

AUKUS Fallout: France's Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Quest for Autonomy

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Abstract: This paper explored how France has reacted to this move by exclusion to AUKUS not through a direct military confrontation, but through soft balancing and hedging approaches. These included diplomatic outreach, defense co-operation, and diversification of the economy with regional powers such as India, Japan, and ASEAN members. The qualitative research approach is employed to identify official reports, policy reports, and academic sources to describe the identified behaviors of France as the outcome of the assessment of the strategic threats and an effort to maintain the status of influence in the problematic region. The study focuses on the multidimensionality of the objectives of France in balance-seeking, the significance of norms, multilateralism, and sovereignty. France counters the ambitious nature of China to stabilize the situation in the region in a non-confrontational manner. France considers itself the major security guarantor in the Indo-Pacific. Even at the expense of AUKUS and thus, it is a key contributor to alliances without compromising their own independent status, even after AUKUS.

Keywords: France, Strategic Autonomy, Indo-Pacific, AUKUS, Balancing Power

Introduction

In recent decades, the term “Indo-Pacific” has become more prominent in geopolitical discourse, reflecting a shift in strategic focus from the traditional “Asia Pacific” framework (Brewster, 2014), (Medcalf, 2020). German Geopolitical theorist Karl Haushofer introduced it in 1920, establishing the basis of the re-conceptualization of regional geopolitics. This change in language represents a more fundamental strategic reorientation, including India and the Western Pacific to form a greater strategic space where the US can offset the rise of China (Medcalf, 2020). The US policy articles show that the engagement has been replaced by containment, which manifests in military interventions and diplomatic relations (He & Li, 2020; pg. 1–7).

In the 21st century, the Indo-Pacific is already a primary crossroad of geopolitical and economic activity, and it is home to more than 4.4 billion people who produce about 2/3 of the globally produced GDP (Saxer, 2024). The region is composed of seven leading military forces in the world: the US, China, France, Japan, India, Australia, and Russia, all competing to gain influence in the form of a complicated chain of military alliances (Zafar, 2023). Specifically, China has been able to strategically utilize its tools of national power, economic diplomacy, maritime assertiveness, and diplomatic influence to expand its presence in the Indo-Pacific region (Hamilton & Primiano, 2025).

In that regard, the aftermath of the Cold War period has seen the meteoric rise of China, which subsequently jeopardized the status quo in the world and generated a significant threat to the US dominion. At the same time, the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative of China created an uneasy feeling in the balance of power in the world (Noor, 2023). Amid this evolving landscape, regional middle powers found themselves engaged in a balancing act. Australia and France seek to maintain a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific, and their approaches can be explained in terms of their own geopolitical location. As a resident power, Australia relies on its security relations with the US in the form of such initiatives as AUKUS (Leavy, n.d.).

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In September 2021, the AUKUS trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States was announced and has largely been perceived as a tactical move to respond to the growing influence of China in the region (Koga, 2025). Although AUKUS was introduced as a progressive partnership, it did not include France, even though it currently has Indo-Pacific relationships and has a long-standing military alliance with Australia. France reacted with diplomatic outrage, which included recalling its ambassadors to Washington and Canberra, an unusual act among allies (Rees, 2025)

This underscored the great strategic interests of France in the Indo-Pacific, as it has territories and exclusive economic zones in the region, which are of paramount economic importance to it. The AUKUS agreement also made France popularize a more autonomous position within the European Union and reduced reliance on the US and China. In this aspect, the statement of the AUKUS alliance in 2021 was a turning point that sabotaged the strategic ideology and identity of France as a middle power with global ambitions (Medcalf, 2020).

This kind of isolation showed more divisions in the Western bloc and undermined trust, disclosure, and regard with clever partners (Holland & Staunton, 2024). In a geopolitical environment that is so dynamic, France is trying to create the right balance between its relationship with the two: China and the United States, and not to threaten its strategic interests.

The paper also attempts to discuss what the AUKUS announcement meant to France regarding its strategic outlook and how the nation responded to regional joint ventures within the Indo-Pacific. It is particularly directed towards illuminating the alternation of policies in France, in which we observe the realization of strategic independence. The proposed study will therefore add to our knowledge by looking at the dynamic policies and practices of France in relation to the defense of its interests and defining its strategic independence in a dynamic Indo-Pacific space against the backdrop of the AUKUS pact.

This study intends to find an answer to a critical knowledge gap by discussing the subtle responses of France and the strategic changes undertaken by this country in response to the implications of the AUKUS deal. Through analyzing these complexities, one can draw meaningful information about the overall political environment and how it influences inter-relations.

Literature Review

This part of the paper will examine the literature about the AUKUS alliance and the overall strategic trend in the Indo-Pacific. The systematic literature review assists in speculating the most crucial premise on power politics, alliance-building, and the role of regions with special reference to the fact that France is not a member of AUKUS. This research can be viewed as a form of background base in the development of the current knowledge of the topic because it can be regarded as a point of departure to the research gap in the knowledge of how the ongoing development of Indo-Pacific policy and pursuit of strategic autonomy continue in France.

The Indo-Pacific region is becoming a focal point of global geopolitical tension, mainly due to China's growing assertiveness in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), military expansion in the South and East China Seas, and increased economic influence. (Brewster, 2018). This has raised strategic tensions within the region and a rebalancing of strategic alliances. Reacting to this, the US launched its Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy to maintain a rules-based order, freedom of navigation, and strengthen collective security (Scott, 2018). Such a strategic rivalry has shifted regional alliances and trilateral defense agreements have been established between the UK, Australia and the US under AUKUS. This is a step towards limited multilateralism, which focuses on more sharing of capability without straining the US (Koga, 2025; Song & and Yang, 2024).

The signing of AUKUS caused great diplomatic consequences, especially to France. France was not included in the AUKUS deal despite its long-term strategic interest in the Indo-Pacific. In addition to the cancellation of the submarine deal worth 90 billion dollars, the action was regarded as a symbolic strike against the French geopolitical position and strategic influence (Pajon, 2023). France positioned itself as an Indo-Pacific power that believes in multilateralism (Reuters, 2024). International law and sustainable

development in the area. With Paris being marginalized in favor of being associated, questions began to emerge on the inclusiveness of the regional security architecture (Philippe, 2021).

At the same time, by becoming part of AUKUS, Australia emphasizes its shifting strategic priorities in the context of increasing tensions with China. The renewed dependence on the US by Australia on its part specifically relating to the sharing of intelligence, technological knowledge on nuclear submarine technology, and collaborative military operations, is reminiscent of the time-tested strategic approach after several years of being self-sufficient (Adamy, 2022). The transformation shows that Australia has been struggling to sustain economic relationship, with China and to resist its increasing strategic assertiveness (Farneubun, 2022).

The AUKUS fallout did not just stop at breaking bilateral relations, but it also created anxiety among transatlantic partners. During the G20 summit, the French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire attacked Australia publicly, an action that indicated the overall frustration of the Europeans. He termed the accord as not being transparent and consultative (Quayle & Giella). AUKUS suggests to the France's Foundation for Strategic Research (FRS) that the US does not mistrust France but rather mistrusts the European Union (EU) as a whole. Although the US-EU relations have rebuilt rapidly, the relationship between the EU and Australia has yet to improve and is threatening the strategic location of the EU within the Indo-Pacific (Panda & Ghiasy, 2024).

In retaliation, France was excluded, and it decided to pivot towards greater involvement with India, Japan, and the ASEAN states. Enhancing collaboration with the major regional stakeholders to advance a balanced and inclusive Indo-Pacific order (Philippe, 2021). France re-established itself as a legitimate and influential player in the context of regional security by appealing to its overseas territories and massive Exclusive Economic Zones EEZs. One of the aspects of the French positioning is the effort towards strategic autonomy. Searching for strategic independence, multilateral involvement, and equilibrium with the US and China (Press, 2021).

Regarding AUKUS, the actions of France in the diplomatic sphere and its military efforts reflect its will to restore its role in the world and the protection of the Indo-Pacific interests. Researchers claimed that the actions of France are also indicative of its fundamental interest in maintaining its strategic location and persistence in the context of rapid geopolitical changes (Leavy,; Pajon, 2023; Saxer, 2024). France has also started playing its role in the region by deploying its military forces, Economic associations to restore its tarnished reputation, but also to ensure that it is a constant and independent actor in the region (Pajon, 2022). However, critics note that selective military alliances like AUKUS escalate tensions, widen rifts between states (Wijaya & Hayes, 2025).

The study examines whether France can gain strategic autonomy in the Indo-Pacific by exploring the policies and alliances that it established after signing the AUKUS agreement. It seeks to measure how France can employ its influence despite hurdling the obstacles of exclusion, great power competition, and the dramatically changing regional alignments by applying the balance of threat as a theory to explain the strategic motive and course of France.

Theoretical Framework

The focus of this paper is on applying the Balance of Threat (BOT) theory to contextualize the emerging strategic position that France takes in the Indo-Pacific region after the declaration of AUKUS. According to the BOT theory, a theory proposed by Stephen Walt (1985) in his book *Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power* (Walt, 1990), states will not only form alliances because of considerations of power but also because of perceived threats. These perceptions are shaped by four key variables: aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and, crucially, offensive intentions (Walt, 1990). Offensive intentions are the most decisive among these, and they force the states to deduce motives of other powers acting, either in alliance or counterbalancing behavior.

With this premise, the notion of hedging has been termed as a strategic action under the BOT framework, more so in an event where the intentions of a state are not clear. Hedging gives states more

room to be cooperative with everyone, but at the same time, a state can be cautious, compared to being in strict alliances. Hedging behavior in this paradigm takes the form of soft balancing. According to T.V. Paul (2018), soft balancing means using non-military instruments, i.e., diplomatic interaction, unofficial alliances, economic cooperation, and involvement in multilateral organizations to bind the power of a strong state without engaging in a direct conflict (Bock & Henneberg, 2013).

For France, the reaction to AUKUS can be seen as a preference for soft balancing behavior. Instead of direct or hard balancing with the United States, France has so far resorted to diplomatic signaling, economic diversification, and attachment to the regional powers like India, Indonesia, and the UAE. This nuanced approach underscores the existence of a greater French ambition of strategic autonomy, which is based on its Gaullist legacy of autonomous foreign policy. This independent stance may be said to be a cautious but proactive foreign policy which, though limited by some forms of dependence, is actively involved in Multilateral platforms. Applying the BOT framework, France can be seen as facing threats, not only due to the China behemoth, but also due to the feeling of marginalization by its traditional partners, which is manifested in projects like (Veress, 2021). French actions, therefore, may be regarded as belonging to the soft balancing-hedging continuum, because it aligns with the vision of a multipolar Indo-Pacific where it will assume a key third party between the US and China.

Research Methodology

This paper employed a qualitative case study design to thoroughly investigate AUKUS and analyze the dynamic French regional interaction in detail. It examines the shift of alliances that France is playing to ensure strategic independence, with AUKUS having its repercussions in the ongoing action in the Indo-Pacific.

The paper is explanatory and aims to fill the knowledge gap about the strategic implications of AUKUS, especially in regard to how the alliance positions or remakes the foreign policy ambitions of France. Exploratory research can be used in studying research phenomena. An exploratory research design can be defined as research conducted to investigate an unstructured problem. It is carried out in a bid to gain a deeper understanding of the current issue. It made it possible to have a profound understanding of complex issues where previous information can be biased or disorganized. Such a strategy is open-ended and offers a framework that can identify patterns, perceptions, and responses that might not be properly articulated in the current literature (Stebbins, 2001). This research employs a case study approach focused on France as the key player affected by the AUKUS. A case study can provide a meaningful analysis of the context around a particular event and actors (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The case study approach allows examining AUKUS from a closer angle and how it affects the French strategic autonomy in the Indo-Pacific Region.

Secondary data collection involves official governmental statements, policy reports, think-tank reviews, scholarly articles, expert commentary, and media coverage of what occurred following the AUKUS announcement in 2021. These sources offer a general overview of information and tendencies that are present in the trend to comprehend the importance of the AUKUS agreement. In analyzing data, the thematic analysis was employed in analyzing and describing patterns, themes, and narratives of the result of the information.

The thematic analysis is conducted as per the six-phase process of Braun and Clarke (2006) to render rigor and a structured process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Manual coding was used to achieve accuracy and transparency. In addition, the researchers included group discussions in the analysis stage to reduce and minimize personal biases and ensure as much coverage and validity of the interpretations as possible. The given methodological option will help gain an in-depth and detailed account of the impact of AUKUS on the realization of France's interests, and the proposed research design could become a worthy contribution to the existing arguments within the context of international relations and research of security.

Discussion

A number of measures have been undertaken by France as an attempt to preserve its strategic autonomy within the Indo-Pacific region in response to the establishment of the AUKUS alliance. First, France has

underscored the importance of the existing strategic partnerships and military arrangements in the region. Such alliances provide France with a strong platform of cooperation and enable it to maintain its presence in the Indo-Pacific. French President Emmanuel Macron has explicitly noted that the ties between France, Australia, and India are important, and outlined a so-called Paris-Delhi-Canberra axis that is essential to the region and shared interests in the Indo-Pacific region. Second, France has formulated its Indo-Pacific defense strategy. This strategy is incorporated in the official documents, according to which France sets priorities and objectives in the region. It is focused on the protection of French interests, economic, diplomatic, and cultural affairs in the Indo-Pacific. Further, France has equally emphasized the importance of multilateralism and collaborating with the regional actors for defense. The country will attempt to advance ASEAN centrality and facilitate the stabilization of the Indo-Pacific region in general through the regional ties that ASEAN enjoys and the numerous multilateral forums where France is involved. Lastly, France is also trying to strengthen its coalitions with other compatible countries in the Indo-Pacific region. These activities involve diplomatic activities, military drills, and elite exchanges.

France and Indo-Pacific

France has a strong presence in the Indo-Pacific by its overseas territories, 465,422 km², and a population of more than 1.6 million French inhabitants (See "Table 1"). These contain the important aspects of the geographical presence of the strategic interest of France in the region (See "Fig 1") (PAJON, 2021). They are economically and strategically advantageous to France. France has a network of defense missions that defend their territories in Indo-Pacific to protect these interests (Duggal, 2022). France recognizes the importance of the marine resources of its overseas territories to support economic development and control. France also enhances its presence and influence in the Indo-Pacific by actively engaging in the work of regional international organizations through its territorial representation and becoming more active in the sea. It also maintains a large military allocation in the Indo-Pacific region than other EU members, with an excess of over 7,000 military troops in its foreign territories (See "Table 2"). Significant players in regional security and stability are major military organizations such as FAZSOI (Armed Forces in the Southern Indian Ocean), FANC, and FAPF (Morcos, 2021). The French Indo-Pacific strategy is consistent with its goal to become a balancing power by 2030. It tries to act as an arbiter and stabilizer without ignoring the complex ties between China and the United States in the area (FRANCE AND SECURITY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC, 2019).

Table 1

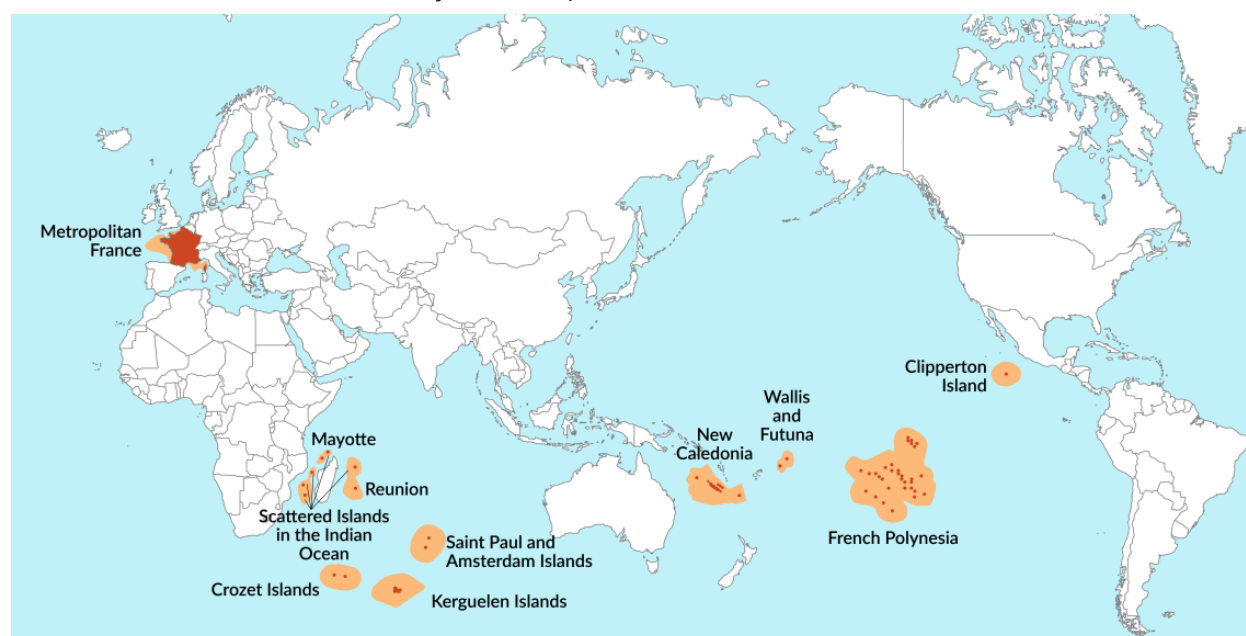
French Presence in the Indo-Pacific (Duggal, 2022)

Territory/Country	No. of French Nationals	EEZ (in square kilometres)
Mayotte- Réunion- Scattered Islands	1,100,000 inhabitants	1,026,037 sq. km.
French Antarctic and Sub-Antarctic Territories	-	2,070,343 sq. km.
New Caledonia	282,000 inhabitants	1,457,032 sq. km.
Wallis & Futuna	12,000 inhabitants	263,422 sq. km.
French Polynesia	276,000 inhabitants	4,852,122 sq. km.
Clipperton	-	438,048 sq. km.

Table 2

French Military Presence in Indo-Pacific (Duggal, 2022)

French Command in Indo-Pacific	No. of Forces
Armed Forces in the United Arab Emirates (FFEAU)	650
Armed Forces in Djibouti (FFDJ)	1450
Armed Forces in the South Indian Ocean Zone (FAZSOI)	2000
Armed Forces in New Caledonia (FANC)	1660
Armed Forces in French Polynesia (FAPF)	1180

Figure 1*France's Territories in the Indo-Pacific (Charles, 2022)*

Besides its military and economic affairs, France is very much engaged in scientific cooperation, grants to support the regional development, and the environmental diplomacy of the Indo-Pacific. It also maintains a considerable level of diplomatic representation in the region, in terms of the number of embassies and consulates. In a move to represent the French commitment to support the security of the Indo-Pacific and make it a priority area in its foreign policy, President Emmanuel Macron has focused on the importance of enhancing strategic alliances in the region. The key goals of the maritime policy of France are to protect its land, to protect its resources, and its exclusive economic zone (EEZ). In addition to air resources, the French Navy performs operations to defend the EEZ, combats terrorism, piracy, and illegal traffic, and is engaged in the management of international crises.

French Indo-Pacific Strategy

The Indo-Pacific strategy of France is based on the 2008 Defense White Paper and is designed to support the sovereignty of France, the creation of a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region under the rule of international law, and to integrate France with Japan and Australia as Indo-Pacific powers (Karambelkar, 2021). Through relations with countries in the region like India, Australia, Japan, Vietnam, Singapore, and Malaysia, this strategy seeks to protect the French nationals, territories, and exclusive economic zones. France is interested in participating in the regional security system, as it is expressed by its engagement in ADMM+ (ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus). The two policy papers of France classify its partners in various ways. The Ministry of European and Foreign Affairs (MEFA) paper singles out the Strategic Partnerships with Australia, Canada, ASEAN countries, China, India, the UAE, and the USA. The Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces (MDA) paper, in contrast, distinguishes between primary and other partners; the primary partners are India, Australia, the USA, and Japan, whereas other partners are part of the ASEAN group and New Zealand (Heiduk, 2021). The partnership also involves arms cooperation, information exchange, joint exercises, and integrated naval operations as well to reinforce the relationship with partner nations. Also, French Military partnership in the Indo-Pacific region can be found in both its 36 Rafale jets purchased by India, and the 12-attack submarine deal by Australian Naval Group of Australia. The French naval reports show its training activities preparation with Japan, India, the US, Australia, guided by the mission of Charles de Gaulle of 2019 (Morcos, 2021).

The French Indo-Pacific Strategy has four pillars, which are multilateralism, economic development and connectivity, research and innovation, and defense and security. This policy places high emphasis on democracy, dialogue, human rights, and international law. Additionally, to enhance its security of the region and maintain national sovereignty, France is committed to active cooperation (Karambelkar, 2021).

In addition, France tackles the environmental problem by incorporating the environment into its strategy. It actively engages with allies and partners in anti-piracy activities, enforces UNCLOS, and promotes a rules-based order in the seas, all of which help in global security.

Strategic Autonomy of France

The ambition of France to gain strategic independence in the Indo-Pacific is deeply entrenched in its history and its sense of being a unique nation. This pursuit of independence started in the early 19th century when France sought to restore its status as a dominant European force. Although it was not easy, it lost the battle against other countries, such as the Crimean War and World War II (Coté, 2023). The French approach to strategic autonomy is defined in different policy documents, including the White Paper on Defense and National Security, as a compromise and flexible approach. The strategic autonomy of France, as described in the National Strategic Review (2022), includes having a robust nuclear deterrent, having a resilient nation, having an economy that is defense-driven, and having cyber resilience. In an April 2023 speech, Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Ms. Catherine Colonna, discussed how France has engaged in strategic autonomy, leveraging it to maintain the autonomy of other states, in partnership with them, to enjoy freedom over their sovereignty (Tuckfield, n.d.). The goal is to make the country more self-reliant and less dependent on the United States. France tries to create a balance between its position as a mediator and stabilizer in its relations with China without escalation but actively participating in the regional forums and forming a strong strategic partnership with those countries that share its opinion. To achieve this, France urges EU countries to pursue strategic autonomy in a bid to place the EU as an independent geostrategic power and assist the involvement of Europe in the Indo-Pacific.

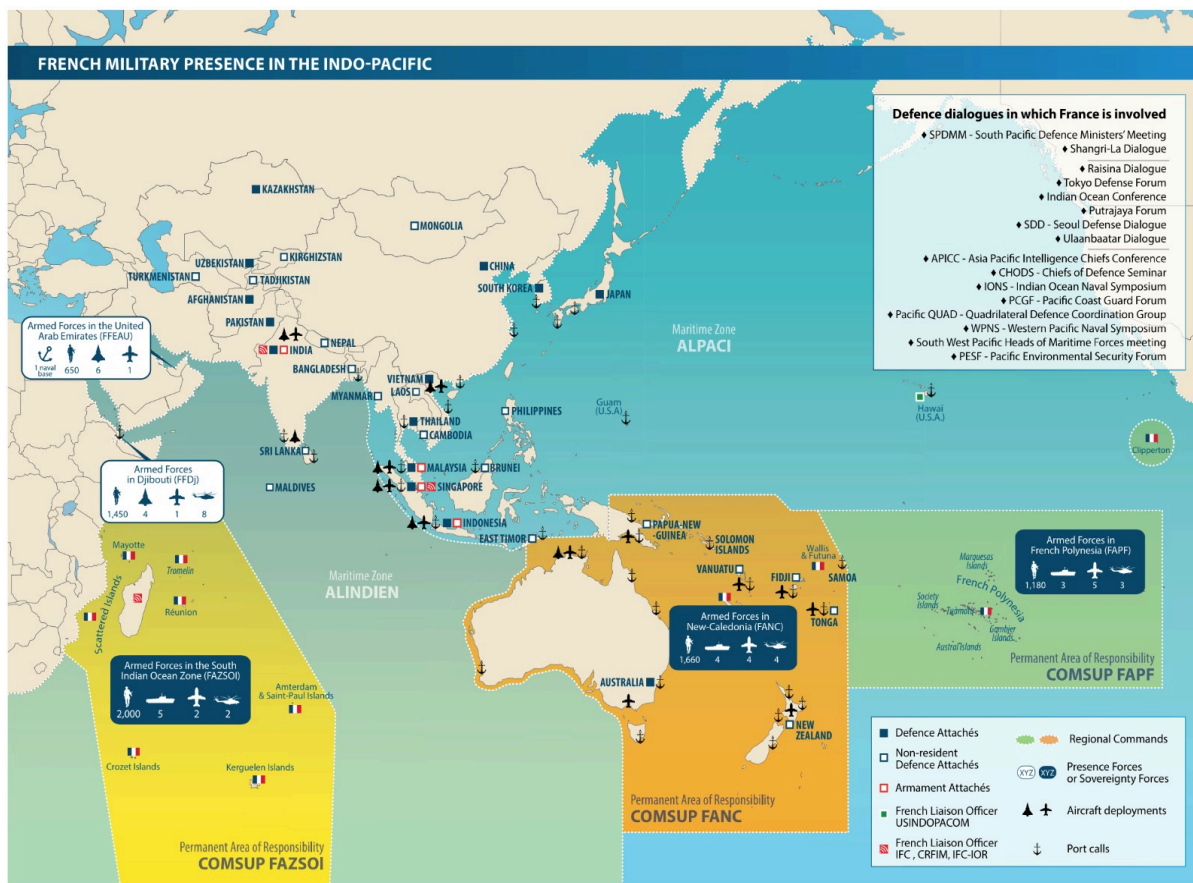
French exceptionalism, values, and capabilities that distinguish it among other nations play a significant role in the way the country perceives global affairs. This sense of exceptionalism determines its activities on the world scene and its attempts to assume a special role in the affairs of the world. The French history and culture have a strong tradition of exceptionalism, which has important ramifications for French foreign policy and security planning. French Foreign Minister Le Drian remarked that "when you have an ally of the stature of France, you don't treat them like that," (BBC, 2021) as a diplomatic crisis developed after the AUKUS (Staunton & Day, 2023). Being excluded from significant Indo-Pacific deals undermined France's status as a resident power in the region, demonstrating how heavily French exceptionalism influences French foreign policy. France regards its position in the world as important, and it has tried to distinguish itself among other middle-sized powers. It feels superior to the world, owing to its nuclear strength, its overseas presence, and its veto powers in the Security Council, and the fact that it has a lot of military and territorial strength.

France's Cooperation with Regional Partners

France, being a defense partner and investor in development, has an active relationship with the states of the Indo-Pacific. This participation involves attending regional meetings such as the South Pacific Defense Ministers Meeting, the Shangri-La Dialogue, the Tokyo Defense Dialogue, and the Seoul Defense Dialogue. France also collaborates with key partners such as Japan, the US, India, and Australia in enhancing regional stability through bilateral exercises and naval drills. It also works with Australia and New Zealand in the Pacific islands to solve the problem of illegal fishing and give humanitarian assistance, and disaster response (HADR) through exercises such as FRANZ. To optimize its presence in the vast area of Indo-Pacific, France relies on its joint regional commands and defense dialogues with its partners (See "Fig 2"). France is actively involved in both the Indian Ocean Commission and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium. Other than this, military drills such as La Perouse and bilateral ones like Varuna with India show a country's commitment to a world order based on rules and its readiness for air and naval conflict. With France's increased involvement in the Indo-Pacific, the historical relationship between France and Australia has become more robust, particularly in the realm of security. (Karambelkar, 2021); (Veress, 2021a).

Figure 2

French Military Presence And Dialogues In Which France Is Involved In Indo-Pacific (France And Security In The Indo-Pacific, 2019)



France And Indonesia

Since 2011, France and Indonesia have partnered strategically, sharing values like democracy and an international system based on rules. The two nations give importance to multilateral organizations and have a common vision of the Indo-Pacific region in terms of maritime security, open spaces, and sustainable development. Not only are they establishing defense talks in 2021 and conducting collective naval exercises in the Sunda Strait, but they are also working on a free trade agreement. The drill included three warships of the Indonesian Navy, a French submarine, and two frigates. France also contributes to the blue economy in Indonesia by combating the plastic pollution of the sea and also through addressing illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing (Karambelkar, 2021). In recent years, the two nations have been increasing their proximity in the Indo-Pacific region by engaging in naval exercises. The French Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot, on his visit to Jakarta, has supported the idea of the Indo-Pacific Port Security Project without providing much information on the initiative (Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires, 2025).

French Cooperation with ASEAN

In order to have strategic autonomy, France has enhanced its collaboration with regional entities such as ASEAN. France collaborates with ASEAN in such areas as maritime security, peacekeeping operations, and combating transnational crimes. It proactively seeks business opportunities in urbanization projects, like Smart Cities, in nations, including China, India, and members of ASEAN. In appreciation for its contributions, ASEAN approved France as a development partner in October 2020. French companies, it is emphasized, participate in over 40% and 20% of submarine and naval projects in Southeast Asia, respectively (Karambelkar, 2021). In 2021, it was accepted as an ASEAN Development Partner (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2021). France intends to send its technical experts to the ASEAN Secretariat every year by the year 2023. French support for ASEAN centrality is strong, and the French Development

Agency (FDA) has made a significant contribution to the region by funding 150 projects totaling 4 billion euros. In November 2024, the fourth meeting of the ASEAN–France Development Partnership Committee (AF–DPC) was held, during which France reinforced its commitment to promoting sustainable and resilient development in Southeast Asia in collaboration with ASEAN member states (Embassy of France in Singapore, 2020.; *Fourth Meeting of the ASEAN–France Development Partnership Committee*, 2024).

France and Quad

France has received an invitation from the Quad to take part in naval exercises in the Indo–Pacific region aimed at countering China's growing influence. Exercise La Perouse, a three–day naval drill that took place in 2019, was the first exercise. Its goals were to promote a free and open Indo–Pacific region and improve maritime cooperation. Before the exercise, Quad leaders met for the first time, which was a significant development in Asian geopolitics. According to a statement made by the French embassy in New Delhi, the exercise "will provide an opportunity for these five like–minded, high–end naval forces to develop closer links, sharpen their skills, and promote maritime cooperation throughout a free and open Indo–Pacific" (*India – France Joint Statement*, 2024; Veress, 2021). After the Malabar drill in November 2020, the Quad nations and France are anticipated to continue working together in maritime exercises in the Indo–Pacific region. To showcase their commitment to improving maritime security in the Indo–Pacific, the Quad partners, Australia, Japan, and the US, took part in a French–led naval exercise in the Bay of Bengal in April 2021. (Veress, 2021a). In order for France to successfully achieve and advocate for its regional objectives, the significance of the Quad and Quad Plus frameworks has increased (France's Indo–Pacific Strategy and the Quad Plus, 2021).

France and India

India and France's cooperation in the Indo–Pacific region have significantly increased in order to counter assertive powers and advance regional stability. They are actively working to strengthen their positions in the region in light of India's expanding strategic aspirations and influence in the Indo–Pacific. This covers collaboration across a range of fields, like space research and maritime awareness (Bharti & Singh, 2023). Defense collaboration, economic ties, and joint military exercises are all part of India and France's strategic partnership. To enhance their naval force levels, the two powers conduct mutual military operations within the Indian Ocean region. They also express aspirations for the high potential of renewable energy and have even signed agreements to collaborate on renewable energy. The cooperation between the two nations extends to the creation and construction of Scorpion–class submarines and the current Project 75I of the Indian Navy, within the framework of which six submarines with air–independent propulsion will be constructed (Karambelkar, 2021).

They aim to achieve peace, stability, and security in the Indo–Pacific, grounded in their commitment to a rules–based international order and the importance of strategic autonomy. Moreover, the French President Macron and the Indian Prime Minister Modi keep in touch to raise closer collaboration between the countries. The strategic partnership between France and India has strengthened through discussions on security matters, particularly regarding Indo–Pacific maritime cooperation. Both countries are determined to improve the existing cooperation projects, enhance frequent interactions, and improve relations between their respective navies (Bharti & Singh, 2023). In November 2022, the Indian and French Air Forces conducted joint exercises in Rajasthan, India, marking a significant step in their cooperation. The joint exercises have opened the path towards further joint exercises and enhanced maritime surveillance. The exercises conducted have enhanced the ability to survey the ocean as well as surveillance towards the Mozambique Channel, Mauritius, and the Southwest Indian Ocean Region. Such collaboration improves the status of the two nations in the war on piracy, drug trafficking, smuggling of weapons, and dealing with the existence of foreign powers in the region (Seth, 2022).

In addition, they have enhanced their collaboration with close coordination, joint development, and co–production ventures. This was further accentuated during the 4th India–France annual dialogue on defense that was held in 2022 at New Delhi with the intervention of the Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh and the visiting French Minister of the Armed Forces, Sebastien Lecornu, on the theme, Indo–Pacific and its importance in the French Regional Strategy (Sukhija, 2024). In the 4th India–France Annual

Defense Dialogue, several issues related to bilateral, regional, and defense industrial cooperation were raised. The two countries suggested that they were eager to improve security and military relations, especially through expanding the number of military operations together in the maritime domain. Furthermore, France has assisted India in its “Make in India” initiative to enhance the defense-industrial collaboration (Bharti & Singh, 2023).

In 2021, India and France signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to enhance their cooperation in the sphere of renewable energy, thus enhancing their partnership in the Indo-Pacific region. This agreement also aids in the movement and training of scientific and technical staff, and continuous sharing of technical information and scientific data. The main objective is to establish common projects and develop cooperation based on technology. The two countries have set a target of attaining 450 GW of renewable energy potential by the year 2030. In 2022, India and France launched a track 1.5 dialogue with an emphasis on such areas as innovation, sustainability, and multilateral cooperation. The other significant aspect of their alliance is the collaboration in counterterrorism; both states are working hard to combat transnational terrorism in the Indo-Pacific. They engage in air drills and counter-terrorist efforts such as the No Money for Terror campaign. The economic relationship between France and India is close, with French firms having business in various sectors of the Indian industries. The bilateral trade between the two countries has been consistently growing, with no trade deficit reported, and they continue to enhance their cooperation on the economic level (India-France Joint Statement, 2024).

France And China

France still maintains a very complex relationship with China in the framework of the Indo-Pacific strategy. France attaches great value to the stability of the region and tries to avoid conflicts with China, although the latter is viewed as a systemic and economic competitor and an influential diplomatic opponent. This is a balanced approach that is fundamental to its Indo-Pacific policy. The French president Macron, days before the referendum of New Caledonia, stated, “In this part of the globe China is building its hegemony, we have to work with China, But if don't organize ourselves, it will soon be a hegemony which will The United Kingdom, France and the Indo-Pacific reduce our liberties, our opportunities, which we will suffer” (BRADY FRSNZ, 2024; Catton, 2022). Due to the recognition of the growing influence and activities of China in the region, France has shifted its position. China is a major trading partner as it is the second-largest supplier and the seventh-largest customer of France. France has condemned China due to unfair trade practices and issues with human rights in Tibet and Xinjiang, despite the economic relationship (Duggal, 2022). The policy manuals of France, like the Indo-Pacific Strategy and the National Strategic Review, have highlighted the threats that China poses to France and Europe. France has demonstrated its military strength by placing the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle in the Indo-Pacific. Nonetheless, France and China still maintain a collaborative relationship in the economic arena, as the two countries have signed agreements to collaborate in various other areas in the infrastructure and environmental fields. France and China have recently been focusing on the stability of global trade by demonstrating impartiality in trade relations towards one another, following the US tariff war (France 24, 2025).

Announcement of AUKUS and Challenges for France

In September 2021, the US, the UK, and Australia established the AUKUS alliance to collaborate by exchanging key military and technological advantages and ensuring security and stability in the Indo-Pacific (Barnes & Makinda, 2022). Due to the fact that the submarine program of Australia was terminated because of this agreement, France took it personally, and there was a serious diplomatic rift between the two nations. The decision by Australia to cancel its contract with France to purchase diesel submarines and buy nuclear-powered submarines with AUKUS shook the strategy plans of France in the Indo-Pacific. France found this a betrayal, considering that both of them had a long strategic alliance and trusted each other. The dispute damaged the relations between Paris and Canberra and made it difficult to plan regionally in France. The relationship between them is strained as Australia is more interested in containing Chinese aggression, and France wants the Indo-Pacific region to be strategically independent

and less dependent on US influence. Nonetheless, France still acknowledges that Australia is a bilateral partner and will seek to work in collaboration with its interests and those of its regional allies.

France Regional Rapprochement after AUKUS

France has a complex approach in the Indo-Pacific region with a focus on balancing its interests in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. The AUKUS pact changed the Indo-Pacific strategy of France and created an Australian diplomatic crisis in September 2021. However, efforts have been made to mend the relationship since the Australian government changed in May 2022. Australia is a key ally for France in its Indo-Pacific strategy, and recent diplomatic initiatives have aimed to rebuild mutual respect and cooperation between the two nations (France-Australia, 2023). A comprehensive plan for collaboration is being created, emphasizing defense, security, resilience, climate action, education, and culture. In addition, France places a high priority on forging alliances in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. It has enhanced its relationships with the UAE and India, especially in matters concerning security and defense. Backed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), France has been in a position to support a powerful naval presence in the Indian Ocean to the extent of having its 800 naval command and troops stationed in the ocean in 2009. On September 15, 2021, Macron welcomed the Emirati ruler, Mohammed bin Zayed. The UAE followed three months later with the announcement that the country was willing to buy eighty French Rafale fighter jets, F-35. The military cooperation and counterterrorism have been further enhanced between the UAE and India through mutual military exercises. In 2021, the French, UAE, and Indian navies conducted a multilateral naval exercise in the Persian Gulf (Samaan, 2023). In a bid to enhance cooperation at regional levels, France is also engaging the ASEAN countries as well as the ASEAN-related forums. France has actively participated in various multilateral initiatives and organizations within the Indo-Pacific region, such as the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), demonstrating its commitment to the area. It also facilitates active safety in the maritime, sustainable development, and collaborations in regions. The environmental security and disaster relief of the region is also a concern for France. It involves France, Australia and New Zealand (FRANZ) mechanism, which strategizes against natural disasters. France is also active in the fight against piracy and cyber threats to security, and counterterrorist action.

France's Cooperation With The EU in the Indo-Pacific

In recognition of the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific region, France is making it a part of its European agenda. By improving the presence of the European Union (EU) in the Indo-Pacific, the country plans to improve its engagement, influence, and cooperation. Due to the strategic position of France, it is in a position to serve as a bridge between Europe and the Indo-Pacific to improve collaboration between the two regions. The EU has issued a Strategy of Cooperation in the region in order to appreciate the significance of the Indo-Pacific. It is also the second-largest receiver of EU goods imports, and it has had significant investments in the region (Duggal, 2022). France uses the financial resources and regulatory power of the EU to offset the influence of China, through such initiatives as the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy. As a part of the EU, France integrates multiple departments and communities into its Indo-Pacific policy. France contributed to the creation of a strategic alliance between the EU and ASEAN. In order to make the EU a geostrategic entity without external interference, President Macron supports the principle of strategic autonomy of the EU (Coté, 2023).

China and US Competition in the Indo-Pacific

The rivalry of China and the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, where multilateral cooperation is essential to maintain stability, is considered a threat to the multilateral world order. The US has fortified the Indo-Pacific strategy to deal with China, whose influence and naval power are on the rise in the area. The intentions to put the First Fleet under US control and the establishment of the Indo-Pacific Command can be cited as examples of this strategy (Lawale and Ahmad, 2021). France, on the other hand, is concerned that either China or the USA will end up dominating the world due to its belief that neither of the two completely respects the values of Europe. France promotes collaboration and coordination to ensure an open and fair global order in the Indo-Pacific. It has concentrated on balancing power between China and the United States, with France and the European Union having interests in competing in this market. The

approach of France is to become a balancing power in the region, which emphasizes that it is against the face-to-face confrontation of the major powers. By providing an alternative to cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, France hopes to prevent states from having to choose between the US and China while still preserving their strategic independence. France is, however, struggling to establish credibility in the Indo-Pacific region due to skepticism by people regarding its economic and military capabilities relative to superpowers. It aims to emerge as the leader of middle powers in Asia, even though the number of resources required towards this end remains unknown. Although France has noted that China is aggressively investing in the region, its Indo-Pacific policy is strongly connected with the United States and supports the alliance with Washington under NATO.

Results

France promotes stability in the region and knows how significant the Indo-Pacific is to business and security. France has reviewed its relationships with Australia in response to events like the AUKUS partnership and the issues that it has brought. Despite this, there is a high level of cooperation in helping the Pacific Island countries. France is trying to achieve independence in its strategic decisions by working with its regional partners. This implies maintaining good defense ties with the UAE and India by being involved in joint military drills. It is also developing closer defense ties with the ASEAN countries by becoming an observer at the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meetings Plus. France signifies its support for multilateralism in the French Development Agency (AFD), which attempts to advance sustainable development in the area. The KIWA and FRANZ agreements show that France is committed to guiding the Pacific Island nations in fighting climate change and responding to disasters. Even though France follows the US footsteps for its Indo-Pacific strategy, there are worries that, as Australia gets stronger due to AUKUS, France could lose its influence in the region. Even though it has some problems in building a strong reputation and defining its regional influence, France is trying to show its authority and secure its interests.

France is demonstrating to be a counter-balancing force to the presence of China, and an alliance is something that should be promoted in the Indo-Pacific region. It advocates international norms, multilateralism, and a rules-based system, thereby providing some other choice to the US-China relations for European countries (*FRANCE AND SECURITY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC*, 2019).

The actions of China are a threat, but France is more eager not to take sides in each and every issue of the two countries because independence is the most important. France is highly autonomous and cannot allow China to take it over in the same proportion hence the need to form strategic alliances. France tries not to engage in open conflict with China and prefers to stay on safe side. France, though not satisfied, does not meddle in the conflict between China, nor does it seek to confront it head-on. It recognizes that any fighting in the Indo-Pacific will cause serious problems in its interests and territories and that is why it is trying its level best to ensure that the region is secure. France will be more interested in demonstrating itself as a third power than in the direct involvement of China. France targets to have a balancing position in the Indo-Pacific, which is mainly out of fear of the Chinese behavior and an intention of making sure that the region is stable.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In this paper, it will be proved that France is actively involved in the Indo-Pacific region. It needs to increase its security effort in conjunction with other neighboring countries like the United Arab Emirates and India to strengthen its independence in strategy. It can be carried out through joint military operations, sharing of information, and also through the cooperation of the defense industry, and this would not only increase the role of France in the Indo-Pacific but also increase security in the region. France also needs to narrow the gap in perception of its economic and military power with the other forces in the region. In order to do this and become a respected and credible partner in the Indo-Pacific region, it needs to consciously flaunt its advantages, demonstrate scientific and technological progress, and emphasize fruitful relationships.

France should pay more attention to improving military relations and economic cooperation with the countries of ASEAN. It is also necessary to strengthen the French spirit of multilateralism and collective

action, as this has been seen with the French involvement in institutions like the FRANZ and the French Development Agency (AFD). To fund sustainable development initiatives such as renewable energy and climate change adaptation, there is also a need to actively participate in bilateral and multilateral donors. France must also analyze and review the repercussions and difficulties of playing the middle ground between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific. The key thing to consider before stepping into the diplomatic field with China is to weigh the pros and cons of such a strategy, the effects it is going to have on the regional politics, French interests, and power in the region.

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