



Center for Geopolitical & Strategic
Maritime Studies

Roma, Lungotevere delle Armi, 24

Geopolitica-mente

Thoughts to understand the world
n. 12 - august 2023

French Maritime Policy in the Indo-Pacific

«Présence et influence» - the role of the Marine Nationale in the regional balance of power

France is the only European state which exercises its sovereignty over the territories of the Indo-Pacific and therefore has illustrated, in several assemblies, an area of direct strategic interest which extends longitudinally from the archipelago of Mayotte (long. 45°E) to Clipperton Island (109°W) and latitudinally from the Korean peninsula up to the Kerguelen Islands (lat. 49° S), an archipelago part of the *Terres australes et antarctiques françaises*.



The logo of the Marine National

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In this geopolitical space, approximately 1.6 million French citizens live, three quarters of the Exclusive Economic Zone extend (the second largest in the world) and a stable force of 7,000 military defends France's sovereignty and interests in the region. The main threats are the historical and growing state tensions (India-Pakistan, USA-China and between the two Koreas) as well as non-state risks, represented by organized crime, pollution and terrorism. In the document *la Stratégie de la France dans l'Indopacifique 2022*, the President of the French Republic Emmanuel Macron outlined the main areas of action of French foreign policy in this area, namely: Indo-Pacific as an open and inclusive area, economy based on connectivity, multilateralism, environmental policy and strengthening of European policy in the region.

Taking into consideration the aforementioned points, this pamphlet aims to illustrate the salient features of the French maritime strategy in the Indo-Pacific. In fact, both from a geographical and anthropological point of view, the sea constitutes the focus of the strategic interests in the region.

Consequently, maritime policy represents a fundamental tool for enabling France to be incisive and effective in a geopolitical space that has become the fulcrum of global balances in recent decades.

Maritime global commons and sustainable economic interests

The general economic characteristics of the region, albeit marked by profound internal contrasts, represent a global basin of opportunities, in fact in the Indo-Pacific: 36% of world wealth resides, 60% of the planet GDP is produced, economic development constitutes the 2/3 of overall growth, in 2030 a middle class made up of 2.4 billion citizens will live there, there are 3 of the 4 largest non-European economies (China, India and Japan) and technological and commercial leadership poles are located.

As far as France is concerned, 18% of imports originate in the Indo-Pacific, 14% of exports are destined for a total of 8% of the total investments made by the transalpine country. In particular, for the French military industry, the Indo-Pacific represents the main global market, with important contracts in India (Dassault Rafale fighter and Scorpène class submarines) and shipbuilding programs: for example, the sale to Singapore and Taiwan of two modified versions of the La Fayette-class light frigate, designated as Formidable-class and Kang Ding-class respectively.

A Safe and Secure Maritime Environment is the necessary and sufficient condition for the commercial prosperity and socio-economic development of the area. This assumption is established in contexts of geopolitical stability and contextual environmental security and allows the development of exchange and connectivity infrastructures, mainly ports, airports and submarine pipelines. The protection of maritime global commons is therefore of primary importance in order to affirm the freedom of navigation and access to marine resources, the safety of the Sea Lane of Communications, the protection of the marine environment and the contrast to the forced territorialization of the spaces seafarers.

In a complex theater on a social and environmental level, France promotes a specific blue economy, focused on sustainability and supported by dedicated forums such as the Pacific Business Days in Papeete.

Sustainable development is also based on cultural and scientific initiatives such as the Tech4Islands Awards, which promote eco-compatible technological innovation projects in the Polynesian archipelagos. Furthermore, an important role is played by interagency collaborations between public and private entities and major research institutes, for example the Institut de recherche pour le développement (IRD), the Institut Français de Recherche pour l'Exploitation de la Mer (IFREMER) and the Institut Pasteur, which have important study centers mainly in New Caledonia.

At the One Ocean Summit, the Presidency of the French Republic strengthened the network of marine protected areas which, located in the Terres australes françaises, in "Rahui Nui" Polynesia and in New Caledonia, make up a total network of more than 3 million km².

Maritime multilateralism

From a maritime point of view, the multilateral approach takes the form of French participation in many sector initiatives, such as: the Indian Ocean Rim Association, the Indian Ocean Commission, the Regional Cooperation Fund in the Indian Ocean and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium. The latter brings together 24 navies operating in the area and promotes synergies between the different command structures and the various operational bodies. The Marine Nationale also promotes a shared maritime security infrastructure among various countries in the region, specifically through the Maritime Information Fusion Centers located in Madagascar, Singapore and New Delhi. The exchange of information is of particular help in combating maritime crime in the area, represented by traditional piracy, illicit trafficking and clandestine fishing. In this context, it is also appropriate to mention a new form of maritime competition, represented by the increasingly widespread use of state-based maritime militias similar to a new meaning of "pirate flotilla". In support of maritime cooperation, France, India and Australia have established a trilateral dialogue in the areas of maritime safety, resource exploitation and the promotion of multilateral forums. The maritime partnership between France and Japan is underlined by the cooperation in the fields of maritime security, the fight against piracy and illegal fishing and in the conduct of significant bilateral exercises. In such a large area subject to multiple environmental risks, France supports Human Safety through international agreements with other States, with the aim of centralizing resources and improving intervention capabilities in the event of humanitarian support. One of the most significant initiatives

operating in the disaster relief sector is the FRANZ Agreement involving France, Australia and New Zealand. Following the Australian choice to promote the military initiatives of the AUKUS pact, to the detriment of the partnership established with France in matters of security and defence, after a period of strong dialogue, Paris has re-evaluated the strategic partnership with Canberra, developing an approach to dialogue on individual shared dossiers.

Security & Defence Policy

The French defense strategy in the Indo-Pacific is divided into five objectives: defend national sovereignty and national interests present in the EEZ, promote international cooperation, preserve the freedom of navigation and the use of the maritime global commons, contribute to the Balance of Power in the area through a multilateral approach and anticipate the risks arising from climate change and environmental problems.



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French military policy in the Indo-Pacific is conducted by three joint forces, the so-called "Forces of Sovereignty", prepared for the defense of the main Territoires d'Outre-Mer of the Indo-Pacific; specifically: Forces armées dans la Zone-sud de l'Océan Indien (FAZSOI: 5000 soldiers, 5 ships, 2 planes, 2 helicopters), Forces armées en Nouvelle-Calédonie (FANC: 1660 soldiers, 4 ships, 4 planes, 4 helicopters) and Forces armées de Polynésie française (FAPF: 1160 soldiers, 3 ships, 5 aircrafts, 3 helicopters). The maritime projection in the region is divided into two distinct Commands, operating in the Indian Ocean (ALINDIEN based in Abu Dhabi) and the Pacific Ocean (ALPACI based in Papeete). It is necessary to underline that the link between the defense policy in the Indo-Pacific and the Euro-Mediterranean security and defense policy is represented by the important logistic and military bases of Djibouti and Abu Dhabi, where the Forces françaises à Djibouti (FFDj: 1450 servicemen, 4 combat aircrafts, 1

transport aircraft, 8 helicopters) and the Forces françaises aux Émirats arabes unis (FFEAU: 650 servicemen, 1 ship, 6 combat aircrafts, 1 transport aircraft).

In addition to the activities of the Marine Nationale, the main object of this document, the Armée de l'Air et de l'Espace usually carries out asset projection missions in the Indo-Pacific as in operations: Pégase 2018 (Southeast Asia), Skyros 2021 (Indian Ocean) and Heifara Wakea 2021 (French Polynesia).

Naval Policy

French military activities in the area have a strong maritime connotation and range from training to missions in the context of Maritime Security Operations, Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) and power projection activities. Maritime Law Enforcement operations are conducted by light frigates and offshore patrol boats and have as their main purpose the fight against illicit maritime traffic, fishing control and anti-piracy. Among the most significant examples of FONOPS conducted by French naval units, we recall the diplomatic confrontation resulting from the harmless passage of the frigate Vendémiaire in the Taiwan Strait in 2019 and the deployment of the FREMM Lorraine in 2023.



French Navy dynamism at sea

(<https://www.google.it/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.lamarinerecrite.fr%2Fqui-sommes-nous%2Fmissions-et-organisation&psig=AOvVaw3EEGu8eidMpdhBT8osH92R&ust=1691638124859000&source=images&cd=vfe&opi=89978449&ved=0CBEQjRxqFwoTCLjLpZ7RzoADFQAAAAAdAAAAABAZ>)

Examples of strategic projection activities are represented by the Clemenceau mission carried out by the Charles de Gaulle Naval Air Group in 2019 and by the redeployment of the Émeraude nuclear attack submarine which took place in 2021.

From a training point of view, the French Navy promotes cooperation in matters of security through many international exercises, among which we recall: La Pérouse in the Bay of Bengal, Croix du Sud in New Caledonia and Varuna/Geruda with India.

Furthermore, the Marine Nationale is used to involve RIMPAC (The Rim of the Pacific Exercise), an offshore patrol

unit normally stationed in Papeete: in 2020 the OPV Bougainville, D'Entrecasteaux class (classified as bâtiments de soutien et d'assistance outre-mer - BSAOM) and in 2022 the light frigate Prairial, Floreal class. Probably, according to what emerges from open sources, an anti-aircraft FREMM should participate in RIMPAC 2024.

The Indo-Pacific is often the scene of naval diplomacy missions by the amphibious task groups part of the Jeanne d'Arc Mission, which, although conceived as an educational campaign in favor of the officers of the Ecole Navale, provides for the deployment of a Mistral-class LHD escorted by a La Fayette class frigate and the conduct of real operations, especially in the context of maritime security.

The Marine Nationale also carries out important maritime Capacity Building, humanitarian support and environmental protection missions which, in addition to safeguarding regional stability, promoting a Safe and Secure Environment, are a valid instrument of diplomatic cooperation.

The "Plan Mercator", a document that outlines French naval policy every two years, illustrates a path aimed at achieving full operational capacity in high-intensity combat, a hypothesis considered increasingly realistic by the Chief of Staff of the Marine Nationale Adm. Pierre Vandier. In this perspective, the Indo-Pacific represents a region of potential conflict and therefore the Marine Nationale has increased the presence of assets with superior operational capabilities compared to the normal "sovereignty forces", mainly dedicated to tasks related to maritime security.

In 2023, the Marine Nationale is conducting two important activities of strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific: the first is represented by the Antarès Mission of the Charles de Gaulle Aeronaval Group (GAN), the second by the Jeanne d'Arc 2023 Mission. The GAN deployment aim was to affirm French strategic credibility in the area, operational readiness and tactical unpredictability, elements achieved by studied and essential strategic communication. The Jeanne d'Arc 2023 education campaign is traveling around the world by participating in various operational, training and diplomatic activities in the Indo-Pacific, for example: EUNAVFOR Atalanta, La Pérouse and Croix du Sud 23.

Finally, some sector magazines hypothesize a deployment of the GAN Charles de Gaulle in the Pacific Ocean in 2025, demonstrating the French will to play an increasingly significant strategic role in the region.

Conclusions: European perspective of French strategy in the Indo-Pacific

Despite the tensions present on the eastern borders of the European Union, due in part to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the Indo-Pacific nonetheless represents an area of primary importance for the safeguarding of global commons

and the economic development of the EU. Trade between the states of the European Union and the economies of the Indo-Pacific has a volume that exceeds 1,000 billion euros and represents 40% of imports and 27% of exports.

France is the only state of the European Union with territories in the Indo-Pacific and has strongly contributed, in the last five years, to the drafting of the "European Strategy in the Indo-Pacific", aimed at affirming an autonomous European strategy in the region, comprising inclusiveness, dialogue and the despiralization of geopolitical tensions. Many of the EU objectives promoted by France have a strong maritime connotation, such as for example Ocean Governance in the application of UNCLOS, compliance with the Rule of Law at sea, human security and the protection of the marine environment. The multilateral approach is reaffirmed by the definition of the strategic partnership between the EU and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and by the many bilateral relationships with other indigenous countries and stakeholders present in the area.

The European security and defense policy in the Indo-Pacific is clearly defined in the "Eu Strategy for Cooperation In The Indo-Pacific" and in the "ESIWA" project (Enhancing the European Union's Security Cooperation In and With Asia). In this documentary framework, the sectors of intervention are identified, strongly similar to the sectors of action of the French strategy in the region:

- Counter Terrorism and Preventing/Countering of Violent Extremism (CT-P/CVE);
- Cybersecurity;
- Maritime Security;
- Crisis Management.

In addition to these, we note the importance of protecting freedom of navigation, an element of fundamental importance if we consider that 30% of trade between Asia and the EU passes through the South China Sea.

A stable presence in the Indo-Pacific constitutes the possibility for the European Union to anticipate those exogenous crisis factors developed in that region which, once they arrive in the Euro-Mediterranean area, would be complex and late to manage.

From this point of view, it is not possible to separate the European Strategy in the Indo-Pacific from the French strategy in the aforementioned area, since the Territoires d'Outre-Mer are the bulwark of the European presence in the region. In this context, the French maritime strategy in the Indo-Pacific plays a decisive role, as it fully applies the naval policy algorithm structured in presence, surveillance, anticipation and intervention.

For further information:

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Marzio Pratellesi

Marzio Pratellesi is a Lieutenant of the Italian Navy. He attended the Naval Academy from 2013 to 2016 when he obtained a Master's Degree in Maritime and Naval Sciences. Specialized in missileic and conventional artillery, he embarked on frigates and destroyers. In 2018 he circumnavigated Latin America (Cape Horn) aboard the Mexican training ship ARM Cuauhtémoc. In the two-year period 2019-2021 he carried out a Personal Exchange Program with the Marine Nationale holding the position of Chief Artillery Component of the destroyer Forbin. The T.V. Pratellesi is currently employed at the New Naval Construction Center.

Center for Geopolitical and Strategic Maritime Studies «Geopolitica-mente»

Edited by: Roberto DOMINI

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