the need arose—the use of its military facilities in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Information gleaned from France’s independent spatial architecture could also prove useful, particularly if some of the U.S.’s space-based assets had been preemptively disabled or destroyed.

If the French military was to provide more direct support to U.S. and allied assets, its warfighting contributions would probably prove the most useful in the subsurface domain. Beginning in 2019, France will receive the first of its six new Suffren (or Barracuda) class SSNs. These boats will be considerably larger than the Rubis class currently in service, with greater speed and payload capacity.<sup>65</sup> Armed with the new *missile de croisiere naval* (MDCN), they would theoretically be able to conduct standoff precision strikes against Chinese targets at ranges up to 1,000 km (approximately 621 miles).<sup>66</sup> More broadly, there is a revived focus on standoff strike and on countering enemy anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) percolating throughout France’s military architecture, whether in its surface fleet—whose latest frigates will also be equipped with the MDCN—or in its air force.<sup>67</sup> Unlike many other European NATO partners, France also possesses an independent nuclear deterrent, which gives it a certain amount of autonomy and maneuverability within the international system, and helps shield it from “great power coercion.”<sup>68</sup> This means that in the event of an actual military crisis, it may be more willing to act rapidly and decisively in support of its American ally than, say, Germany or Italy. Naturally, any reflection on such an eventuality remains highly speculative. It is surprising, however, that such issues are rarely discussed in either Paris or Washington. Going forward, it may behoove both countries’ security communities to brainstorm such “high risk low probability” scenarios more frequently.

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<sup>65</sup> “France-Navy,” *Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment—Western Europe* (last updated January 19, 2017).

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> For a granular overview of these efforts, see Corentin Brustlein, *Entry Operations and the Future of Strategic Autonomy* (Paris: Institut Francais des Relations Internationales, 2017), available at <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/etudes-de-lifri/focus-strategique/entry-operations-and-future-strategic-autonomy>

<sup>68</sup> See *President Francois Hollande: Discours sur la Dissuasion Nucleaire, Deplacement Aupres des Forces Aeriennes Strategiques*, February 19, 2015, available at <http://www.elysee.fr/declarations/article/discours-sur-la-dissuasion-nucleaire-deplacement-aupres-des-forces-aeriennes-strategiques-istres-3/>. For a recent study of the deeply political component to France’s independent nuclear deterrent, see Bruno Tertrais and Jean Guisnel, *Le President et la Bombe: Jupiter a l’Elysee* (Paris: Editions Odile Jacob, 2016).

## Conclusion

Despite its current state of military hyperactivity, Paris remains committed to Asia-Pacific security. Although France has long paid close attention to security dynamics in the region, in recent years it has also arguably enacted a “pivot” of its own, placing a greater emphasis on defense diplomacy, military presence, and counter-hegemonic balancing.<sup>69</sup> The Western Indian Ocean remains the intellectual and operational fulcrum of French Asia policy, but there are signs that this may be shifting, and that France is—albeit tentatively—in the process of crafting a more holistic Indo-Pacific strategy. It remains to be seen, however, whether France will be able to properly resource these increasingly pan-Asian ambitions, particularly in light of the more immediate threats it faces, both domestically and within its near-abroad. With the advent of a new administration, and following the most recent strategic review, one can expect the release of a new defense white paper within the next year. This document will provide important insights into how France views its Asia strategy going forward. One thing remains certain, however. France will always be the most Asian of European powers, and one of the United States’ most important treaty allies in the Indo-Pacific.

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<sup>69</sup> See Francois Godement, *France’s Pivot to Asia* (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2014), available at [http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR101\\_FRANCE\\_ASIA\\_BRIEF\\_AW.pdf](http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR101_FRANCE_ASIA_BRIEF_AW.pdf)