

Beware of Entrapment: Alliance Politics and French Indo-Pacific Strategy

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Abstract

In 2018, the French Government announced two strategic documents titled “French Strategy in the Indo-Pacific” (La stratégie de la France dans l’Indopacifique) and the “French Defense Strategy in the Indo-Pacific (La Stratégie de Defense Française en Indo-Pacifique). It mainly contained France’s extraterritorial vision of the Indo-Pacific and underlined France

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as the “genuine Indo-Pacific power.” The publication of the strategic document that follows a series of speeches by the French President Macron coincides with the height of the geopolitical contest between China and the United States that defined themselves as the “Indo-Pacific great power” and brought France, previously an outlier in the region and lesser power, as an independent key player within the contest. This situation raised a question on the consideration of France in forming a separate Indo-Pacific narrative and initiative despite its bilateral alliance with the United States and through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). This paper attempts to shed light on France's strategic concerns, including its independent perspective in defining its transcontinental interest in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly in strategic sectors such as economics, defense and security, and maritime development. Consequently, this paper argues that, by looking into the French foreign policy tradition of maintaining its identity of being part of the West while avoiding a total alignment with the United States on foreign policy issues, French endeavors in the Indo-Pacific are designed to give France more independent foreign policy initiatives in the region. From its perspective, France also tries to avoid any enigmatic situation in the Indo-Pacific that might rise along with the upcoming great power competition between the United States and China—that may impact French national interest – by trying to balance its relations with both superpowers while also spreading its influence

**Beware of Entrapment: Alliance Politics and French
Indo-Pacific Strategy**

57

independently to emerging Indo-Pacific countries, most notably India and Indonesia, by leveraging its mature armament industry.

Keywords: Alliance Dilemma, Entrapment, Indo-Pacific, Strategy, France, Alliance Politics

I. Introduction

France has an extensive transcontinental region. Metropolitan France—the core region of France where its national capital, Paris, is located, covers only 88 percent of France’s total area. The remains are called *France d’Outre Mer* or Overseas France, encompassing 13 dependencies and collectivities, four of them located in the Indo-Pacific region.¹ Besides the different stratification of their political status, the French Government considers these overseas regions part of “France sovereignty,” including assigning their inhabitant as citizens of France. Hence, the French Government believes that it has the sovereign right to assert its interest and maintain footprints in the Indo-Pacific, which encompassing various sectors, including defense and security, economics, investments, and the rule of law. This eventually made France one of the significant actors in the region.

The current dynamic of the Indo-Pacific, from the rise of China—both as a political and economic power—to the United States’ reaction by enacting its Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) narrative, mainly became a stimulus for France to re-assess its lukewarmness and sought to be more assertive on its Indo-Pacific regional possession. In 2018, French President Emmanuel Macron

¹ Among 13 regions, 11 of them are inhabited and two of them are uninhabited. Four France’s region in the Indo-Pacific including French Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna, New Caledonia, and Clipperton Island

Beware of Entrapment: Alliance Politics and French Indo-Pacific Strategy

59

delivered speeches in Canberra and Reunion, aiming to re-assert its identity as an “Indo-Pacific power” and affirm France's broader role in the region.² His administration also set out and published a strategic document called *La stratégie de la France dans l'Indo-Pacifique* (French Strategy in the Indo-Pacific) which underlines France's critical strategy to maintain its presence in the area by comprehensive actions, including “to maintain stability and inclusivity, involve further in economic and regional development, and promote effective multilateralism to reduce tensions and encourage cooperation.”³ . The further development of regional alliances and alignments, indicated by the formation of mini-lateral forums such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and AUKUS—in 2020 and 2021,⁴ respectively, further pushed France to underline its “third-way” strategy in independently projecting its geopolitical interest, as both initiatives excluded France from its membership. However, the relations between France and both initiatives' members have

² Eric Frécon. “France's Third Path” for the Indo-Pacific? Credentials and Challenges,” *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 12 (2022).

³ Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères [Ministry of European and Foreign Affairs, “La Stratégie de La France Dans l'Indo-Pacifique [French Strategy in the Indo-Pacific] (Paris: Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, 2019), https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/fr_a4_indopacifique_022022_dcp_v1-10-web_cle017d22.pdf.

⁴ C Raja Mohan and Darshana M Baruah. “Deepening the India-France Maritime Partnership,” Carnegie India, 2018.

generally improved after a short disenchantment regarding Australia's cancellation of submarine procurement.

Although France considers itself a “Western power,” working side-by-side through various strategic forums with the United States and one of the founding members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) under the formal alliance treaty, the country opted for an independent action regarding its interest in the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, the government also considers the Chinese expansion in the Indo-Pacific to be a challenge to its regional interests, as mentioned in various President Macron speeches.⁵ Also, the opinion of French people toward China in the past three years has been worsening. A survey conducted by the French Institute of International Relations (*Institut français des Relations Internationales/IFRI*) in 2020-2021 stated that more than 60 percent of respondents expressed a “negative” tone towards China, accentuating its expansionist policy, dictatorship, and COVID-19 pandemic, and believes that their country should align its foreign policy towards the EU or the United States.⁶ These tendencies should support the closer US-France strategic alliance, especially in handling

⁵ Jérémy Bachelier and Celine Pajon. “France and AUKUS: Bouncing Back to Live Up to Pacific Challenges,” Paris: Institut français des relations internationales, (2022).

⁶ Marc Julienne et al. “French Public Opinion on China in the Age of COVID-19,” Paris: Institut français des relations internationales, (2021), https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/fr_poll_report.pdf.

Beware of Entrapment: Alliance Politics and French Indo-Pacific Strategy

61

common geopolitical interests, but the reality is often different than expected.

From this situation, this journal intended to answer several questions: why is France choosing and implementing its autonomous strategy in the Indo-Pacific, albeit still being one of the strategic allies of the United States? What are the considerations of the French Government underlining to independently define its Indo-Pacific interests rather than buck-pass its regional responsibility to its principal ally? And the broader concern: How is France's perspective of the Indo-Pacific, and how important is the region for France? This research will utilize the alliance formation concept, arguing that France tends to avoid any unnecessary political disarray that might be malignant to its existence by forming an independent Indo-Pacific grand strategy apart from the US-based geopolitical narrative. This research will take into account several aspects, including the historical framework of France's possession in the Indo-Pacific and its independent geopolitical narrative, its relations with the United States regarding their political alliance, and France's Indo-Pacific interests and strategy implementation based on the French Strategy in the Indo-Pacific (*La stratégie de la France dans l'Indopacifique*).

The analysis of France's Indo-Pacific strategy from the perspective of alliance politics and a broader strategic lens remains under-explored. Previous research mainly focuses on

relatively narrow policy implementation, such as France's initiatives to create strategic partnerships with several Indo-Pacific middle powers. The study by Mohan and Baruah specifically mentioned bilateral initiatives to strengthen the strategic partnership between France and India and the "possibility of including like-minded countries," such as expanding naval reach, defense industrial development, and security dialogue.⁷ Although nudging the Indo-Pacific as a common interest of the two countries and pictured India and France as fellow "formidable middle power," the paper generally does not explain France's strategic independence further.

Another research by Bachelier and Pajon underlined the relations between France and AUKUS. This research focuses on the links between France and AUKUS members, especially regarding the rift dynamics between them due to the annulment of the joint submarine project between France and Australia.⁸ Meanwhile, Erice Frecon's work on ISEAS mainly shed light on France's engagement in the Indo-Pacific due to its historical and political footprint in the Indo-Pacific.⁹ Despite these studies comprehensively underlined France's independent Indo-Pacific

⁷ Mohan and Baruah. "Deepening The India-France Maritime Partnership."

⁸ Bachelier and Pajon. "France and AUKUS: Bouncing Back to Live Up to Pacific Challenges."

⁹ Eric Frecon. "'France's Third Path' for the Indo-Pacific? Credentials and Challenges," accessed July 20, 2023,

<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2022-12-frances-third-path-for-the-indo-pacific-credentials-and-challenges-by-eric-frecon/>.

Beware of Entrapment: Alliance Politics and French Indo-Pacific Strategy

63

vision, France's right to assert sovereignty on its Indo-Pacific territorial possession, its position as a "balancing power" between the US and China, and the solid explanation of France's *raison d'être* to create and develop its independent Indo-Pacific strategy remain disregarded.

This research sought to fill the research gap by analyzing the *raison d'être* of France's independent grand strategy of Indo-Pacific from a bigger picture, using the lens of alliance formation and the position of France within the "Western geopolitical sphere" and its relations with NATO as a security alliance it participates. The paper is divided into several essential parts. First, the theoretical framework will underline the alliance theory, focused on how the geopolitical alliance is formed and why certain countries sought to join or take distance from the alliance. Several perspectives are utilized, including Stephen Walt's definition of political alliance and Snyder's explanation of entrapment and why countries tend to avoid it. It will be followed by a profound explanation of France's *raison d'être* on avoiding entrapment that might emerge along with forming the Indo-Pacific alliance from a historical and political context. The next part explains the French Indo-Pacific strategy and how the French Government will implement it as a basis for its autonomous definition of the Indo-Pacific region, including France's views on broadening partnerships with several Indo-Pacific strategic powers.

II. Theoretical Framework: Alliance Theory

Scholars have defined alliances in broad or narrow ways. Stephen Walt defines an alliance as “a formal or informal arrangement for security cooperation between two or more sovereign states.”¹⁰ He used the terms alliance and alignment interchangeably because, although there was no formal treaty, states cooperated and committed to each other. Meanwhile, Glenn Snyder defines alliances as “formal associations of states for the use (or non-use) of military force, intended for either the security or the aggrandizement of their members, against specific other states, whether or not these other are explicitly identified.” According to him, alliances are only the formal subset of alignment.¹¹ Recently, based on Snyder’s definition, Iain Henry argues that “an alliance can be epitomized not by a treaty text but by an ongoing pattern of security cooperation.”¹²

Each definition has its merits and demerits in research on alliances. In the case of France and the US, their relationship fits in into a narrow definition of an alliance. Both countries are parties to the North Atlantic Treaty, the founding treaty of NATO.

¹⁰ Stephen Walt. *The Origins of Alliances*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, (1990): 12.

¹¹ Glenn Snyder. “Alliance Theory: A Neorealist First Cut,” *Journal of International Affairs* 44, no. 1 (1990): 104-5.

¹² Iain Henry. *Reliability and Alliance Interdependence: The United States and Its Allies in Asia, 1949-1969*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, (2022): 14.

Beware of Entrapment: Alliance Politics and French Indo-Pacific Strategy

65

The phenomena of alliance formation and management/politics attract the interest of several scholars. Some of them explain that the structure of the international system and the distribution of power in it affect the formation and management of alliances. Kenneth Waltz explains that the structure of a system, both national and international, conditions the behavior of units inside it. The international system is anarchic, which means no entity organizes states' behavior and their relations with each other. While states function the same, they have different capabilities. In this situation, states continuously worry about their survival and the relative gain from cooperation because there is uncertainty about the intentions and actions of others.¹³ They attempt to create or maintain the balance of power against the strongest state by internal balancing, increasing their economic and military capability and developing strategies, and external balancing, allying with other states or enticing states from the opposing alliance to defect.¹⁴ However, some states do not have the resources to face any potential opponent, so the only way to increase their security is by pooling their military capability with other states.

Walt recognizes that there are anomalies in alliance formation that the balance of power theory could not explain. Some alliances grow larger and stronger over time, often

¹³ Kenneth Waltz. *Theory of International Politics*, Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, (1979): 104-7.

¹⁴ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 118.

surpassing their opponents. He then argued that states form alliances as a response to the threats they perceive rather than the power of others.¹⁵ The level of threat that states pose to others will depend on their aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive power, and aggressive intentions.¹⁶ However, states will form alliances against the most threatening state only if they can achieve a balance of power and allies are available.¹⁷ Existing alliances will collapse because of two changes. One of them is a significant shift in the level of threat that alliance members face as a result of a change in the balance of power, a change of beliefs about other states' intentions, or there are other means to achieve security.¹⁸ The other is doubt about whether the alliance can guarantee the security of its members either due to the lack of capabilities to deter and defeat opponents or whether allies assist.¹⁹

Snyder is also a scholar who explained that the international system's structure influences the formation of alliances and intra-alliance politics. Anarchy creates such insecurity for states that they increase their power relative to each other. States can achieve security by increasing military strength, but some countries formed alliances because they were unsatisfied with

¹⁵ Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, ix-x.

¹⁶ Walt, *The Origins of Alliance*, 22.

¹⁷ Walt, *The Origins of Alliance*, 29-31.

¹⁸ Stephen Walt. "Why Alliances Endure or Collapse," *Survival* 39, no. 1 (1997): 158-59.

¹⁹ Walt, "Why Alliances Endure or Collapse," 160.

Beware of Entrapment: Alliance Politics and French Indo-Pacific Strategy

67

moderate security. In addition, countries form alliances to avoid isolation or prevent other countries from allying with them. Forming alliances involves a bargaining process in which countries compete for the most net benefit the alliance can offer. Each country has two main goals in the bargain: to become the most powerful party in the alliance and maximize their share of net benefit from the alliance.²⁰ Conflicts and commonalities of interests among potential allies also influenced bargaining in forming alliances. Commonalities of interest increase the value of an alliance, whereas conflicts of interest decrease it because compromises must be made for the alliance to be formed.²¹ More comprehensively, Snyder explained that the benefits and costs (value) of an alliance would be influenced by the needs of countries for the alliance, the extent to which potential partners meet those needs, and the provisions in the agreement underlying the alliance.²²

Once countries form alliances, their security concerns shift to commitments to support partners and how much support is given to partners in conflict with adversaries. One of the concerns of countries in the alliance is abandoned by allies (abandonment), either in the form of allies switching to opposing parties, allies leaving alliances, allies failing to show commitment, or allies

²⁰ Glenn Snyder. "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics," *World Politics* 36, no. 4 (1984): 462-63.

²¹ Snyder, "The Security Dilemma," 465.

²² Snyder, "Alliance Theory," 110.

failing to provide support when needed. Another concern is that allies are involved in a conflict where they have different interests (entrapment). These two dilemmas are interconnected because a strong commitment and support to an ally can reduce the risk of abandonment but make the ally more emboldened in conflict with the adversary, thus increasing the likelihood of entrapment. Meanwhile, weak commitment and support to allies reduce the likelihood of engaging in unwanted conflicts. However, this increases the risk of being abandoned by allies because loyalties in the alliance become questionable.²³

Intra-alliance politics or alliance management, like forming alliances, involves states calculating benefits and costs. Snyder explained that the cost of abandonment depends on a country's dependence on the alliance concerning its conflict with the adversary. Meanwhile, the cost of entrapment depended on the extent to which allies shared interests. Countries seek to reduce both risks and costs to maximize an alliance's benefits. The country with the lowest dependence on the alliance will have more bargaining power than its partners. In this case, it does not need to adapt its policies to the wishes of its allies and can even tolerate the risk of the dissolution of the alliance.²⁴ Snyder's theory of alliances can be used to understand French behavior in its alliance with the US. Both countries have different interests, and France tries to reduce the risk of entrapment. Those lead to

²³ Snyder, "The Security Dilemma," 466-67.

²⁴ Snyder, "Alliance Theory," 113-14.

Beware of Entrapment: Alliance Politics and French Indo-Pacific Strategy

69

the two countries' relatively different foreign policies in the Indo-Pacific and toward China.

III. French Indo-Pacific Policy: Avoiding Entrapment

A. *Politique de Grandeur*: Introduction and Brief History

The current French policy in the Indo-Pacific could be traced all the way to the presidency of Charles de Gaulle, the French national hero who served as the President of France from 1959 until 1969. Named *politique de grandeur*,²⁵ it is designed to ensure the considerable influence of France akin to that of a world superpower during the colonial era. In the past, French's superpower was buttressed by the fact that it was a colonial power by having colonies in Africa (most notably Algeria) to Indochina (Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos).

However, after the advent of decolonization, the humiliating French defeat in Dien Bien Phu, and the long-running colonial war in Algeria, France lost its colonies one by one. De Gaulle realized that France would need a new source of power to maintain its status as a major power in its own right, with the ability to independently carry out its foreign policy that suits its interests instead of depending on and following the US and

²⁵ It is difficult to translate "*politique de grandeur*" into English that could accurately reflect its true meaning. Its rough translation could be those of "greatness policy." Due to this difficulty, this paper would only use the original French term

NATO lead all the time. In the words of de Gaulle, one of the problems facing France is France's foreign policy "[i]n the Western world to which we belong, *without having to confine ourselves to it*, to take our proper place, to take an action that is our own, to serve peace and security simultaneously [emphasis added]." ²⁶

This does not mean that France would abandon NATO and one of its longest-standing ally, the United States. On the contrary, France remains in NATO and remains one of the US longest-standing allies. Consequently, the French foreign policy is those of hedging: even though France will stay in the West and consider itself part of the West, it would not mindlessly follow the US and NATO (in de Gaulle's words, "Anglo-Saxon hegemony"). Consequently, France strives to have the best of both worlds: a place as a member of the collective West and maintaining great autonomy in foreign affairs as wide as possible.

The following three events are the clearest manifestation of France's *politique de grandeur*: its quest to become the world's fourth state with nuclear weapons, its withdrawal from the NATO

²⁶ Charles de Gaulle. "Allocution Prononcee Par Le General de Gaulle à La Radio-Television Francaise [Speech by General de Gaulle in French Radio and Television]," Gaumont Pathe Archives (Gaumont Pathe Archives, June 13, 1958), https://gparchives.com/media/doc_acc/0312/5825GJ_00001_ds.PDF. The exact quotation is «...*Dans le monde occidental auquel nous appartenons, sans devoir nous y confiner, prendre une place qui nous soit propre, mener une action qui soit notre action, en vue de servir à la fois la paix et la sécurité.*»

Beware of Entrapment: Alliance Politics and French Indo-Pacific Strategy

71

unified command, and its opposition to the Iraq war. These events will be described and analyzed in detail to give a concrete example of France's *politique de grandeur*.

The biggest public demonstration of France's *politique de grandeur* would be France's usage of its nuclear weapons. At first, having its own separate nuclear deterrent makes little sense. France is a member of NATO and is, therefore, protected by US and UK nuclear umbrella through NATO's infamous Article 5, which considers an attack on one member as an attack against all members of the alliance. In other words, guaranteeing France's security would have been enough without possessing an independent nuclear deterrent. Indeed, France's nuclear program was initially conducted without a proper strategy and that "... technological means were driving the strategic ends..."²⁷ However, over time, the nuclear program and procurement were used as a means to secure France's foreign policy independence. In a speech before the French military school (*École-Militaire*), President de Gaulle declared that:

France's defense needs to be French... A country like France, when it is time for her to go to war, the war must be a French war. France's effort must be a French effort. Otherwise, our country would

²⁷ Benoît Pelopidas and Sébastien Philippe. "Unfit for Purpose: Reassessing the Development and Deployment of French Nuclear Weapons (1956–1974)," *Cold War History* 21, no. 3 (2020): 3-4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2020.1832472>.

*be in contradiction with everything since its beginning, with its role, with its capabilities, with its soul. Naturally, French defense would be carried out in collaboration with others. It is the nature of things. However, it is necessary that France defend itself, for itself, and in its own way.*²⁸

The only way for France to secure its autonomy is to have a nuclear deterrent independent of those of the UK and the US. De Gaulle links the idea of a French nuclear deterrent as an absolute necessity for France to maximize the independence of its foreign policy decision.²⁹ To realize this desire, de Gaulle supercharged France's nuclear program and successfully tested a nuclear bomb in the Algerian desert on 13 February 1960.³⁰

²⁸ Charles de Gaulle, quoted in Lucien Poirier. *Des Strategies Nucleaires* [Nuclear Strategies], Paris: Editions Complexe, (1988): 294-95. The exact quotation is «*Il faut que la defense de la France soit Française... Un pays comme la France, s'il lui arrive de faire la guerre, il faut que ce soit sa guerre. Il faut que son effort soit son effort. S'il en était autrement, notre pays serait en contradiction avec tout ce qu'il est depuis ses origines, avec son role, avec l'estime qu'il a de lui-même, avec son âme. Naturellement, la defense française serait, le cas échéant, conjugée avec celle d'autres pays. Cela est dans la nature des choses. Mais, il est dispensable qu'elle nous soit propre, que la France sa defense par elle-même, pour elle-même, et à sa façon* »

²⁹ André Passeron. "Une Constante de La Politique Du Général de Gaulle : Doter La France Des Moyens d'Assurer Sa Sécurité [A Constant Theme in the Policies of General de Gaulle: Providing France with the means to assure its security]," *Le Monde diplomatique*, December 1, 1964, <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/1964/12/PASSERON/26344>.

³⁰ Poirier, *Des Strategies Nucleaires*, 295

Beware of Entrapment: Alliance Politics and French Indo-Pacific Strategy

73

The successful French nuclear program also allowed France to take another step in implementing the *politique de grandeur*: withdrawing from the NATO unified command. An independent nuclear deterrent is necessary as one of the main reasons to depend on NATO was the American and British nuclear umbrella that protects Europe through NATO's Article 5. After several tests to ensure the reliability of the French nuclear deterrent, de Gaulle wrote a letter to the President of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson, on March 7, 1966, announcing France's withdrawal from the NATO unified command. However, it would remain a member of the alliance.³¹ In the letter, de Gaulle justified the withdrawal on the basis that France needed to exercise sovereignty over the whole of its territory, and this exercise of sovereignty was constrained by the presence of foreign troops on French soil.³² De Gaulle had other reasons, such as reforming the NATO alliance. However, the dominating motive was the need to exercise France's autonomy to its fullest.³³ France would not rejoin NATO's unified command until 2009.

³¹ Poirier, *Des Strategies Nucleaires*, 297

³² Thomas Wieder. "1966 : La France Tourne Le Dos à L'OTAN [France Turns its Back on NATO]," *Le Monde*, March 10, 2009, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2009/03/10/1966-la-france-tourne-le-dos-a-l-otan_1165992_3210.html.

³³ Dominique Vidal. "Ce Que Voulait de Gaulle En Quittant L'OTAN [This is What de Gaulle Wants in Quitting NATO]," *Le Monde diplomatique*, April 1, 2008, <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2008/04/VIDAL/15800>. The title, we must argue, is an inaccurate representation of the event as France never left NATO completely, only its unified command structure.

Moving closer to the present day, one can also see France's *politique de grandeur* in action in the lead-up to the Iraq War in 2003. The United States, believing that Iraq had Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), sought its allies' commitment and international legitimacy to fight against Iraq, including France. France's acquiescence was also vital in another way: it is a permanent member of the UN Security Council with the power to block any resolution. Consequently, the United States needed, at least, a French abstention to pass a resolution granting legitimacy to its war in Iraq.³⁴ Due to its policy of cultivating friendly relations with countries in the Middle East and the minuscule French interests in going to war against Iraq, President Jacques Chirac announced on national television on March 10, 2003, that it opposed the US-led invasion of Iraq.³⁵

However, the *politique de grandeur* is not universally welcomed across Europe. In particular, Eastern European countries often conflict with France over France's efforts to cultivate a more independent Europe free from the clutches of the United States. Zięba, in particular, offers an illustration and analysis of Franco-Polish relations, which the author described as

³⁴ Assuming, of course, that the other 3, most notably China and Russia, also abstained, at least, and the resolution had a majority vote from the ten non-permanent members.

³⁵ Henri Vernet, Christophe Bourdoiseau, and Marion L'Hour. "Jacques Chirac, l'Homme Qui a Dit Non à La Guerre En Irak [Jacques Chirac: The Man Who Said 'No' to the War in Iraq]," *Le Parisien*, September 26, 2019, <https://www.leparisien.fr/politique/jacques-chirac-l-homme-qui-a-dit-non-a-la-guerre-en-irak-26-09-2019-8160591.php>.

Beware of Entrapment: Alliance Politics and French Indo-Pacific Strategy

75

“meandering, changeable and even complicated.”³⁶ This is due to the different perceptions of maintaining their security in Eastern European capitals and Paris (i.e., different threat perceptions). The former, after gaining its true independence in 1991, believes that its security and independence could only be secured by joining NATO and having US military protection, and (particularly for the Baltic states) France’s strategic autonomy could come at the risk of the Euro-Atlantic alliance.³⁷ This is due to the perception in Eastern European capitals that Europe’s most significant threat would come from Russia. France, however, saw things differently. After the collapse of the Berlin Wall, France believed that Europe’s threats would come from Africa and the Middle East and was not initially very enthusiastic about expanding NATO to the East.³⁸

To conclude this subpart, the *politique de grandeur* is a policy that prioritizes French independence in its foreign and defense policy and is independent of the US and the UK for its protection. Free from the US’ constraints, France has considerable freedom in determining its foreign policy goals and strategies.

³⁶ Ryszard Zięba. “France–Poland Security Relations,” *French Politics* 20, no. 1, (2021): 71–94, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41253-021-00161-x>.

³⁷ Marie Robin. “La Perception de La France Par Les Pays Baltes : Quels Obstacles Pour Parvenir à Un Rapprochement Sécuritaire ? [Perception of France by the Baltic States: What Obstacles to Achieving Security Rapprochement],” *Le Rubicon*, July 11, 2023, <https://lerubicon.org/la-perception-de-la-france-par-les-pays-baltes-quels-obstacles-pour-parvenir-a-un-rapprochement-securitaire/>.

³⁸ Zięba, “France–Poland Security Relations”

The French nuclear program, the withdrawal of France from NATO's unified command, and its opposition to the Iraq War could be traced to the decade-long presidency of General de Gaulle in the 1960s. However, as the previous paragraph has demonstrated, France's quest for a more independent Europe is not universally shared, especially in Eastern Europe. The next subpart would discuss French interests in the Indo-Pacific region to determine the basis of French foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific.

B. France's Interests in the Indo-Pacific

In much literature on world history, France is almost always considered a solely European power, and for good reason. The significant historical events that shaped France happened in Europe: the French Revolution, the Napoleonic wars, Franco-German War, World War I, and World War II to the Cold War. All of the things that are associated with France – the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, the Paris Notre-Dame Cathedral, Arc de Triomphe, Champs-Élysée, and many others – are located in Metropolitan France (or, in casual French, *l'hexagone*). Indeed, when one thinks about France, one would normally associate their thoughts with Metropolitan France.

Such characterization, however, overlooks that France's territory is not only comprised of the territory in the European continent but also overseas France (*outre-mer*), a collection of far-flung French territories spread across the globe. Thanks to

Beware of Entrapment: Alliance Politics and French Indo-Pacific Strategy

77

these far-flung territories, France is the only member of the European Union to have territories in the Indo-Pacific.

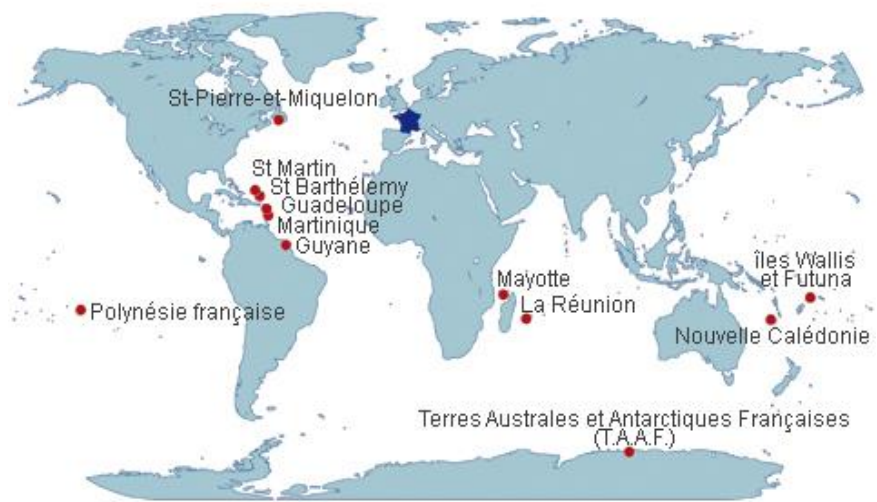


Figure 1: Map of Metropolitan France and Overseas France.

Source: Réunionnais du Monde

Therefore, France's overriding interest in the Indo-Pacific is the maintenance of its sovereignty and territorial integrity over its territories in the Indo-Pacific (Mayotte, Reunion, New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, and Clipperton Island). Therefore, France has a direct high political interest in maintaining the survival of its nation in the Indo-Pacific. No wonder that, in the French Indo-Pacific Strategy and the French Defense Strategy in the Indo-Pacific, defending French sovereignty and territorial integrity ranks first in France's objectives in being involved in the

region.³⁹ Thanks to international maritime law under the UN Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS), the small archipelagos that made up the French Indo-Pacific territories also attribute France to the world's largest economic zone and 93% of the French Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is located in the Indo-Pacific region, thanks to the archipelagic waters of France's Indo-Pacific territories.⁴⁰ In this regard, France has more legitimacy to be more militarily and politically involved in the Indo-Pacific than any other member of the EU.

In recent years, the French government has exploited the status as the only EU member to have territories in the Indo-Pacific as a basis for a new construction of French foreign policy. From now, France would have an identity as a European power *and* an Indo-Pacific power. In a speech in Montevideo on France's maritime policy on December 3, 2019, French President Emmanuel Macron declared that "this maritime union gives France the status of a global partner, a European power, and also

³⁹ Ministère des Armées [Ministry of the Armed Forces]. "La Stratégie de Défense Française En Indopacifique [French Defense Strategy in the Indo-Pacific]" Paris: Ministère des Armées (2019), <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/dgris/enjeux-regionaux/strategie-francaise-indopacifique>.; Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, "La Stratégie de La France Dans l'Indo-Pacifique"

⁴⁰ Bruno Sat. "L'Indo-Pacifique Rapproche Inéluctablement France et Australie Grâce Notamment à l'Outre-Mer [Indo-Pacific Inevitably Brings France and Australia Together Thanks to the French Overseas Territories]," *Outre-mer la 1ère*, February 22, 2019,

<https://la1ere.francetvinfo.fr/indo-pacifique-rapproche-ineluctablement-france-australie-grace-notamment-outre-mer-682995.html>.

Beware of Entrapment: Alliance Politics and French Indo-Pacific Strategy

79

an Indo-Pacific power...”⁴¹ One could argue that such a reorientation could be made to offset France’s relative decline of influence in Europe. A reorientation to the Indo-Pacific region offer France an opportunity to reaffirm its role as a European major power⁴² as France would have more disposition to lead European political, economic, or military forays into the Indo-Pacific region.

The second reason for French’s forays into the Indo-Pacific region would be economic. The Indo-Pacific region is increasingly becoming the center of the world supply chain with newly-emerging economies such as China, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, and others. Due to the rising purchasing power of Indo-Pacific residents, many European, including French companies, have an interest in investing in the region. French trade with member states of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) totaled 264 billion euros, representing a

⁴¹ Emmanuel Macron. “Déclaration de M. Emmanuel Macron, Président de La République, Sur La Politique de La Mer, à Montpellier Le 3 Décembre 2019 [Declaration by Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic, on Maritime Policy in Montpellier on 3 December 2019],” Vie-publique.fr, 2023, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/272249-emmanuel-macron-03122019-politique-de-la-mer>. The exact quotation is: «*Ce trait d’union maritime fait de la France un partenaire mondial, puissance européenne autant que puissance indopacifique...*»

⁴² Paco Milhiet. *Géopolitique de l’Indo-Pacifique: Enjeux Internationaux, Perspectives Français [Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific: International Challenges, French Perspectives]*, Paris: Le Cavalier Bleu, (2022): 81.

quarter of all France's overseas trade.⁴³ Additionally, French Foreign Direct Investment in the Indo-Pacific region totaled 108 billion euros as of early 2023⁴⁴, and French investment in China makes up a majority of Chinese investment in the region.⁴⁵

However, the true extent of the interlinkages between France and the Indo-Pacific lay beyond those numbers. Those numbers only include trade conducted directly between France and China, and it does not consider when a component is shipped from the Indo-Pacific to a third country to be assembled before being exported to Europe and France. These interlinkages would make the degree of interdependence between France and Asia higher than the numbers suggest. One must also remember that France is

⁴³ Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères [Ministry of European and Foreign Affairs]. "Coopérations Dans Le Domaine Économique [Cooperation in the Economic Domain]," Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, accessed July 4, 2023, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/strategies-regionales/indopacifique/la-france-en-action-dans-l-indopacifique/article/cooperations-dans-le-domaine-economique#:~:text=Les%20C3%A9changes%20commerciaux%20entre%20la>.

⁴⁴ Cedric Perrin et al. "La Stratégie Française Pour l'Indopacifique : Des Ambitions à La Réalité [the French Strategy for the Indo-Pacific: From Ambitions to Reality]," Sénat, April 7, 2023, https://www.senat.fr/rap/r22-285/r22-285_mono.html.

⁴⁵ Ministère de l'Économie, des Finances et de la Souveraineté industrielle et numérique de la France [Ministry of Finance, Industry, and Industrial and Digital Sovereignty of France]. "Échanges Bilatéraux Entre La France et La Chine [Bilateral Exchanges between France and China]," Ministère de l'Économie, des Finances et de la Souveraineté industrielle et numérique de la France, March 22, 2023, <https://www.tresor.economie.gouv.fr/Pays/CN/echanges-bilateraux-entre-la-france-et-la-chine#:~:text=D>.

Beware of Entrapment: Alliance Politics and French Indo-Pacific Strategy

81

part of the Schengen Area, where goods, people, and money can move freely between its members without a customs check or even a visible border. In this regard, a product can be exported from, say, Vietnam to Poland before being re-exported to France. Consequently, given the great interlinkages of the global supply chain, Europe's interest in the Indo-Pacific region is way higher than the numbers suggest.

One material, in particular, is essential for France's – and Europe's – economic well-being: semiconductors. More than 60% of the world's semiconductors are manufactured by the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) in Taiwan.⁴⁶ Additionally, nearly all of the world's most advanced chips are made by TSMC.⁴⁷ However, China claimed Taiwan as part of its sovereign territory and will not hesitate to use force if it ever declares its independence. If China ever invades Taiwan, the world's electronic supply chain will grind to a halt, given the centrality of semiconductors in electronic devices. The shortage of semiconductors during the COVID-19 pandemic has forced

⁴⁶ Etienne Meyer-Vacherand. "TSMC, Ces Puces Qui Font Tourner Le Monde [TSMC, the Chips That Makes the World Turn]," *Le Temps*, June 11, 2023, <https://www.letemps.ch/economie/tsmc-ces-puces-qui-font-tourner-le-monde>.

⁴⁷ Kevin Coldiron. "The World's Most Important Product and the Only Two Companies That Can Make It," *Forbes*, December 15, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kevincoldiron/2022/12/15/the-worlds-most-important-product-and-the-only-two-companies-that-can-make-it/?sh=48d1b5255824>.

many France companies, such as Renault, to review their production line.⁴⁸

To mitigate this issue, the French government has tried to wean itself off its dependence on Asian-made semiconductors. In June 2023, the French Government officially opened a semiconductor mega-factory in Grenoble to double French semiconductor production by 2028.⁴⁹ However, it is far from certain that France's efforts to increase its semiconductor independence would pay off. For one, assuming that the project is successful, it would take at least a few years for France to wean itself off its dependence on TSMC. For another, the research and development of semiconductors is subject to "Moore's Law" which stipulates that the capacity of semiconductors would double every two years.⁵⁰ It would take a herculean financial effort on the part of France to sustain and finance research to

⁴⁸ Forbes France. "Crise Des Semi-Conducteurs : Pénurie et Recherche de Souveraineté Technologique [Semiconductor Crisis: Shortage and Research for Technological Sovereignty]," Forbes France, October 16, 2022, <https://www.forbes.fr/technologie/crise-des-semi-conducteurs-penurie-et-recherche-de-souverainete-technologique/>.

⁴⁹ Ministre de l'Économie, des Finances et de la Souveraineté industrielle et numérique de la France [Ministry of Finance, Industry, and Industrial and Digital Sovereignty of France]. "La Méga-Usine de Semi-Conducteurs a Officiellement Commencé Sa Production [Semi-Conductor Mega-Factory Has Officially Begun Its Production]," Ministre de l'Économie, des Finances et de la Souveraineté industrielle et numérique de la France, June 5, 2023, <https://www.entreprises.gouv.fr/fr/actualites/france-2030/la-mega-usine-de-semi-conducteurs-officiellement-commence-production>.

⁵⁰ Christopher Miller. *Chip War: The Fight for the World's Most Critical Technology*, New York: Simon & Schuster, (2022): xix.

Beware of Entrapment: Alliance Politics and French Indo-Pacific Strategy

83

engineer ever-more powerful chips every several years to provide an alternative to TSMC for French companies. Consequently, for the medium-term, France would still depend on the TSMC for semiconductors and, as an extension, peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. France's position on Taiwan would be discussed in greater detail in the upcoming subpart.

To conclude this subpart, France's vital interests in the Indo-Pacific are defending its sovereignty and ensuring economic stability. We recognize that there are other interests, such as protecting and promoting human rights and protecting the environment. However, we consider these interests to be trivial as they do not pose a direct threat to France's security and stability.

C. French Indo-Pacific Endeavors**D. The French Indo-Pacific Strategy**

In 2018, the French Foreign Ministry officially launched its Indo-Pacific strategy, a set of guidelines that would serve as the basis for French economic, political, and social engagements in the Indo-Pacific region (henceforth referred to as the Indo-Pacific Strategy). It is the first Indo-Pacific strategy published by a European country. This was followed by the publication of the French Defense Strategy in the Indo-Pacific region by the Ministry of the Armed Forces in the following year (henceforth referred to as the Indo-Pacific Defense Strategy).

According to the Indo-Pacific strategy, France's goals in the region rest on four pillars: defense and security; economy, connectivity, research, and innovation; multilateralism and the rule of law; and climate change, biodiversity, and sustainable maritime management.⁵¹ As already mentioned, the first of these pillars deals directly with upholding French sovereignty over the French Indo-Pacific territories. The second one, economy, refers to promoting economic cooperation and reducing economic dependency on any Indo-Pacific country. The Third one, multilateralism and the rule of law, refers to the French way of doing business in the region: multilateralism and upholding international law in the region, particularly UNCLOS. The last one focuses on the efforts to help energy transition and stem the rate of climate change, threatening the survival of countries and territories in Oceania, including France.

It is also enlightening to see the French conception of the Indo-Pacific region. The US conception of the Indo-Pacific region does not include the western part of the Indian Ocean. In this regard, the US is more focused on including India, the country, into the broader geopolitical game in the Asia-Pacific.⁵² However, the French conception of the Indo-Pacific region is way more

⁵¹ Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères. "La Stratégie de La France Dans l'Indo-Pacifique"

⁵² The White House. "Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States," Washington DC: The White House, (2022): 1,

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.

**Beware of Entrapment: Alliance Politics and French
Indo-Pacific Strategy**

85

extensive than the US as it also considers the countries in East Africa as part of the Indo-Pacific region. In this regard, the French version of the Indo-Pacific region is concerned about including the Indian Ocean. At the same time, the US conception is more concerned about bringing India into the geopolitical game in South and Southeast Asia, as well as Oceania. Such a wide geographical conception of the Indo-Pacific region would also include the French territories of Mayotte and Réunion in the western part of the Indian Ocean.



Figure 2: Side-by-side comparison of the French Conception of the Indo-Pacific (left) Next to the US Conception of the

Beware of Entrapment: Alliance Politics and French Indo-Pacific Strategy

87

Indo-Pacific (right) on the cover page of both countries' Indo-Pacific Strategy. Source: Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères (left) and The White House (right)

The Indo-Pacific Strategy also lays out the role that France would like to play in the region. President Macron explicitly stated that France would be a 'stabilizing power' (*puissance stabilisatrice*). In his own words: "...France wants to be a stabilising power, that brings the values of freedom and rule of law."⁵³ In this regard, France would like to offer itself as a 'third way' for neutral Indo-Pacific countries in East, South, and Southeast Asia. However, French officials also use the term *puissance d'équilibre*⁵⁴ in speeches and public declarations to characterize its role in the Indo-Pacific.⁵⁵ Additionally, in the

⁵³ Emmanuel Macron, quoted in Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, "La Stratégie de La France Dans l'Indo-Pacifique," 3. The exact quotation is: «*la France veut également être une puissance stabilisatrice, qui porte les valeurs de liberté et de respect du droit*»

⁵⁴ It is quite difficult to translate that term into English that accurately reflects its meaning in French. Its literal translation would be 'balancing power,' which is more similar to the realist conception of a balancer in the balance of power. See Antoine Bondaz, "Reconceptualiser La Politique Étrangère et de Sécurité Française En Indo-Pacifique [Reconceptualizing the French Foreign and Security Policy in the Indo-Pacific]," La Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, 2023, <https://www.frstrategie.org/publications/notes/reconceptualiser-politique-etrangere-securite-francaise-indo-pacifique-2023>.

⁵⁵ See, for example, Elysée. "Discours Du Président de La République à La Conférence Des Ambassadeurs [Speech by the President of the Republic at the Conference of Ambassadors]," Élysée, August 27, 2019, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2019/08/27/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-a-la-conference-des-ambassadeurs-1>.

competition between the US and China, France would like to present itself as an alternate choice for neutral Southeast Asian countries to avoid overtly choosing between the US and China. For them, France presents itself as a good choice as it is a NATO member (hence its weapons would more or less be interoperable with those of another NATO member) and politically safe as it does not always follow the United States come what may. This could also benefit France economically, given that its defense industries would receive more orders from Indo-Pacific countries.

To present itself as a ‘third choice’ and a “stabilizing power” in the Indo-Pacific region for neutral Southeast Asian countries, the Indo-Pacific Strategy overtly portrays the region as the battleground for the great power competition between the US and China.

The Indo-Pacific today is the theatre of profound strategic evolutions. The increasing power and territorial revendications of China, expressed in more asserted ways, the intensification of the Sino-American competition, the tensions in the Sino-Indian border, in the Taiwan Strait, and the Korean Peninsula have modified the regional balance

Beware of Entrapment: Alliance Politics and French Indo-Pacific Strategy

89

*and rendered strategic equations more complex.*⁵⁶

Given such characterization, the Indo-Pacific strategy lays out France's preferred way to engage with countries in the region in the middle of the great power competition. In this case, France is not looking to become the United States' 'deputy sheriff,' but as an independent Western entity following its own interests.

Consequently, it could be argued that the French Indo-Pacific Strategy is a masterpiece of French hedge between the US and China to present itself more favorable to neutral Indo-Pacific countries for its own benefit and to defend its insular territories in the Indo-Pacific region. It is designed to be complementary to the US' Indo-Pacific strategy as it shares the same objectives that the US wants to uphold in the Indo-Pacific region:⁵⁷ the rule of law, especially maritime law, and the upholding of UNCLOS, and regional stability, particularly in the South and East China Seas as well as the Taiwan Strait. Therefore, France is not alienating or extricating itself from the US in the region. However, contrary to

⁵⁶ Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères. "La Stratégie de La France Dans l'Indo-Pacifique," 3. The exact quotation is «*L'Indopacifique est aujourd'hui le théâtre de profondes évolutions stratégiques. La montée en puissance et les revendications territoriales de la Chine, exprimées de façon chaque fois plus appuyée, l'intensification de la compétition sino-américaine, les tensions à la frontière sino-indienne, dans le détroit de Taïwan et dans la péninsule coréenne, modifient les équilibres régionaux et rendent l'équation stratégique plus complexe.*»

⁵⁷ Milhiet, *Géopolitique de l'Indo-Pacifique*, 81

the US Indo-Pacific region, France does not provocatively single out China as the ‘enemy’ in the region in the same way as in the US’ Indo-Pacific Strategy,⁵⁸ as France underlines engagement and multilateralism with the region.

France, therefore, has its own strategy to have an independent ‘map’ to navigate the turbulent Indo-Pacific region. It does not want to follow the US’ lead blindly come what may. To be more explicit, it does not want to follow the US into a hypothetical war with China if French interests are not at stake. If French goes to war against China to blindly follow the US’ lead when its own interests are not at stake, it would undermine its interests in the region. Therefore, to avoid this, France needs its own strategy that gives itself a “path” to protecting and achieving its interests in the region in the middle of the great power competition.

In conclusion, the French Indo-Pacific lays out what France *intends* to do and *how* it intends to do them. Based on characterizing the Indo-Pacific region as the center of the US-China competition, France would like to present itself as a “third way” for neutral South, East, and Southeast Asian countries. The next subpart would analyze what France *has done* and argue that it endeavors to avoid being entrapped in an alliance with the United States.

⁵⁸ For example, see The White House, “Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States,” 5

Beware of Entrapment: Alliance Politics and French Indo-Pacific Strategy

91

E. Reality Check

In conducting its foreign affairs with countries in the Indo-Pacific region, France has repeatedly ensured that the endeavors are based upon careful considerations of its national interests and not blindly following the US lead. Consequently, it has tried to build an image of independence, neutrality, and as a ‘third way’ between the United States and China by, among other things, cultivating its own defense partnerships independent of the US and NATO, notably with India and Indonesia, and is willing to disregard the US’ leads when following them is not in French national interests. Above all, its endeavors are consistent with its Indo-Pacific strategy.

In the former, French attempts to cultivate its independent partnerships with countries in the region, most notably with India and Indonesia, mostly focused on defense matters. This is helped by, among other things, the relatively advanced French armament industry, especially in aerospace and sea, and the image of France as a neutral party in the region (a NATO member while not actually a US blind follower) also helps. In 2015, India announced that it would be acquiring 36 French Rafale fighter jets.⁵⁹ Additionally, the Indian Prime Minister was invited as a guest of honor to attend

⁵⁹ Le Journal du Dimanche. “L’Inde Commande 36 Rafale à La France [India Ordered 36 Rafale to France],” Le Journal du Dimanche, April 10, 2015, <https://www.lejdd.fr/International/L-Inde-commande-36-Rafale-a-la-France-727286>.

the Bastille Day parade, where it was rumored that India would purchase a further 26 Rafale and 6 Scorpene submarines.⁶⁰ This will have an immediate economic benefit for France as its factories will generate jobs and economic growth for the French economy by fulfilling the armament orders.

This kind of defense cooperation between France and India would help concretize the relationship between India and France. This is especially important for France, given India's status as an emerging major power and a major Indo-Pacific power in its own right. Furthermore, France has another reason to form a strong partnership with India: its major role in the Indian Ocean, where two French territories are located. Consequently, it would be in the interest of France to maintain a strong partnership with India to independently safeguard its national interests in maintaining its sovereignty. If, for example, France chose to approach India through the United States, NATO, or the United Kingdom, then France's room for maneuver would be limited as France would have to coordinate its actions with the third party. The other party may not consider France's interests with India (such as reducing the rate of climate change to prevent the sinking of its insular island territories) as a great concern. For India, the relationship with

⁶⁰ Pascal Samama. "Rafale, Sous-Marins: Un Méga Contrat Avec l'Inde Pointe à l'Horizon Du 14 Juillet [Rafale, Submarines: A Mega-Contract with India on the Horizon for 14 July]," BFM BUSINESS, July 6, 2023, https://www.bfmtv.com/economie/entreprises/defense/rafale-sous-marins-un-mega-contrat-avec-l-inde-pointe-a-l-horizon-du-14-juillet_AN-202307060520.html.

Beware of Entrapment: Alliance Politics and French Indo-Pacific Strategy

93

France is neither transactional, as with the case with the United States, nor impeded by colonial memories, as with the case with the United Kingdom.⁶¹

In addition to India, France has also cultivated good relations with the other major power in the Indo-Pacific region: Indonesia. Indonesia's position in the region is extremely central: it is located between the Indian and Pacific Oceans and at the entrance to the South China Sea. In addition, it is one of the world's emerging economies with 270 million people, most of whom are working age. In addition, Indonesia is also considered one of the 'informal leaders' of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Consequently, to gain Indonesia's goodwill, France has agreed to sell 42 Rafale to Indonesia⁶² and two Scorpene submarines.⁶³ For

⁶¹ Manoj Babu Buraga. "La France, La Sécurité Environnementale et l'Océan Indien : Perspectives Pour La Coopération Franco-Indienne Dans Le Domaine Maritime [France, Environmental Security, and the Indian Ocean: Perspectives for Franco-Indian Cooperation in the Maritime Domain]," Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, November 24, 2022, <https://www.frstrategie.org/publications/notes/france-securite-environnementale-ocean-indien-perspectives-pour-cooperation-franco-indienne-dans-domaine-maritime-2022>.

⁶² France 24. "L'Indonésie Signe Avec La France Pour Six Premiers Rafale [Indonesia Signs a Deal with France for First Six Rafales]," France 24, February 10, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/fr/asie-pacifique/20220210-l-indon%C3%A9sie-signe-avec-la-france-pour-six-premiers-rafale>.

⁶³ Michel Cabirol. "L'Indonésie Souhaite Aussi Acheter Deux Sous-Marins Scorpène à La France [Indonesia Also Wants to Buy Two French Scorpene Submarines]," La Tribune, 2022, <https://www.latribune.fr/entreprises-finance/industrie/aeronautique-defense/l-in>

Indonesia, France is a politically safe choice given Indonesia's policy of staying neutral between the United States and China in the upcoming great power competition.

As with India, France's efforts to woo Indonesia are based on the French need for an independent presence and influence in the Indo-Pacific region. The need to intensify its relations with ASEAN on maritime security and defense is France's top priority in Southeast Asia, according to the French Indo-Pacific strategy.⁶⁴ Additionally, given its territorial size and economic influence, Indonesia is considered one of the 'informal leaders' of ASEAN.⁶⁵ Therefore, France needs Indonesia to ensure the fulfillment of its interests with ASEAN, and it tries to woo Indonesia through one of its most renowned industries: defense. An ASEAN approach through the US or NATO would not work. Given its overwhelming focus in Europe, the latter is not even considered a player in the ASEAN region. The former is seen as a party to the great power competition, and France could be seen as America's agent if France approached ASEAN with the help of the US. Therefore, France would have to approach ASEAN independently, and Indonesia could be France's gateway to participating in the organization.

[donesie-souhaite-aussi-acheter-deux-sous-marins-scorpene-a-la-france-903795.html](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/actualites/indonesie-souhaite-aussi-acheter-deux-sous-marins-scorpene-a-la-france-903795.html).

⁶⁴ Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères. "La Stratégie de La France Dans l'Indo-Pacifique," 43.

⁶⁵ Kishore Mahbubani and Jeffrey Sng. *The ASEAN Miracle: A Catalyst for Peace*, Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, (2017): 165.

Beware of Entrapment: Alliance Politics and French Indo-Pacific Strategy

95

However, France could not be completely independent from the United States in upholding its interests in the Indo-Pacific. The United States is still, after all, France's formal military ally that Indo-Pacific countries could not replace for the time being. Therefore, in addition to conducting friendly outreach to the major emerging nations of the Indo-Pacific, France has also conducted joint military exercises with its US ally in the Indo-Pacific, either through Indonesia-organized 'Super Garuda Shield' ⁶⁶ or the US-organized RIMPAC. ⁶⁷

Of course, French participation has apparent benefits from the military point of view, namely interoperability between French navy vessels and the US Pacific Fleet. However, it also serves the political purpose of keeping the US at arm's length and assuring the country of France's commitment to the Franco-American alliance. It may not help France much in avoiding US entrapment, but it helps France in avoiding US abandonment, especially if France needs America's support when its interests in the Indo-Pacific are being threatened. In short, France is trying to have it both ways:

⁶⁶ Gusty Da Costa. "Indonesia Hosts Super Garuda Shield 2023 to Promote Regional Stability," Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, September 12, 2023, <https://ipdefenseforum.com/2023/09/indonesia-hosts-super-garuda-shield-2023-to-promote-regional-stability/>.

⁶⁷ Xavier Vavasseur. "French Navy FREMM Set to Take Part in RIMPAC, Shoot Missile for the First Time," Naval News, May 31, 2024, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2024/05/french-navy-freem-set-to-take-part-in-rimpac-shoot-missile-for-the-first-time/>.

being able to operate independently in the Indo-Pacific while having the United States to back it up as a last resort.

While the outreaches to India and Indonesia may not put France in a position that contradicts US policies in the region, as arming US partners to be able to defend itself against a potential Chinese attack is not against US interests, France has also conducted outreaches and released statements that may run into the opposition of the United States. One such outreach is Emmanuel Macron's visit to China in April 2023 and his interview with *Politico Europe* and *Les Echos* about his aspirations and views regarding Taiwan.

In visiting China, Macron brought an entourage of French business leaders, giving an impression that France did not entirely subscribe to the US' attempt to decouple or 'derisk' its economy from China. In a joint statement with the Chinese President, Xi Jinping, the two leaders stated that the two countries will continue to maintain their cooperation in the aerospace industry.⁶⁸ This cooperation may run counter to the US interests as China has a blur separation between the civil and military domains, and French technology could find itself being applied to Chinese military

⁶⁸ Elysée. "Déclaration Conjointe Entre La République Française et La République Populaire de Chine [Joint Statement between the French Republic and the People's Republic of China]," [elysee.fr](https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2023/04/07/declaration-conjointe-entre-la-republique-francaise-et-la-republique-populaire-de-chine#moduleAnchor-210672), April 7, 2023, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2023/04/07/declaration-conjointe-entre-la-republique-francaise-et-la-republique-populaire-de-chine#moduleAnchor-210672>.

Beware of Entrapment: Alliance Politics and French Indo-Pacific Strategy

97

armaments and be used against the US military.⁶⁹ However, given that China is one of Airbus's largest markets, France put its economic interests first instead of following the US's wishes. Additionally, given that the likelihood of a war between China and the United States is infinitely greater than between China and France, France has fewer worries about its technology being used against it in a war.

However, Macron's interview with *Politico* and *Les Echos* solicited the most explosive reaction. While aboard the Cotam Unité (France's Air Force One) to return to Paris, President Macron gave an interview to the two media outlets regarding his views on a potential US-China conflict over Taiwan. His answer gives the most substantial possible proof of his intention for France and Europe to look at the conflict and decide whether to intervene based on a rational calculation of their interests. For Macron, the most significant risk for Europe and France is when they find themselves in "a conflict that is not ours" and that "it is us that prevents the establishment of strategic autonomy."⁷⁰ His views

⁶⁹ For more explanation on the civil-military fusion in China see Audrey Fritz. "China's Evolving Conception of Civil-Military Collaboration," Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 2, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/trustee-china-hand/chinas-evolving-conception-civil-military-collaboration>.

⁷⁰ Jamil Anderlini and Clea Caulcutt. "Macron Incite Les Européens à Ne Pas Se Penser En 'Suiveurs' Des Etats-Unis [Macron Pushes Europeans Not to Think as the United States' Followers]," POLITICO, April 9, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-incite-europeens-etats-unis-c-hine/>. The exact quotation is: «Pour le président, "le grand risque" pour

may be significantly influenced by the Russian invasion of Ukraine as “Europe has not managed the crisis in Ukraine, how could we be credible on Taiwan: ‘Attention, if you something bad, we will be there?’ If you really want to increase the tension, this is the best way to do it.”⁷¹ If his propositions are already bad, the disclaimer put forth by *Politico* that “certain parts of the interview, where the President talked in a more direct way on Taiwan and Europe’s strategic autonomy, has been cut by the Elysée [the French Presidential Palace]”⁷² garner suspicions that his real views on Taiwan are likely to be even worse, at least from the US point of view. In any case, Macron’s propositions are clear: the United States should not take French and European support for its war over Taiwan for granted, and French and European involvement in a hypothetical war over Taiwan would be based upon careful consideration of their interests.

One may find Macron’s view on Taiwan confusing. For one, given that France is one of US’ NATO allies and its oldest partner, shouldn’t France and the US have a synergic view on Taiwan?

l’Europe serait “de se retrouver entraînée dans des crises qui ne sont pas les nôtres, ce qui nous empêcherait de construire notre autonomie stratégique,” a-t-il déclaré à bord du vol présidentiel entre Pékin et Canton, dans le sud de la Chine.»

⁷¹ Anderlini and Caulcutt, “Macron Incite Les Européens à Ne Pas Se Penser En ‘Suiveurs’ Des Etats-Unis”

⁷² Anderlini and Caulcutt, “Macron Incite Les Européens à Ne Pas Se Penser En ‘Suiveurs’ Des Etats-Unis.” The exact quotations are: «...certaines parties de l’entretien, au cours desquelles le président a parlé de manière encore plus directe de Taïwan et de l’autonomie stratégique de l’Europe, ont été coupées par l’Elysée.»

Beware of Entrapment: Alliance Politics and French Indo-Pacific Strategy

99

Shouldn't France follow the US' lead on Taiwan? Understandably, Macron's comments have solicited criticisms from the US and Eastern Europe.⁷³ However, if one considers the *politique de grandeur* and the history of French foreign relations, then Macron's comments on Taiwan should come as no surprise. Macron's statements and comments on Taiwan are just a continuation of French foreign policy that dates back to the years of Charles de Gaulle. If French interests are not at stake, then France should not blindly follow the United States's foreign policy forays. Militarily allying itself during a hypothetical US-China war over Taiwan can lead to a loss of the Chinese market for French companies, as China will almost certainly put heavy restrictions on US companies and the companies of US allies. Additionally, if France joined the US in sanctioning Taiwan, then French companies would lose one of its biggest markets and sources of revenue.

Worse, French intervention in a US-China war over Taiwan could endanger its own territories in the Pacific Ocean. If France and the US use the French territories of New Caledonia or Wallis and Futuna to conduct military operations against China, those territories would be legitimate targets for a Chinese military attack that could cause the loss of life of French citizens. This will not be

⁷³ Luke McGee. "Analysis: 'Tone Deaf' Macron Faces Backlash over Taiwan Comments," CNN, April 13, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/04/13/europe/macron-taiwan-comments-transatlantic-relationship-intl-cmd/index.html>.

in accordance with one of the pillars of the French Indo-Pacific strategy: maintaining the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and security of French territories in the region. Therefore, perhaps France thinks that absent an attack on French interests, going to war against China or participating non-militarily against China in the event of a Taiwan invasion will be detrimental to French interests in the region.

However, it does not mean France would need to accommodate Chinese influence in the region significantly. The French government, especially President Macron, has cautioned the region against the increasing Chinese influence, albeit subtly and indirectly. During a visit to Vanuatu in July 2023, President Macron warned that “in the Indo-Pacific, especially in Oceania, there are new imperialists that appear, and the logic of power that will threaten the sovereignty of many states, the smallest ones and, often times, the most fragile ones [emphasis added].”⁷⁴ Given that China is a relative newcomer in the region, it is undeniable that Macron was referring to it when warning Oceanic states of the dangers of Chinese presence in the region. This proves that, even though France would like to maintain a positive relationship with China, France is also following its own interests of combating Chinese influence in the region to uphold its own interests.

⁷⁴ Elysée. “Déplacement Au Vanuatu [Trip to Vanuatu],” Elysée, July 27, 2023, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2023/07/27/deplacement-au-vanuatu>.

Beware of Entrapment: Alliance Politics and French Indo-Pacific Strategy

101

Still, it would not be prudent to assume that France could be a viable ‘third pole’ for countries in the Indo-Pacific. If anything, one could argue that the strength of the *politique de grandeur* is limited. For example, France and its EU partners opposed the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal in May 2018. France, Germany, and the United Kingdom then endorsed the establishment of the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (Instex), ostensibly to circumvent US sanctions on Iran.⁷⁵ However, in the end, the alternative payment facilitation is only used for facilitating payment of food and medicine. French companies were still forced to leave Iran due to the fear of secondary US sanctions, and, in this regard, it could be argued that Paris has failed to protect the interests of French companies.⁷⁶

France’s ambitions in the Indo-Pacific could be proven as a big ambition with little capability actually to realize it. Bondaz criticized the usage of the term *puissance d’équilibre* in official speeches and declarations as it could be perceived as France being a ‘third balancing power’ in the Indo-Pacific, a role that France is ill-equipped to play.⁷⁷ With only a few thousand soldiers and a few

⁷⁵ Agathe Demarais. *Backfire: How Sanctions Reshape the World against U.S. Interests*, New York: Columbia University Press, (2022): 176.

⁷⁶ Hadi Dolatabadi. “Franco-Iranian Economic Relations: A Study of the Ebb and Flow of Multi-Level Factors,” *French Politics* 20, no. 1, (2021), 68, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41253-021-00156-8>.

⁷⁷ Bondaz, “Reconceptualiser La Politique Étrangère et de Sécurité Française En Indo-Pacifique [Reconceptualizing the French Foreign and Security Policy in the Indo-Pacific],” 3

aircraft and submarines, it would be near-impossible for French forces to pose as a credible fighting force in the region, especially compared to regional powers such as the United States, China, and Japan. Laksmana also warned of an “illusion of strategic centrality” when analyzing French outreach in the Indo-Pacific, especially concerning its arms sales, as French arms sales to India and Indonesia could be perceived as an upsurge of French influence in the region.⁷⁸

IV. Conclusion

France’s decision to form, announce, and implement its autonomous Indo-Pacific grand strategy is a substantial step by its government to avoid the risk of entrapment within alliance politics while retaining its alliance with the United States. Due to several concerns, France chooses the “politically safe” option regarding its regional interest in the Indo-Pacific. First are its historical footprints and its vision to protect the territorial integrity of its Indo-Pacific territories and dependencies, especially from any risk of confrontation between China and the United States. Its autonomous grand strategy enables France to independently define its territorial integrity and deploy forces to protect its people in Indo-Pacific territories with minimal concerns from the region’s great powers.

⁷⁸ Evan Laksmana. Twitter Post. August 29, 2023, 3:29 PM.
<https://twitter.com/EvanLaksmana/status/1696439849539252726?s=20>

Beware of Entrapment: Alliance Politics and French Indo-Pacific Strategy

103

Second is France's economic concern, especially regarding the risk of Chinese invasion of Taiwan. Blindly participating in every US narrative of the Indo-Pacific will put France into a risky position within China's perspective, as the country will be remarked as a "US alliance" and, most importantly, increasing the risk of being associated as a proponent of Taiwan's independence. Therefore, in the case of the rising risk of the invasion of Taiwan, France is using its independent strategy to lower the risk impact for its interest, especially in the technological sector. This consideration also explains why France considers regional stability to be the foremost priority of its Indo-Pacific strategy. For France, political stability in the Indo-Pacific will ensure the security of its strategic sea lanes of communication and investments, especially with its strategic partner in the region.

Third, its autonomous grand strategy also supports France's cultivation of independent partnerships, especially with the Indo-Pacific's emerging powers, such as Indonesia and India. Consequently, this benefit will make it easier for France to navigate itself within the Indo-Pacific tight geopolitical space by independently safeguarding its national interest without any requirements to coordinate with a third party. Furthermore, a broader partnership with various countries will widen France's options to avoid any adverse circumstances from instability caused by the US-China rivalry in the region while still garnering further benefits from its investments and political footprints in its partners.

However, France's Indo-Pacific strategy, positioning itself as an alternative power to the United States and China, faces several challenges. Beyond concerns about its capacity to effectively implement the strategy, there is a significant risk that diminishing its involvement in the US-China conflict could increase perceptions of France as an unreliable ally within the US alliance. This perception might lead to the US potentially abandoning France in future geopolitical crises. This is a critical issue for France, which depends on US support to protect its regional interests due to its limited power projection capabilities. To mitigate the risks of entrapment and abandonment, France is conducting joint military exercises with the US in the region. This strategy is crucial for maintaining a close relationship with its "larger ally" and ensuring reliability. Therefore, this research underscores that countries with moderate power projection capacities are still heavily influenced by their relationships with larger powers, even in managing geopolitical risks.

With the growing presence of European states in Indo-Pacific geopolitical dynamics over the past decade, this research provides a robust analysis of how these states manage their regional interests—focusing on gaining benefits, avoiding losses, and addressing potential threats and risks. We suggest that while European states, exemplified by France, remain committed to their alliance treaty with the US, they also adopt an independent and unique approach, which serves as a risk management strategy. France, with its territories in the region, has a distinct interest

Beware of Entrapment: Alliance Politics and French Indo-Pacific Strategy

105

compared to other European states like Germany and the Netherlands, which have developed their Indo-Pacific strategies without any territorial possession in the region. This distinction highlights a gap in the existing research that future studies can explore.

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107

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