

POLICY BRIEF

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Valérie Niquet is senior fellow at the Japan Institute of International Affairs and head of the Asia department at Foundation for Strategic Research. She writes extensively on Asia-Pacific strategic affairs and security. Her latest book include *L'Indo-Pacifique nouveau centre du monde* publication date: 2024. You can follow her on twitter @V.Niquet

France in the Indo-Pacific: between Strategic Autonomy and Regional Engagement to Support Shared Values, Rule of Law and Territorial Integrity

Valérie Niquet

Introduction

As the world is in turmoil, French President Emmanuel Macron took the opportunity of his introductory keynote speech at the 2025 Shangri La security dialogue to reassert France posture in the region. Supported by Defense Minister Sébastien Lecornu, he articulated a robust vision for France's long term role. Speaking to a high-level audience of defense chiefs, diplomats, and more than 200 French experts and officials from the ministries of Foreign and European Affairs and the Ministry of Armed forces, they underscored France's commitment to strategic autonomy and "common interest" between Asia and Europe for this concept, offering a "third way", that echoes President Charles de Gaulle speech in Phnom Penh in 1966. Without directly naming rivals, Paris signaled a firmer stance on key flashpoints such as the South China Sea, North Korea and Taiwan, with a comparison with the Ukraine War, provoking a harsh response from the PRC (People's Republic of China).¹

This paper examines France's enhanced Indo-Pacific posture, strategic autonomy but also deeper engagement with ASEAN as a partner of choice for military cooperation—as demonstrated by the many defense contracts signed with Vietnam and Indonesia just before Macron arrival in Singapore—defense of international law through freedom of navigation operations, and strategic ties with Japan, Australia, and India. Together, these elements position France as the European Union's and Europe leading Indo-Pacific power and a valuable partner for regional stability, the more so as the publication

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¹ "President of the French Republic Keynote Address", *IISS Shangri La Dialogue 2025*, 30-05-2025, file:///Users/valerieniquet/Downloads/keynote-address_president-macron_as-delivered.pdf

of the UK (United Kingdom) 2025 defense review signals a refocus, in the context of the war in Ukraine, on “NATO first” and European security.²

France and the European Union: A Singular Strategic Role

Within the broader framework of the European Union, France occupies a unique strategic position in the Indo-Pacific. As the only EU member state with overseas territories and permanent military facilities in the region, France has sovereign interests that go beyond diplomatic alignment. This presence translates into operational responsibilities that no other EU member assumes.

France’s territories in the Indian Ocean and Pacific—Reunion, Mayotte, New Caledonia, French Polynesia—serve as platforms for regional engagement and as anchors for European influence. While the EU has developed its own Indo-Pacific strategy, it is largely non-military and heavily reliant on France’s assets to ensure a credible presence. French naval deployments, exercises, and defense dialogues often serve as the de facto projection of EU interests in the region.³

Paris has taken a leadership role in shaping the EU’s engagement with Indo-Pacific partners. France was the first European country to present an “Indo-Pacific Strategy”, following a speech pronounced by President Macron in

Australia in 2018.⁴ During its presidency of the Council of the EU in 2022, France convened the first EU-Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum. It also contributed significantly to the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. The divergence between France’s ambitions and the capabilities or willingness of its European partners remains a structural constraint, despite the fact that positions in Europe have evolved considerably on these issues in recent months as demonstrated by High representative Kaja Kallas speech at the Shangri La Dialogue.⁵

France singularity can be both a strength and a burden. France gains diplomatic capital by representing Europe on the Indo-Pacific stage, but it also risks isolation if other EU states fail to match its level of commitment, or choose to stress other priorities. Coordinating multilateral maritime missions, for instance, has often required French initiative and resources. Paris continues to encourage broader European involvement, but its posture remains fundamentally national in nature—albeit one with European resonance that Macron choose to emphasize in his speech.⁶

Strategic Autonomy: A Distinctive Voice in a Polarized Region

At the heart of France’s Indo-Pacific policy lies the notion of strategic autonomy that has been at times misunderstood. Macron’s address in Singapore reaffirmed that France does not seek alignment with either of the great powers,

2 Ministry of Defense, *Strategic Defense Review 2025*, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/683d89f181deb72cce2680a5/The_Strategic_Defence_Review_2025_-_Making_Britain_Safer_-_secure_at_home__strong_abroad.pdf.

3 *France Indo-Pacific Strategy*, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/en_a4_indopacifique_synthese_rvb_cle068e51.pdf

4 « Discours prononcé à Garden Island base navale de Sydney », 03-05-2018, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2018/05/03/discours-a-garden-island-base-navale-de-sydney>.

5 « Speech by High representative/Vice President Kaja Kallas at IISS Shangri La Dialogue 2025 », IISS Shangri la Dialogue 2025, 31-05-2025, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/speech-high-representativevice-president-kaja-kallas-iiss-shangri-la-dialogue_en.

6 “President of the French Republic Keynote Address”, op.cit.

but prefers to act with and through a coalition of like-minded states committed to sovereignty, multilateralism, and a stable international order. At the same time strategic autonomy does not mean neutrality, France ally are the United States of America, but the necessity to think about and take into account national, or regional in the case of the EU, interests

This vision draws on France's Gaullist tradition of global independence but is adapted to 21st-century challenges. With a better perception of strategic challenges in the region, it is much more realistic regarding China's assertiveness in the region, including its objective to seize Taiwan by force. Macron portrayed France not as neutral but as non-subordinate, committed to shape outcomes, but without ceding its ability to act independently. In practical terms, this means supporting allies while preserving national agency, and promoting cooperation without bloc politics, a posture close to that of many actors in Asia.

Macron argued that a world divided into antagonistic spheres increases the likelihood of conflict and undermines the global commons. He urged the Indo-Pacific states to reject the fatalism of bipolar rivalry and instead participate in a "coalition of action"—a flexible network of partners capable of addressing issues such as maritime security, climate change, infrastructure, and technology governance.⁷

Minister of the Armed Forces Lecornu's contribution complemented this philosophy by emphasizing the need for credibility.⁸ In his view, strategic autonomy must not be rhetorical; it must be embodied in capacities and commitments, particularly facing new threats in Cyber, space and underwater terrains. He insisted that Europe cannot call for international law in Asia if it fails to uphold it in Europe,

notably in Ukraine. The Indo-Pacific, in this sense, becomes a theatre in which France tests its consistency and defends a vision of strategic stability not dictated by power but upheld by the rule of law and denunciation of those who try to change the status quo by force

France Doctrine for the Indo-Pacific : Sovereignty, Rule of Law, and Opposition to Force

A central tenet of President Macron's address at Shangri-La 2025 was the unwavering defense of sovereignty and international law. Macron explicitly linked the erosion of these principles in Europe—namely Russia's aggression in Ukraine—with growing concerns in the Indo-Pacific. In his view, the rules-based international order must be upheld consistently across all geographies. If violations are tolerated in one region, they risk becoming precedents elsewhere.

This framing led Macron to deliver one of his clearest warnings to date about the use of force to alter the status quo, particularly in the maritime domain. While avoiding direct references to China, Macron left little ambiguity regarding the targets of his concern. He condemned attempts to impose territorial claims through coercion, whether by military intimidation or grey-zone tactics, insisting that these practices undermine global stability and erode the legitimacy of multilateral institutions.

In line with this stance, Macron reaffirmed France's commitment to the principle of freedom of navigation, declaring that the open seas must remain a global commons governed by international law—not zones of influence subject to unilateral control. This principle, he argued, applies equally in the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea, and other contested maritime

⁷ Idem.

⁸ Sebastien Lecornu, « Cyber Undersea and Outer Space Challenges », IISS Shangri la Dialogue 2025, 31-05-2025, file:///Users/valerieniquet/Downloads/sld2025_fourth-plenary-session_sebastien-lecornu_as-delivered.pdf.

spaces. Macron's message was particularly resonant in Southeast Asia, where several states face mounting pressure on their sovereign maritime claims.

The president also warned against the normalization of selective interpretations of international law. He stressed that the rules must be universal, not contingent on power dynamics. The use of force or economic leverage to impose political outcomes, he asserted, cannot be accepted under any circumstances. In this context, France's Indo-Pacific deployments and naval presence are not merely exercises in projection—they are manifestations of a political and legal principle: that law, not might, should determine international outcomes.

Macron's position was echoed by Minister Sébastien Lecornu, who emphasized the growing threats to undersea infrastructure, cyberspace, and maritime trade routes, global challenges across borders and geopolitical areas. He advocated for the creation of new norms and mechanisms to address hybrid threats while insisting on the inviolability of sovereignty, particularly for smaller and medium-sized states. The underlying message was clear: no actor, however powerful, should be allowed to unilaterally redraw the map or rewrite the rules.

Military Engagement and the Projection of Sovereignty

France's Indo-Pacific presence is not merely discursive; it is operational. The *Charles de Gaulle's* aero-naval group five-month deployment in early 2025 marked a turning point in France military engagement in the region. The carrier strike group sailed from Toulon through the Indian Ocean, South China Sea, and Western Pacific, conducting exercises with navies from India, Japan, Australia, the United States, and

several ASEAN states, including the Philippines where the entire naval group anchored for one week during the mission Clémenceau 2025 before crossing the South China Sea to assert freedom of navigation in international waters following the rule of law and the Hague arbitrary court decision ruling of 2016.⁹

The joint French-Philippine patrol in February 2025 was symbolically important. It demonstrated that France's freedom of navigation operations are not simply unilateral assertions of sovereign rights, but part of a network of partnerships. France acted alongside a regional claimant state, reinforcing both Philippine sovereignty and the principle that the South China Sea is not a closed sea.

The message was clear: France is not just present in the Indo-Pacific because of its territories—it is willing and able to contribute to regional security through high-level, interoperable assets. Notably, France remains the only European country with such a level of projection capability. No other EU member can independently deploy a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, conduct long-duration operations across multiple maritime zones, and engage in multilateral exercises from the Indian Ocean to the Philippine Sea.

France's regular presence in the Indian Ocean, its coordination with Pacific Island nations on disaster response, and its investments in space and satellite infrastructure all reinforce this image of a capable, multidomain actor. Yet, this visibility also carries expectations—and raises questions about sustainability.¹⁰

Strategic Partnerships: Japan, Australia, and India

France and Japan share a convergence of values and security interests: both are

9 « The South China Sea Arbitration », <https://pca-cpa.org/cn/cases/7/>.

10 Sébastien Lecornu, « Cyber Undersea and Outer Space Challenges », op.cit.

democracies committed to international law, regional stability, and strategic autonomy. They have deepened defense ties through joint exercises, technology cooperation, and ministerial dialogues.

However, the full potential of the partnership remains untapped. Discussions over a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) have not been finalized yet despite important progress. Legal and operational hurdles, as well as differing strategic priorities, may have slowed momentum.

While cooperation at sea and in high-level forums continues, there is still a misplaced suspicion in Tokyo regarding France “strategic autonomy” concept. For Paris, Japan is a trusted and central partner—but one among several in a diverse Indo-Pacific strategy where – including for arms trade reasons – ASEAN countries, including Vietnam and Indonesia, play an increasingly important role.

With Australia, the AUKUS agreement of 2021—announced without prior consultation and resulting in the cancellation of a major submarine deal—shook France’s trust in its Australian partner. However, both sides have since worked to repair the relationship. High-level visits, renewed military cooperation, and joint initiatives in the South Pacific have restored a degree of confidence.

Yet the partnership is recovering slowly. A certain caution remains in Paris, particularly regarding industrial cooperation in sensitive sectors. While France continues to participate in exercises and coordinate on maritime security in the South Pacific, the strategic intimacy once promised by the submarine contract has not yet been fully reconstituted. Australia remains an essential partner, but also a reminder that geopolitical alignment can be overtaken by hard choices. France now seeks to anchor the relationship in broader regional cooperation—on climate, infrastructure, and Pacific Islands

resilience—rather than relying on exclusive bilateral defense deals.

Of all France’s Indo-Pacific partnerships, the one with India is the most developed and multidimensional. It includes high-level political trust, sustained defense industrial cooperation, and alignment on strategic concepts such as multipolarity and sovereignty. France has supplied India with Rafale fighter jets and Scorpène-class submarines and supports its ambition for self-reliant defense capacity. The bilateral logistics agreement enables mutual naval access in the Indian Ocean, reinforcing interoperability.

India is also a partner in space, nuclear energy, and counterterrorism. Importantly, despite the fact that India belongs to the QUAD format alongside Australia, Japan and the United States, both countries share a reluctance to be drawn into great-power rivalries and prefer issue-based coalitions over formal alliances. The relationship, rooted in long-standing respect and autonomy, offers a model of balanced strategic partnership in the Indo-Pacific.

ASEAN: The Centre of Gravity for France’s Regional Policy ?

As emphasized in France President speech at the Shangri La Dialogue, France’s policy in the Indo-Pacific deliberately places Southeast Asia at the center—not only because of ASEAN’s institutional role but because of its preference for balance and inclusiveness while not afraid to denounce China’s assertive ambitions in the region, threatening member States sovereign rights and strategic stability in the region, including in the Taiwan Strait.

Macron’s 2025 visit to Indonesia and Vietnam before Shangri-La underscored this commitment. France no longer positions itself as a power simply “engaging” with the Indo-Pacific; it presents itself as a regional actor whose interests are tied to the resilience and

prosperity of ASEAN countries. In his speech, Macron praised ASEAN's capacity to maintain dialogue despite regional tensions, describing it as a model for inclusive multilateralism.¹¹

France has taken concrete steps to support this vision. It is enhancing security cooperation with ASEAN states through joint naval activities, training programs, and arms transfers. The Rafale fighter jet deal with Indonesia, cooperation with Vietnam on maritime surveillance, and support for the Philippine Coast Guard are not isolated cases—they reflect a strategy of incremental, pragmatic engagement.

Lecornu's call for greater involvement in the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+) illustrates France's ambition to institutionalize this security dialogue. Paris also supports ASEAN's outlook on the Indo-Pacific, which, like France's own approach, emphasizes cooperation over systematic confrontation.

Importantly, France emphasizes shared interests in capacity building, maritime domain awareness, and freedom of navigation. This diplomatic balance enables France to be seen as a constructive partner—not one pushing for alignment against a common adversary, but one strengthening regional agency while maintaining its vigilance against disruptive powers who may want to change the status quo by force and disrespect international rule of law.

Conclusion: Between Strategic Clarity and Operational Constraints

France's Indo-Pacific strategy has matured into a coherent and assertive policy grounded in values, presence, and partnerships. It offers an alternative to binary competition, without claiming a delusion of neutrality, reinforces multilateral cooperation, and upholds legal norms through both diplomacy and action.

At Shangri-La 2025, Macron articulated this vision in front of Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth and a few Chinese military experts, representatives of two disruptive powers at the economic and strategic levels. The message is important particularly for regional actors seeking balanced, reliable partners. Yet challenges remain. France must manage expectations—both its own and those of its partners. Its resources are finite. Its military deployments, while impressive, cannot be sustained at the same level indefinitely and most importantly cannot replace the United States as the essential guarantor of strategic stability in the region. And its message of strategic autonomy, though compelling, must continue to be translated into consistent engagement.

Future implications will depend on France's ability to clarify France's role within the EU framework: whether as a spearhead of broader European engagement when uncertainties prevail regarding the future of NATO or as an independent actor speaking in the name of shared values.

France's regional credibility will increasingly hinge on the consistency of its message and the clarity of its commitments. If Paris succeeds in aligning strategic discourse and capacities, including financial capacities, with sustainable action, it will solidify its role as a stabilizing power in the Indo-Pacific, taking also advantage of its status of permanent member of the United Nations security council. If not, the risk is reputational fatigue: of being seen as ambitious but overextended. Nonetheless, the 2025 deployment of the *Charles de Gaulle*, the strengthening of ASEAN partnerships, and the consolidation of ties with Japan, Australia, and India show that France has moved beyond symbolic presence, and the opportunity given to President Macron, the first EU head of State to do that, to deliver the keynote speech at the Shangri La dialogue, is a testimony to that evolution.

¹¹ "President of the French Republic Keynote Address", Op.cit.