

France and security in the Asia–Pacific

From the end of the first Indochina conflict to today

112

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France's defence- and security-related activities in the Asia–Pacific are often underestimated, sometimes distorted or simply ignored. The natural focus on the role of major powers in the region—the US, China, India and Japan—causes the contribution of a strategic actor, considered first and foremost as European and therefore an outsider, to be overlooked; however, this actor exercises global power at the diplomatic, military and economic levels, including in the Asia–Pacific region. The point here is not to overestimate France's strategic role in the region, but merely to recognise that after its role was diminished at the end of the first Indochinese conflict, France became involved again strategically in the early 1990s—a movement that has expanded in recent years. This reflects a lasting strategic realignment that can be seen in French defence policy and more tangibly at the regional level in operations, cooperation and dialogue.



A French Armed Forces soldier leads Australian Army soldiers from the 2nd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment to Ile Des Pins airport during Exercise Croix du Sud 2016 in New Caledonia, 13 November 2016. Photo courtesy Australian Department of Defence.

1. From the Indochina War to the Paris Agreements on Cambodia

The French defeat at Dien Bien Phu on 7 May 1954, and the Geneva Agreements of 20 July 1954, irrefutably marked the end of an era for France in Asia, and marked France as a great power incapable of adapting to the powerful historical movement for decolonisation against the backdrop of the Cold War. French military engagement in the region, mainly in the Indochinese peninsula, declined rapidly, although it continued nonetheless into the mid-1960s. The French Expeditionary Corps left Vietnam in April 1956 and, while the Geneva Agreements authorised France to maintain a significant military presence in Laos (5,000 soldiers), by the early 1960s only a few hundred remained. The last French military base in Asia, located in Seno in southwest Laos, closed in 1963. In Cambodia, France maintained an imposing military cooperation mission and began to provide the Cambodian forces with a large amount of equipment from 1964 onwards, but General Lon Nol's coup in 1970 ended that cooperation.

As a party to the Manila Pact on 2 September 1954 and a member of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), General de Gaulle's France rapidly distanced itself from that organisation, believing that no military solution was possible in the Vietnamese conflict. As Pierre Journoud notes:

... in 1965, following the deployment of the Marines to South Vietnam and the first systematic bombardment of the North, Paris ended up abstaining from any ministerial participation at the summit [of foreign ministers in the organisation] in May 1965, withdrawing French units from joint naval manoeuvres and repatriating its experts in the permanent bureau for military studies and the intelligence committee.¹

However, France continued to pay its financial contributions until 1974 and didn't renege on the Manila Pact when the dissolution of SEATO was announced in June 1977.

A new leaf was turned in the mid-1960s, after which the terms of French participation in the Asia–Pacific's strategic affairs were reduced to the protection of its overseas territories in the Pacific and Indian oceans and providing defence equipment to the countries of the region. After fully rebuilding an efficient national defence industry, France was able to assist the build-up of the newly sovereign countries' armed forces—particularly those of India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore—while Australia turned to Paris to modernise its combat aircraft (approximately a hundred Mirage IIIs, assembled in Australia). However, this acknowledgement of French skill couldn't conceal France's strategic intent to disappear from the region—except in the Pacific, where nuclear tests mobilised a significant number of navy ships—even if its independent foreign and security policy guaranteed its international influence and its ability to offer an alternative to non-aligned countries during the Cold War. France's diplomatic role in resolving the third Indochina conflict would enable it to return to a strategic role in the region.

2. The turning point in the 1990s

France had a number of advantages to help it play a role in resolving the Cambodian conflict: its knowledge of Indochina and its leaders, particularly Prince Sihanouk and Son Sann, head of the Khmer People's National Liberation Front; its position as permanent member of the UN Security Council, which would play a crucial role due to the indirect involvement of Russia and China in the conflict; and its relationship of trust with Indonesia, the co-sponsor of the peace negotiations. Several meetings were held in France between the parties to the conflict from the end of 1988, which contributed to the opening of the first conference in Paris in July 1989 and, after several postponements, to the Paris Agreements in October 1991.²

The agreements were followed by the deployment of the UN Advance Mission in Cambodia, the military component of which was placed under French command, before the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia mandate began in May 1992. In keeping with the role it played in the outcome of the conflict, France contributed greatly to the operation, deploying 1,500 soldiers, the second biggest contingent after Indonesia. In doing so, it was sending a strong and firm message of its commitment to peace in the region, which would be lasting, particularly in its support in training the Royal Khmer Gendarmerie, which played a very positive role in securing the territory. At the end of the decade, France would again demonstrate its operational commitment through its participation in Operation INTERFET in East Timor, under UN mandate, for which the French mobilised 600 troops between September 1999 and February 2000.

The 1990s were marked by several signs of renewed commitment from France in the region.³ First of all, the French Ministry of Defense strived to ensure that a series of bilateral agreements were signed, targeting the development of cooperation in one or all of its three main components—strategic dialogue, military cooperation, and industrial and technological cooperation—especially with South Korea (1992), Cambodia (1993 and 1994), Malaysia (1994), the Philippines (1994), Vietnam (1997) and Singapore (1998). With Singapore, France intended to be able to permanently accommodate an Royal Singapore Air Force fighter squadron for training at the Cazaux air base, in southwest France, which continues today.

In the South Pacific, France and its Australian and New Zealand partners signed an arrangement in December 1992 on ‘disaster relief cooperation in the South Pacific’, better known as the FRANZ arrangement, which provides for the coordination of emergency response operations in order to optimise the use of the operational assets available to island states in the region, which are often hit by tropical storms and cyclones. Since this arrangement was signed, the French Armed Forces in New Caledonia and in French Polynesia have contributed to more than 30 humanitarian interventions following natural disasters in the region.

However, relations between France, Australia and New Zealand would encounter some bumps in the road due to the last French nuclear test program on Mururoa and Fangataufa between September 1995 and January 1996, which led to a serious crisis between France and its neighbours in the Pacific. France’s signature of the Treaty of Rarotonga in March 1996, followed by the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in September 1996, and finally the closure of the Centre d’Expérimentation du Pacifique in 1998, helped France repair its relations with neighbouring countries as well as giving fresh impetus to their cooperation. This can be seen in France’s participation, since 1998, in the Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group—alongside the US, Australia and New Zealand—with the goal of coordinating the security effort in the Pacific, primarily in the maritime field for the benefit of island states. Another example of this new dynamic was the establishment of political–military dialogue between France and New Zealand in 1999, following a ‘2+2’ format between the foreign affairs and defence ministries.

France was thus slowly pivoting towards the Asia–Pacific, but the movement was gradual and the view from Paris focused especially on Asia’s economic expansion. Priority was given to developing relations with the major regional powers, including through partnerships and high-level strategic dialogues established with Japan (1995), China (1997) and India (1998).

Other evidence can be found in the 1994 French White Paper on Defence, the second of the Fifth Republic (the previous one dated to 1971). The 1994 paper highlighted the development of Japanese military capabilities, faced ‘with developments in China, particularly in the naval field, and the consequences of a possible failure of the struggle against nuclear proliferation in its region, in particular in North Korea’. As for China, the White Paper stressed uncertainty about ‘the exportation of destabilising nuclear and ballistic equipment, the assertion of air and sea ambitions in the South China Sea, and territorial claims such as the Spratley islands, all seen as potential risks to regional stability’. The White Paper didn’t mention other Asian countries but highlighted that ‘82% of France’s non-European imports and 56% of exports transited by sea, a large portion of which transits through the Mediterranean, the Red Sea and the northern part of the Indian Ocean’, which were therefore considered to be ‘strategic zones’.

Strategic scenarios in this White Paper didn’t invoke Asia directly. One of them, concerning a ‘regional conflict that does not threaten our vital interests’, indicated that ‘for France, the primary zones of interest likely to be affected by such events’ were located ‘in Europe, the Mediterranean and the Middle East. *The need for more far-off projections, from 5,000–7,000 km, is not to be excluded*’, meaning that the zones of interest may include the northwest section of the Indian Ocean.

Another scenario, concerning a ‘regional conflict that could threaten our vital interests’—that is, one ‘involving a nuclear power and thereby entailing the risk, through knock-on effect, of a threat to our vital interests’—applied to the European continent, and even ‘in the longer term the Mediterranean and the Middle East’. At that stage, nothing had yet been applied to Asia.

Lastly, concerning a scenario that referred to an ‘attack on the national territory outside metropolitan France’—that is, affecting overseas *départements* and territories—the White Paper deemed a direct attack with territorial aims unlikely, recalling the fact that ‘first of all, these territories are covered by deterrence’ and specifying that ‘for an intervention designed to preserve or restore our sovereignty, sufficiently diverse projection assets are therefore necessary.’

The 1990s was a decade when several multilateral cooperation and dialogue forums appeared in the Asia–Pacific, with ASEAN playing a key role. France welcomed this, but didn't wish to be excluded from those forums whose membership it could legitimately seek, even if only due to its sovereign territories in the Pacific and Indian oceans.⁴ Its attempt to join the ASEAN Regional Forum—as an independent member and not only through the EU—in the 1990s was unsuccessful. However, its initiative with Singapore in November 1994 to create the Asia–Europe Meeting (ASEM) led to the establishment of a new interregional forum, the first meeting of which took place in March 1996. ASEM includes a political pillar, which enables the development of a dialogue and cooperation on security issues, in this case to fight terrorism and proliferation.

This paved a new way for France to be involved politically and strategically in the Asia–Pacific, and that would manifest itself at all levels throughout the following decade.

3. The 2000s—France's growing involvement due to globalisation and the rise in regional tensions

A series of factors explain the reinforcement of France's strategic engagement in the Asia–Pacific, all simultaneously related to globalisation, the emergence of new threats, the structure of multilateral cooperation in the region and the growing interconnection of strategic zones.

Growing trade, factors of opportunity and vulnerability

When Asia became the new centre of global economic growth, France, the world's fifth economic power and global exporter, very significantly reoriented its external trade in order to accommodate this deep shift. While its global external trade multiplied sixfold between 1985 and 2015, trade with the countries of the Asia–Pacific multiplied tenfold during the same period. The percentage that the Asia–Pacific represented in France's non-EU trade rose from 14% in 1985 to 24% in 2000 and 32% today. French investment capital in the region now exceeds US\$80 billion, which is four times higher than Asian investment in France. This change has raised awareness of new interdependencies, as a crisis in Asia is now likely to seriously affect European and French economic interests.⁵

By providing new economic opportunities, Asian growth has significantly contributed to trade diversion in the field of defence equipment. The Asia–Pacific received 17% of French arms exports in the early 1990s, but that percentage grew steadily, reaching 23% in the early 2000s and 34% in the years after 2010.⁶ France has delivered approximately €30 billion worth of defence equipment to Asia–Pacific countries in the past 25 years, which makes it a major provider to a large number of countries in the region. This success was mostly due to France's ability to offer high-quality equipment and systems—some of which the US was unable or didn't want to export, such as conventional submarines and observation satellites—used by professional armed forces committed across several theatres and tailored to the needs of the armed forces of many countries in the region.⁷

France also established productive technological and industrial partnerships, particularly with Singapore, which is now France's second-ranking international partner in defence research and technology. Since Japanese export policy was relaxed in 2014, new perspectives for technological cooperation have opened up, particularly on robotics. At the industrial level, French companies are highly visible locally and participate in this way in the defence technological and industrial bases of many Asia–Pacific countries, especially South Korea, Singapore, Malaysia and Australia.⁸

Because the international arms trade is overdetermined by strategic and diplomatic considerations, the arms relationship had a visible knock-on effect on other components of defence relations, in particular political–military dialogue and operational cooperation. Client countries often hope that major contracts will be accompanied by exchanges of a strategic nature and transfers of operational skills, thereby adding to the transfers of technological and industrial skills that are now the norm in the international market. France's renewed strategic involvement in the Asia–Pacific wasn't commercially driven—arms transfers are eminently political and strategic moves—but it's certain that a number of export operations fostered the strengthening of defence cooperation at all levels.

New challenges, new threats

The September 11 attacks on the US in 2001 and the resulting global fight against terrorism—particularly the intervention in Afghanistan, in which France participated under NATO until 2012—opened up new perspectives for intelligence exchanges and cooperation with Asian countries directly affected by the terrorist threat, especially India and the island states of Southeast Asia. With vast experience in counterterrorism and today in dealing with the threat of the Islamic State, which struck in metropolitan France, the French state knows how important international cooperation is, especially for countering the threat posed by foreign fighters returning to their homelands—a threat that many countries in the Asia–Pacific also face.

Meanwhile, the development of maritime piracy in the Gulf of Aden, the Malacca Strait and the South China Sea in the 2000s was another source of concern for France, as 70% of container traffic destined for France transits via peripheral Asian shipping routes. France responded by initiating the launch of European Operation EUNAVFOR Atalanta in 2008, which helped reduce the threat in the northwest Indian Ocean in a few years.

It also contributed to programs initiated regionally by dispatching a liaison officer to the Information Fusion Centre in Singapore to help establish the global maritime situation by using information sent from civilian ships participating in the French voluntary naval control system set up in December 2013 for Southeast Asia.

The France–Australia security and defence relationship

France and Australia are neighbouring countries in three oceans: the Indian, Pacific and Southern. This geographical proximity is an important basis for their political and defence cooperation. However, it isn't the only one, as the historical, human and political links that unite Australia and Europe led Australia to participate in World Wars I and II in Europe. The human sacrifices made by Australia on French soil created strong and lasting ties—blood ties.

Bilateral defence and security cooperation has developed progressively since the 1990s, particularly in the South Pacific, where our countries are united in their efforts to ensure the security and stability of the region, focusing on the sustainable management of maritime resources, supporting Pacific island countries and contributing to the emergency response to natural disasters.

France and Australia have been jointly engaged in several theatres of operations, such as in Cambodia and East Timor under the auspices of the UN, more recently in Afghanistan and today against Daesh in Syria and Iraq. This has demonstrated our shared values and a common will and capacity to contribute to international peace and security.

The strategic partnership that brought our two countries together in 2012 illustrates a desire for further cooperation at all levels, particularly in the defence and security domains. Australia has chosen French contractors for the renewal of its oceanic submarine fleet, demonstrating the deep trust between the two countries and the will to extend and intensify this cooperation over the long term in a domain of crucial importance to both nations' security: the freedom of the seas, in particular in the Pacific and Indian oceans.

The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, their technologies and their vectors is another threat to international security, and North Korea is a hotbed of major risks in this domain. France is at the forefront on this situation at the diplomatic level, as it demonstrated in the Iranian case and as part of control regimes (the Nuclear Suppliers Group, the Australia Group, the Missile Technology Control Regime and so on) and combating proliferation (such as the Proliferation Security Initiative), in order to tailor these tools to evolving threats and illegal supply networks. Its action as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and the EU to develop and implement sanctions regimes and other restrictive measures is well known; it recently played a key role once more in pushing the EU to adopt independent sanctions against North Korea, going beyond the provisions of UN Security Council

Resolution 2270. This battle also involves a strong intelligence effort and, in this area, France has highly effective assets and has significantly developed its exchanges with Asia–Pacific partners.

North Korea, through its nuclear and ballistic missile programs, not only poses a growing threat to the security of close partners of France—Japan and South Korea, primarily—but also in the longer term to the non-proliferation architecture and even the security of Europe if Pyongyang manages to develop intercontinental ballistic missiles. Knowledge transfers from North Korea to other countries, particularly in the Middle East, are also a source of worry for Europeans. These are major security interests, even vital interests, that are at stake for Europe and France.

Maritime security has become a key issue in the Indo-Pacific region due to the heavy maritime traffic around the Asian continent, the weaponisation of maritime spaces and the aggravation of territorial tensions, particularly in the South and East China seas. With sovereign forces in the Pacific (2,800 troops) and the Indian Ocean (1,900), prepositioned forces in Djibouti and the United Arab Emirates (2,000) and ships regularly projected into the region, France has a total of approximately 8,000 service members distributed across the zone, and significant air and naval forces⁹: 4 surveillance frigates, 3 multi-role vessels, 4 patrol boats, an estimated 40 aircraft, not to mention occasional deployments of battlegroups formed around nuclear aircraft carriers or a *Jeanne d'Arc* midshipmen training task group formed around a landing helicopter dock and a first-class frigate.

This permanent presence is designed not only to protect France's overseas territories, but also to contribute to regional security through cooperation actions and to solidly display France's will to preserve freedom of navigation and respect for the international law of the sea.

This is the message that France has sent on several occasions in recent years, both at the EU level and as part of the G7 and in a national capacity, through Minister of Defense Jean-Yves Le Drian at meetings of the Shangri-La Dialogue. In June 2016,¹⁰ Le Drian reaffirmed that respect for international law is extremely important to France, and specifically mentioned the Montego Bay agreement and the principle of peaceful resolution of disputes. He stated that French ships regularly transited through the South China Sea and fully enjoyed their navigation and overflight rights within their regional cooperation activities and while respecting international law. This message was a political one applicable to the Asia–Pacific, and the purpose was not only to defend freedom of navigation in a region where it risks being thwarted, but more generally to defend universal standards that were being undermined in this part of the world and could easily be challenged tomorrow in other theatres. That a European country such as France took a clear stance on this sensitive topic was seen by the countries in the region and by the US as a useful political contribution to regional security.

Elsewhere, France actively supported the EU CRIMARIO (Critical Maritime Routes in the Indian Ocean) program, which aims to develop maritime domain awareness in the Indian Ocean through technical training programs and the creation of maritime information fusion centres. France particularly supported, at the political and technical levels, the creation of the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre in Madagascar, which has been operational since 2016 and plays an essential role in combating illegal activity in the southwest Indian Ocean.

Environmental security is a major challenge because of the growing exploitation of resources, especially fisheries, amplified by the effects of climate change. The vast expanse of the French exclusive economic zone in the Indian Ocean, the Southern and Antarctic Territories (2.6 million square kilometres) and the Pacific (6.9 million square kilometres) is extremely rich in fish and other underwater resources, so it needs protection against illegal activities of all types, and that's one of the main tasks of the French forces in La Réunion, New Caledonia and French Polynesia. For this task they have at their disposal tailored naval, air and satellite assets, as well as instruments of regional cooperation, particularly with Australia and New Zealand in the South Pacific and France's partners in the Indian Ocean Commission¹¹ in the southwest of the Indian Ocean.

France also plays a major role in humanitarian rescue and relief efforts during major natural disasters. For example, heavy naval and air assets were deployed after the tsunami of December 2004 to relieve affected populations and territories in the Indian Ocean. Today, this is a regular mission of the French forces in the Pacific when cyclones and tropical storms hit island states

(cyclones Ian in 2014, Pam in 2015 and Winston in 2016, to mention just three recent examples). These rescue operations are coordinated with Australia and New Zealand as part of the FRANZ arrangement.

Finally, environmental security also means factoring in the consequences of climate change. France plays a leading role at the international level in this field, not only as part of the French presidency of COP21, which resulted in the entry into force in record time of the Paris Agreement, but also by launching a new series of international conferences on climate and defence at ministerial level, which Asian countries were greatly involved in.¹²

Active participation in the regional security architecture

When the region's nations set up multilateral forums for dialogue and cooperation in defence and security matters, France joined the movement by becoming a member of several forums and also by taking the initiative in this domain.

Of forums for dialogue, France has participated in the South Pacific Defence Ministers Meeting since its creation in 2013, the Shangri-La Dialogue (at the defence minister or chief of defence staff level) since 2008, the Indian Ocean Rim Association as a partner in dialogue, and in several military forums for dialogue—the Chiefs of Defense Seminar, the Asia–Pacific Intelligence Chiefs, the Western Pacific Naval Symposium and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, of which it will take the presidency in 2020.

Since the early 2000s, the French Armed Forces have considerably developed their participation in military programs and exercises (roughly 15 of them) organised in the Korean peninsula region (Ulchi Freedom Guardian, Key Resolve) as part of the French participation in the UN Command, Military Armistice Commission, Korea; in Southeast Asia (the Pacific Partnership); and in the Pacific (RIMPAC, Multinational Planning Augmentation Team, Southern Katipo, etc.);¹³ and in the Indian Ocean (Papangue, Diana, Cutlass Express).

In addition, large-scale bilateral naval exercises are conducted with India every year (Varuna, since 2001) and, less frequently, air exercises (Garuda, since 2005) and land exercises (Shakti, since 2011), which shows the importance to both countries of the comprehensive development of their strategic relations.

Finally, France organises several multilateral exercises, in particular the Croix du Sud—a biennial coordination exercise in regional humanitarian assistance, which has steadily grown in size since it was launched in 2002. The 2016 exercise in New Caledonia brought together more than 1,800 soldiers from a dozen countries and significant land, air and naval assets.¹⁴

Growing interconnections between strategic spaces

The 2008 French White Paper on Defence and National Security took into account the strategic consequences of globalisation, stressing that 'major conflicts in Asia will certainly affect French and European interests'. It mentioned the consequences of a conflict over strategic shipping routes, the economic and financial effects, and the repercussions on regions where Asian powers source their energy and strategic commodities and ties with Europe and the US, which also guarantee the security of several states in the region. It concluded that 'the prevention of major conflicts in Asia is a key objective for all international actors.'

Beyond the prevention effort, the White Paper highlighted the need to concentrate external intervention capabilities on priority geographical areas, the most important covering 'the Atlantic Ocean to the Sea of Oman and the Indian Ocean, with possible extension towards Asia'.

Whereas the 2008 White Paper acknowledged Asian security challenges and their impact on Europe and France, the 2013 White Paper, although a much more concise text, placed greater emphasis on strategic issues in Asia and their implications for French defence. It examined Chinese policy developments, specifically in terms of how China expresses power, and stated that 'The current rebalancing of the US military towards the Asia–Pacific region is therefore likely to continue, and will be an important factor for France's commitment as a sovereign power and a player in the security of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific.' It gave a detailed overview of the various hotbeds and elements of tension—the Korean peninsula, the South China Sea, the Indian subcontinent, increasing defence spending and the arms race, and so on—and concluded with an assessment of the extent of the instability risk in Asia.

Extracts from Australia’s and France’s White Papers

French White Paper on Defence and National Security (2013)

New Caledonia and the communities living in French Polynesia and Wallis-et-Futuna make France a political and maritime power in the Pacific. France has substantial fishing and mineral resources in this region, a situation that gives it access to many regional organisations: The South Pacific Forum, the Fisheries Agency, etc. It is our responsibility to defend our sovereignty in this part of the world and also to guarantee the security of our fellow citizens in regions exposed to climatic risks, notably through the FRANZ Agreement (France – Australia – New Zealand). France contributes to the general protection of populations and resources in the Pacific Ocean. In this capacity, it develops relations of cooperation with many neighbouring States, particularly Australia, with which it established a strategic partnership.

In the Pacific, France fully assumes its responsibilities as a political and maritime power with a presence in the region. It signed a strategic partnership agreement with Australia in 2012, which marks the growing convergence of the two countries’ interests on a great many international and regional matters relative to the Pacific and the Indian oceans. It also confirms a renewed interest in a French presence on the part of countries in the region, seen as a factor of stability and a source of immediate assistance, particularly in the event of a natural disaster, thanks to France’s pre-positioned resources in the overseas territories in the region.

Australian Defence White Paper (2016)

To help countries in our immediate neighbourhood respond to the challenges they face, Australia will continue to play an important regional leadership role. Our strategic weight, proximity and resources place high expectations on us to respond to instability or natural disasters, and climate change means we will be called on to do so more often. We will continue to play that role in close collaboration with New Zealand, France, the United States, Japan and other partners.

Australia and France share a longstanding and close defence relationship with a shared commitment to addressing global security challenges such as terrorism and piracy. We are strong partners in the Pacific where France maintains important capabilities and we also work closely together to support the security in our respective Southern Ocean territories. Under the FRANZ Arrangement between France, Australia and New Zealand the three partners coordinate humanitarian and disaster relief operations in the Pacific. Australian and French defence forces worked alongside each other to provide life-saving humanitarian assistance to Vanuatu in the wake of Tropical Cyclone Pam.

Following the 13 November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, Australia has expressed its unwavering solidarity with the people of France. Australia will continue to work with France and other like-minded countries to combat Daesh as part of the fight against terrorism.

In the chapter on strategic priorities, it stated that ‘the security of the Indian Ocean, a maritime access to Asia, is a priority for France and for Europe from this point of view’, stressing the importance of the strategic partnership established with India since 1998. Concerning East Asia, it pointed out that ‘Chinese–French bilateral relations have, since 1997, been characterised by a global partnership leading to a regular flow of high-level political exchanges and dialogue encompassing all topics and areas.’ It stated that France was ‘keen to play a more active role with regional security organisations’ and highlighted the development of defence cooperation with Japan, Australia and several other ASEAN countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam).

It concluded by stating that, for France, ‘the stability of Asia and freedom of navigation are diplomatic and economic priorities. Alongside its allies, France would, in the event of an open crisis, make a political and military contribution at the appropriate level’, thereby indicating the importance of Asia to French and European security interests and the political will to contribute to their defence.



Source: *France and security in the Asia-Pacific*, French Ministry of Defense, 2016, p.15

The guidelines given by both White Papers resulted in the intensification of interaction between France and Asia-Pacific countries, particularly at the political and cooperative levels. New strategic partnerships were signed with Indonesia (2011), Australia (2012), Singapore (2012) and Vietnam (2013). Each of those partnerships includes a significant section on defence and security, which reflects the fields in which the parties are committed to developing long-term cooperation.¹⁵

If the number of ministerial meetings is considered a pertinent indicator of the importance with which defence relations with foreign partners is viewed, it's worthwhile noting that the Minister of Defense, Jean-Yves Le Drian, had almost 120 meetings with his counterparts and senior political representatives from Asia-Pacific countries between mid-2012 and the end of 2016. He visited the region around 20 times, travelling to India, Australia, Japan, Malaysia and Vietnam, and made four trips to Singapore for the Shangri-La Dialogue. This is clear evidence of the sizeable role accorded to the Asia-Pacific in France's strategic agenda.

This trend is likely to continue under the impetus of several fundamental factors. First, annual ministry-level consultations, provided for by bilateral agreements, have been set up. This has included meetings with Japan (2+2 since 2014) and Malaysia and more strategic dialogues and military, technology and industry cooperation meetings with a growing number of countries. This cooperation architecture guarantees lasting regional commitment:

signing major arms contracts of strategic importance commits France in the long term (in particular with India, Australia and Malaysia) on the political, technological and operational levels.¹⁶

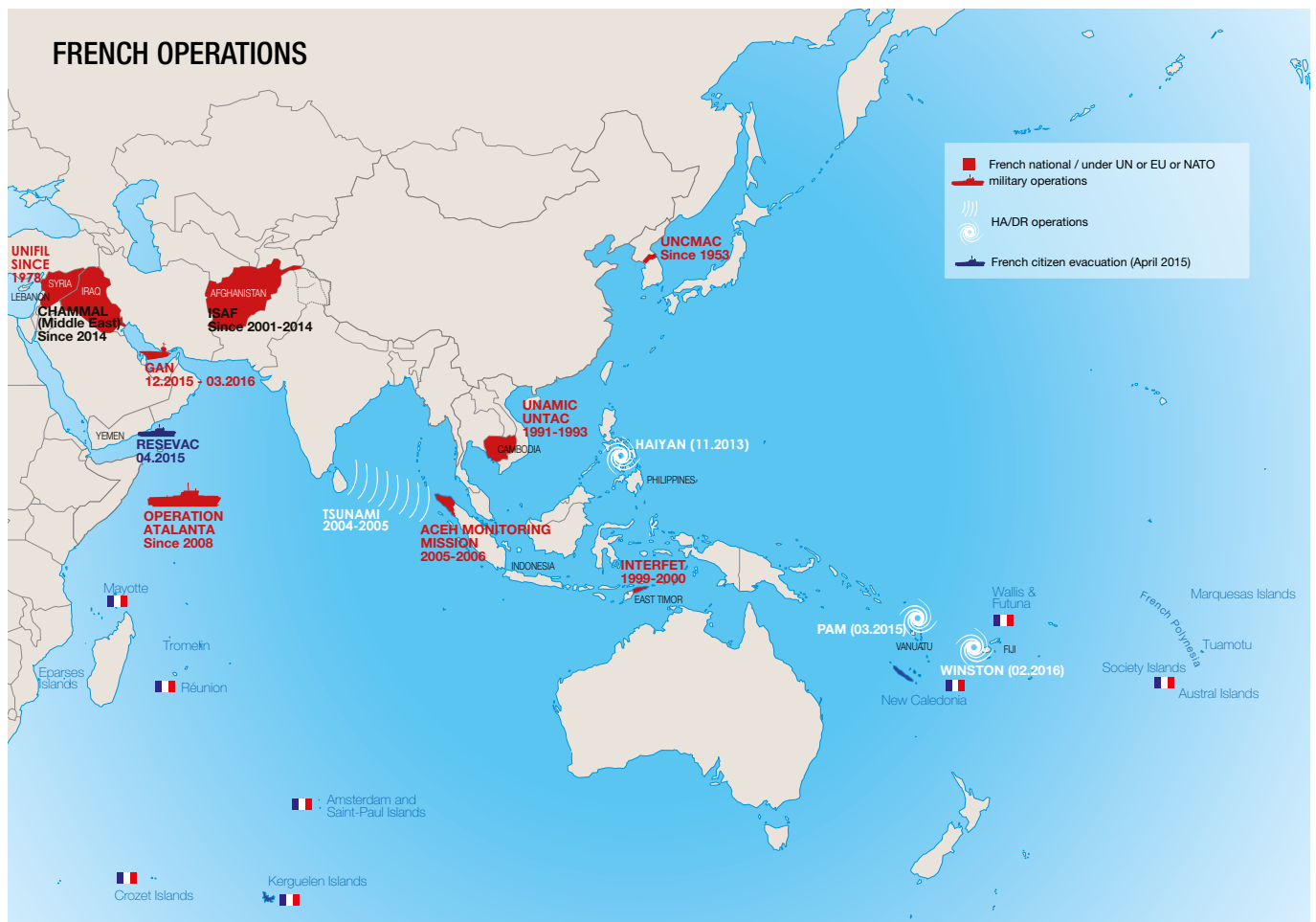
Finally, the development of the strategic backdrop in the Asia-Pacific means that regional tensions in this part of the world have a global impact and also generate a call for European involvement, particularly from France.

4. A serious and lasting commitment

Over the past 25 years, France has shown that its regional defence commitment is serious, lasting and based on clearly identified strategic interests and solid, multifaceted bilateral cooperation. These relations continue to develop for the mutual benefit of France and its partners. France offers them operational experience that's quite exceptional for a medium-sized power, but one that's engaged on every sea in the world, in operations in the Mediterranean, the Middle East, the Sahel, the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Guinea.¹⁷ France's involvement in several theatres of operations raises the profile of its defence cooperation internationally and increases interest in the training available in its military schools (which welcome around a hundred officers from Asia–Pacific countries every year).

France's partners recognise its capacity for independent situational assessment, which contributes to its independent foreign security policy, mostly due to its highly efficient space capabilities. This strategic independence and the vast range of French defence capabilities are all assets recognised by its partners in the Asia–Pacific.

The results of renewed French commitment to the region are significant, but that doesn't mean that France is fully satisfied with the current situation. New bilateral cooperation opportunities open up every year, and France hopes to commit to them within its means and capabilities. Promising cooperation reinforcement opportunities are appearing on the horizon with major regional powers—in particular India, Japan and Australia—as well as with the US, with which regular consultations have been established at high level on the strategic context in the Asia–Pacific.



Source: *France and security in the Asia-Pacific*, French Ministry of Defense, 2016, p.7

France also intends to pursue its commitment within multilateral security forums and has declared an interest in taking part in ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus activities, believing that this structure contributes pragmatically to the development of regional capacities to confront current and future security challenges and that France could provide a useful contribution.

Does France carry weight in the major strategic balance in the Asia–Pacific? The answer to this question is ‘No; not directly.’ But if the question is whether France contributes to regional security and to the development of defence and security capabilities in a large number of countries in the Asia–Pacific, then I believe that the answer is clearly a positive one. France doesn’t overestimate its strategic role in the Indo-Pacific region but considers it to be significant and appropriate and would like it to be better known. Its key defence partners in the region know what France does and appreciate its contribution, even if that can’t be said for the media and academia, despite their major role, by action or omission, in forming perceptions of political actors.

Notes

- 1 Pierre Journoud, ‘La France et l’Asie du Sud-Est, de l’Indochine à l’ASEAN’, in *Etudes de l’IRSEM*, no. 14, 2012.
- 2 Nicolas Regaud, *Le Cambodge dans la tourmente—le troisième conflit indochinois 1978–1991*, L’Harmattan, Paris, 1992.
- 3 Paul Stares, Nicolas Regaud, ‘Europe’s role in Asia–Pacific security’, *Survival*, vol. 39, 1997.
- 4 The number of French residents in the Indian Ocean, mainly in the *départements* of La Réunion and Mayotte, is over 1 million. The population of French residents in New Caledonia, French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna is just over 500,000.
- 5 Alain Richard, ‘European defence and Euro-Asia security relations’, speech delivered by the French Minister of Defense at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Singapore, 24 February 1999.
- 6 Figures provided in reports to the parliament on French arms exports, published every year since 2000. Statistical datasets are available from 1990 onwards. The latest report in English is titled *France and the control of the arms trade 2016*, [online](#).
- 7 The French Armed Forces have 210,000 active service members (excluding civilian personnel), and in 2017 the French Ministry of Defense budget will be approximately US\$45 billion, or 1.77% of GDP. The political objective is to raise it to 2% by 2020.
- 8 For example, Thales Australia employs 3,200 staff, and its revenue exceeds A\$1 billion.
- 9 A total of 11 surface ships, which represent approximately 20,000 tons at full load.
- 10 ‘The Challenges of Conflict Resolution: Jean-Yves Le Drian’, The IISS Shangri-La Dialogue: the Asia Security Summit, 2016, [online](#).
- 11 The Indian Ocean Commission, created in 1984, includes the Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, France/La Réunion and Seychelles.
- 12 The first conference was held in Paris on 14 October 2015, with three international organisations and 34 countries participating, including 12 Asia–Pacific countries: Australia, Canada, Chile, China, the US, France, India, Japan, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Seychelles and Singapore. The proceedings of *International conference “The implications of climate change for Defence” 14 October 2015* are accessible in English [online](#). The second conference was held in Morocco in September 2016.
- 13 For a general overview of the defence positions and actions conducted by France in the Asia–Pacific, see *La France présente sa politique de défense en Asie–Pacifique*, which was updated in June 2016, [online](#).
- 14 Participants included Australia, Canada, Chile, the US, France, Fiji, Japan, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, the UK and Vanuatu.
- 15 *Joint statement of strategic partnership between Australia and France*, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Canberra, 19 January 2012, [online](#).
- 16 Philippe Le Corre, Michael O’Hanlon, ‘France’s pivot to Asia: it’s more than just submarines’, *The National Interest*, 9 May 2016.
- 17 Operation Chammal in Iraq–Syria, as part of the international operation Inherent Resolve (up to 4,050 troops upon deployment of the carrier battlegroup, as was the case in 2016); Operation Barkhane in the Sahel (3,500 troops); contribution to UNIFIL in Lebanon (850); anti-piracy Operation Corymbe in the Gulf of Guinea; contribution to Operation EUNAVFOR Atalanta in the Indian Ocean; and contribution to Operation EUNAVFOR Med Sophia in the Mediterranean.

Acronyms and abbreviations

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASEM	Asia–Europe Meeting
EU	European Union
GDP	gross domestic product
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
UN	United Nations
UK	United Kingdom

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