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REVIEWING THE INDO-PACIFIC POLICY OF FRANCE: CAN GAULLISM SHINE, AND HOW?

¹Hsiao-Chi Hsu & ²Chih-Mei Luo

¹Graduate Institute of Political Science,

National Taiwan Normal University, Taiwan

²Department of Public Administration and Policy,

National Taipei University, Taiwan

²*Corresponding author: cmluo@mail.ntpu.edu.tw*

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ABSTRACT

In the context of escalating global geopolitical concerns over the Indo-Pacific region, France stands out among its European counterparts for being the earliest state to recognize the region's significance. This distinction has prompted key research questions in the following three areas: the motivation behind France's Indo-Pacific policy, whether France's actions deviate from its Gaullist foreign policy tradition, and the potential effectiveness of these actions. To address these questions, this paper conducted a careful qualitative examination of France's Indo-Pacific policy development and characteristics. The findings revealed that France's Indo-Pacific policy is motivated by three key interests, namely security, economy, and leadership. This paper also found that France's policy actions reflected both a continuation and modification of the Gaullist tradition, evident in President Macron's

mix of cooperation and skepticism toward the United States (US) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Concerning policy effectiveness, France's status as a regional and middle power implies significant constraints in its physical capabilities, which hinder its ability to alleviate tension arising from the US–China competition, the dominant forces shaping the regional political-economic dynamics. Nevertheless, France's expanding presence and enhanced soft-power influence in the Indo-Pacific region have the potential to yield increased bargaining leverage in its interaction with the US and China.

Keywords: French foreign policy, Indo-Pacific strategy, partnership building, Gaullism, US–China competition.

INTRODUCTION

The competition between the United States (US) and China in the Indo-Pacific region has become a focal point in recent years. In addition to the “QUAD” states (the US, Japan, India, and Australia), European states, such as France, Germany, and the Netherlands, have all articulated their Indo-Pacific policies in response to the escalating power dynamics. Among these European states, France stands out as being the earliest to pay attention to the region's significance.

France's intention to bolster its involvement in the Indo-Pacific region began to draw attention in early 2018. During his state visits to India and Australia, President Macron (2017–) explicitly expressed his eagerness to “make India [France's] prime strategic partner in the region” and advocated for extending the France–India strategic partnerships to Australia. He also gave his regional vision by emphasizing the importance of “freedom and sovereignty” and arguing that “[n]either the Indian Ocean, nor the Pacific Ocean can be allowed to become spaces of hegemony” (French Embassy in New Delhi, 2018). This trip culminated in strengthening the bilateral strategic relationship through the “Joint Strategic Vision of India–France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean region” (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018), a document focusing on coordinated maritime issues. A few weeks later, Macron visited Australia, where the two states announced the “Joint Statement on the Australia–France Relationship,” underscoring the significance of close collaboration between the two nations to uphold the rule-based order, trading system, multilateralism, and shared security in

the Pacific and Indian Oceans (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2018). While Macron reiterated that France did not adopt an antagonistic stance towards China, his speech at the Garden Island naval base underscored the need for a strategic re-orientation by France to garner respect as an equal partner from China, emphasizing the importance of existing rules and multilateralism for China's development in the region (Staff, 2018).

To encapsulate Macron's political objectives in the above-mentioned events, Frederic Gare (2020) highlighted three key imperatives from the Garden Island speech as follows: "limiting the harms to French interests posed by the rise of China, preserving the Franco-American relationship beyond the vicissitudes of the occupant of the White House, and extricating France as much as possible from the rivalry between Beijing and Washington." To understand why France has taken an active position in the region, this paper seeks to examine the motivation and characteristics of France's Indo-Pacific policy. It begins with an overview of France's foreign policy convention. What follows next is a review of the evolution of France's Indo-Pacific policy, as well as an examination of the policy's characteristics and effectiveness. It then concludes by discussing the regional implications of France's Indo-Pacific policy.

THE CONVENTIONS OF FRENCH FOREIGN POLICY

As a major power in Europe with a rich historical heritage, France's foreign policy ideology has been significantly influenced by its past and collective memories. Shortly after World War II, President Charles de Gaulle (1959–69) adopted a "Third Way" diplomatic doctrine aimed at restoring France's major power status in Europe and avoiding automatic alignment with the United States (Mazzucchi, 2023, p. 6). A notable manifestation of this doctrine was the reluctance in Paris to engage fully with the US-dominated North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). De Gaulle even took steps to withdraw France from NATO's integrated military command in 1966, leading to the relocation of the organization's headquarters from Paris to Brussels. Given that this unique doctrine has been shaping French diplomatic policy throughout the decades, it is essential to examine briefly its rationale and subsequent impact.

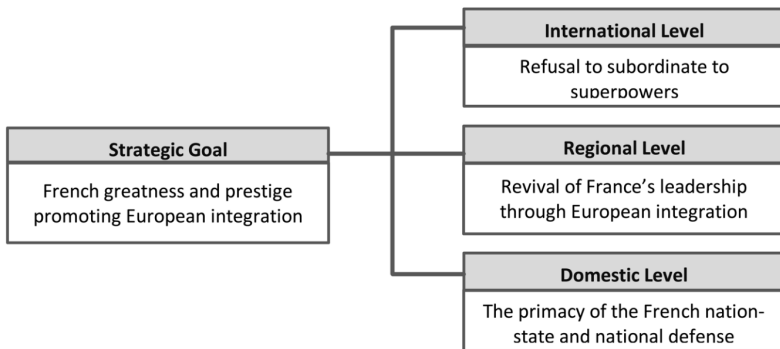
France's foreign policy approach in the 20th century was intricately linked to shifts in its power status since World War II. As one of the principal belligerent state, France felt slighted by its exclusion from the "peace conferences in Tehran (1943), Yalta or Potsdam (1945) where Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin discussed the end of the war and the post-war arrangements" (Rieker, 2017, p. 16). This disillusionment, coupled with its weakened power position during the war, fueled a strong desire within the state to restore its national prestige (Vernet, 1992). This endeavor, as Rieker aptly described, was "explicitly justified by referring to France's historical heritage, its 'exceptionalism' or, as de Gaulle put it, 'la grandeur de la France'" (Rieker, 2017, p. 16). De Gaulle believed that restructuring the French political system to reinforce the state leader's political control was essential to achieve this goal (Rieker, 2017, p. 17). With authoritative control over policymaking, de Gaulle sought to reassert his state's position as a major power by emphasizing its political and cultural heritage and asserting its right to diplomatic autonomy even amidst the superpower rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union. Stanley Hoffmann (1984, p. 41) succinctly summarized two fundamental principles of de Gaulle's foreign policy. First, de Gaulle not only staunchly opposed close integration with NATO, but also rejected the idea of establishing a supranational European organization, the European Economic Community (EEC).

As Vratimos (2023) has pointed out, although de Gaulle eventually supported the creation of the EEC, his motivation was to advance French economic interests through it rather than a belief in European integration. The second principle of de Gaulle's foreign policy pertained to French relations with the US and the Soviet Union. While de Gaulle resisted the former's dominance in Europe and interference in foreign policy, he maintained a delicate balance of containment and cooperation with the latter. Likewise, his policy toward West Germany consisted of a combination of reconciliation, close cooperation, and the preservation of French military superiority (Hoffmann, 1984, p. 41). As Gordon (1993, p. 3) summarized, de Gaulle's strategic thinking consisted of the following five principles: "the absolute need for independence in decision-making, a refusal to accept subordination to the United States, the pursuit of grandeur and prestige, the primacy of the nation-state, and the significance of national defense." Among these five principles, the pursuit of France's grandeur and prestige can be regarded as the overarching strategic goal of the state. This strategic goal, in turn, gave rise to three corresponding foreign policy principles at different levels (see Figure 1), which can be summarized as follows:

- At the international level, a steadfast refusal to subordinate to superpowers.
- At the regional level, a commitment to reviving France’s leadership through the initiation and promotion of European integration.
- At the national level, a dedication to upholding the primacy of the French nation-state and national defense.

Figure 1

De Gaulle’s Foreign Policy Strategic Goal and Principles



De Gaulle left office in 1969, but his foreign policy influence persisted throughout the Cold War era. Even his long-time adversary, François Mitterrand, did not deviate significantly from this legacy during his presidency (1981–1995). Mitterrand leaned more towards Atlanticism and the notion of reintegration into NATO, but he continued to ensure firm presidential control over foreign policy, emphasize France’s national independence, and insist that France’s nuclear force not be included in any arms control negotiations (Hoffmann, 1984, p. 42). Similarly, President Jacques Chirac (1995–2007) fell short of bringing France back to the alliance due to US disagreement with his insistence of the “‘real’ Europeanization of NATO” (Rieker, 2017, p. 110). The 2003 Iraq war further strained bilateral relations between Paris and Washington, as Chirac vehemently opposed the US military invasion. A more notable policy shift occurred during Nicolas Sarkozy’s presidency (2007–2012), as he successfully steered France back into NATO’s integrated military command in 2009. This development has led to varied assessments of Sarkozy’s foreign policy beliefs with some analysts labeling him an Atlanticist and others disagreeing. For instance, Justin Vaisse (2008, pp. 5–6) argued that although Sarkozy’s

penchant for media exposure and reliance on diplomatic backchannels appeared to diverge from the Gaullist principles, his focus on promoting “French independence, influence, and grandeur” actually aligned with Gaullism. Conversely, Brinton Rowdybush and Patrick Chamorel (2012) contended that while certain facets of the Gaullist tradition were still present, France had gradually shifted towards a more moderate approach in pursuing its foreign policy independence and external influence.

Despite diverse assessments of Sarkozy’s foreign policy orientation, one aspect has remained constant: France’s foreign policy formulation is deeply ingrained in the belief of its illustrious history, which has greatly influenced its view of European development and desire to be “an initiator rather than a reactor” (Rowdybush & Chamorel, 2012, p. 177) in global politics. Therefore, even if the US–Soviet bipolar power competition has no longer existed since the 1990s, the Gaullist doctrine endures with France’s endeavor of regaining its “greatness” (Rieker, 2017, p. 1). This historical context provides a critical foundation for comprehending the nuanced characteristics of current President Emmanuel Macron’s (2017–) foreign policy, within which one could observe the leader’s aspiration to revive France’s leadership in promoting European integration, effort to enhance French-German cooperation in managing regional affairs, and friendly yet cautious approach toward the US to prevent excessive direct intervention in European politics (Steible, 2022; Tiersky, 2018).

FRANCE’S INDO-PACIFIC POLICY DEVELOPMENT

An earlier discussion of France’s assessment of the Indo-Pacific region appeared in the 2017 official report, *Defence and National Security Strategic Review* (Ministry of Armed Forces, 2017). While addressing the importance of deepening strategic partnerships, the document argued that the establishment of close ties with Australia was crucial for France to “forg[e] bonds that will help enhance maritime safety in the Indo-Pacific” (p. 62). It also explicitly pointed out the challenges raised by China’s global ambitions and its assertive behavior in the South China sea (p. 42–43). After Macron publicly laid out France’s concerns regarding the Indo-Pacific region, the French government released a set of official documents in the years between 2018 and 2022. To understand the development of France’s Indo-Pacific policy, this section offers a brief overview of these documents.

France and Security in the Indo-Pacific (2018) and Strategic Update 2021

Published by the Ministry of the Armed Forces, the paper entitled *France and Security in the Indo-Pacific* explicitly defined Indo-Pacific security as “a strategic challenge for France” (p. 2). According to this document, the rationale behind France’s rising interests in this region is at least two-fold. First, France is the only European state that possesses territories which span an area of 465,422 square-kilometer in this region. These territories are located in “the southern part of the Indian Ocean with the islands of Mayotte and La Réunion, the Scattered Islands and the French Southern and Antarctic Territories” and “in the Pacific Ocean with its territories in New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, French Polynesia and Clipperton Island” (p. 2). Second, given the dense population and intensive trade activities in the region, France has developed close commercial ties with many regional states. Consequently, this document argued that France is justified to consider itself a resident state and a key player in the Indo-Pacific. Following the release of this document, France appointed Ambassador to Australia, Christophe Penot as its first ambassador for the Indo-Pacific in October 2020. This appointment marked a major step forward in the Indo-Pacific policy actions of Paris.

In alignment with the above security evaluation, the updated assessment document entitled, *Strategic Update 2021*, further defined China as a “systemic rival for the EU, while remaining an economic competitor and sometimes important diplomatic partner” (p. 21). It further specified the protection of French citizens and territories, as well as the preservation of French influence and freedom of actions as the state’s key strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region. To protect these interests, this document emphasized the importance of strengthening its partnership with strategic allies, including the European Union (EU), NATO, the US, and Indo-Pacific allies.

France’s Partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, 2021

Another document also released in 2021, offered a comprehensive analysis of France’s view regarding partnerships building in the Indo-Pacific. According to this document, France’s strategic objectives of partnership-building in the Indo-Pacific can be categorized into the following aspects: to justify its role as a regional participant rather than an outsider, to assure freedom and openness in the region, to strengthen bilateral and multilateral networks of cooperation in the

region while continuing to pursue economic ties with China, and to bring the EU into this region to serve both European and French interests. A distinct feature of this document regarding partnership-building was that it differed from the US approach by proposing different types of cooperation according to the will and needs of the Indo-Pacific states. This diplomatic strategy was aimed at pursuing a third-path approach (p. 2), to attract regional states faced with acute challenges and they were unwilling to take a side in the US–China competition.

France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy, 2022

A paper entitled *France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy*, which has become the most comprehensive Indo-Pacific strategic document thus far, reiterated the goals of maintaining “a space that is open and inclusive, free of all forms of coercion and governed in accordance with international law and multilateralism” (p. 8). It categorized the country’s regional strategy objectives into the four pillars listed below, which reflected France’s practical concerns of hard-power competition (pillars 1 and 2), soft-power challenges (pillar 4), and the necessity of enhancing France’s influence by fostering cooperation with partner states—particularly the EU (pillar 3).

- **Security and defense:** drawing upon France’s long-term concern for the balance of power, this pillar lists the following three major threats in the Indo-Pacific: China’s increasing power and its tougher expression of territorial claims, the intensified China–US competition, as well as the growing tensions in the Chinese-Indian borders, the Taiwan straits, and the Korean peninsula.
- **Economic development and order:** this pillar values the region’s economic potential in trade, infrastructural buildings, and innovative technologies. It also acknowledges the challenges raised by China’s increasing infrastructural investment in the region through the Belt and Road Initiative.
- **Effective multilateralism based on the rule of law:** this pillar considers multilateralism a crucial approach when dealing with all the above three elements of its policy.
- **Global common goods:** this pillar concerns the importance of global common goods, such as climate change, public health, and human rights.

In addition to outlining its policy objectives, *France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy* also examined the key policy actions that the French

government deemed essential for addressing its strategic challenges and advancing its interests in the region. These actions provide valuable insights for gaining a deeper understanding of the characteristics of the country's Indo-Pacific strategy. Therefore, the next section aims to provide a careful examination of these characteristics by breaking them down into several components: France's perception of and interests in the region, its selection of policy instruments, and the influence of its foreign policy convention.

KEY FEATURES OF FRANCE'S INDO-PACIFIC POLICY

France's Perception of the Indo-Pacific and its Interests in the Region

Unlike those of other European states, France's interests in the Indo-Pacific are primarily driven not by economic interests but by the ambition to position itself as "a resident power in the region" (Wacker, 2021, March 9, p. 1). This is because France is the sole European power that still retains sovereign authority in the region. This territorial possession grants France an extensive Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the Indo-Pacific of about 9 million square kilometers. The region is also home to over 1.6 million French citizens and 7,000 military personnel (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020, p. 36; Toropchin, 2022, p. 400; Wacker, 2021, p. 3). With these sovereign interests in mind, France's predominant concerns revolve around security (Toropchin, 2022, p. 400) and geo-strategic challenges (Frécon, 2022, p. 5). This is evident in Macron's speeches and the two documents published by the Ministry of the Armed Forces, namely *France and Security in the Indo-Pacific* and *Strategic Update 2021*.

However, despite the initial emphasis on security, economic interests remain significant for France. According to the French government's assessment, the Indo-Pacific (excluding China) accounts for approximately 8.7% of French imports and 10% of French exports (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2022, p. 28). Although these figures might seem modest at first glance, both increased by 21.75% and 24.87%, respectively, from 2009 to 2019.¹ In addition

¹ The growth rates were calculated by the authors, using the trade data provided by the WITS database (<https://wits.worldbank.org>). The percentage of import from the Indo-Pacific region (excluding China) dropped significantly in 2020 and 2021, probably due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

to commercial goods, France held the position of the third-largest arms supplier to the region from 1999 to 2018. This has incentivized the French defense industry to anticipate an advanced engagement with the region (Frécon, 2022, p. 5; Parmar, 2022, p. 5). The region also represents a growing market for infrastructure development and technological innovations, further underlining its economic potential and value to France.

Beyond material interests, France's increasing involvement in the Indo-Pacific is also driven by a desire to bolster its reputation and influence. Macron articulated that France's strategy revolves around being a "stabilizing force, promoting the values of freedom and the rule of law" that aims to "provide solutions to the security, economic, health, climate, and environmental challenges facing countries in the zone" (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2022, p. 3). Furthermore, France seeks to distinguish itself from the more competitive approach of Washington by emphasizing the concept of "an inclusive Indo-Pacific" (Frécon, 2022, p. 6). These policies collectively aim to enhance the popularity of Paris and establish its leadership legitimacy in the region, which is consistent with Nye's (2004) concept of soft power.

To summarize, France's interests in the Indo-Pacific are multifaceted and likely unique among Western powers. To pursue these intricate interests effectively, the French government has adopted a comprehensive set of policy instruments.

France's Policy Instruments

As discussed above, the key interests that France attempts to secure via its Indo-Pacific policy include security, economy, and leadership. Similarly, the policy instruments adopted to pursue these interests can also be categorized into the following three distinct groups: military, economic, and diplomatic.

Military Instruments

Military instruments encompass a spectrum of activities, including regular patrols, training exercises, joint military drills, information sharing, arms trade, and more. These actions are geared towards safeguarding France's security through power projection and the

establishment of partnerships. For instance, the annual extensive mission of Jeanne d'Arc focuses on training navy personnel, fostering military cooperation and interoperability with partner states, and protecting French geo-strategic interests. France also regularly engages in joint military exercises with regional partners, such as the biennial exercises of Varuna and Garuda with India, and Croix du Sud with multiple states in New Caledonia (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2022, p. 54). Since 2018, France has begun to double its efforts to establish military partnerships. A pivotal milestone was reached with the French government's decision to launch Mission Clemenceau in 2019. During this five-month-long (March–July) mission, the carrier strike group Task Force 473 traversed the Mediterranean Ocean and the Indian Ocean, conducting a series of military exercises with France's defense partners. This included the regular Varuna exercise and the newly established French-led La Perouse exercises in the Bay of Bengal. Mission Clemenceau marked a number of strategic highlights. First, the mission was executed by France's most formidable combat group, Task Force 473, along with the state's only nuclear-powered submarine, Charles de Gaulle. Second, the La Perouse exercise was the first joint military exercise conducted together with Australia, France, Japan, and the US in the Indo-Pacific, showcasing their commitment and capability to uphold regional security and stability. Third, during Task Force 473's visit to Singapore for the Shangri-La Dialogue (May 31–June 2), French Defense Minister Florence Parly described the carrier group as a “mighty instrument of power projection” and a significant “incarnation” of the emerging “Indo-Pacific axis with France, India and Australia as its backbone, but with a strong cooperation with other countries in the region, and with Europeans of course” (Consulate General of France in Mumbai, 2019). In combination, these significant events conveyed a clear message of French determination to safeguard its power position in the Indo-Pacific through assertive actions. Recognizing the imperative of nuclear capabilities, France announced in late December 2020 that it is slated to construct a new nuclear-powered aircraft carrier to replace the de Gaulle by 2038.

Economic Instruments

France's economic instruments can be categorized into three dimensions. The first dimension emphasizes network-building, focusing on economic partnerships with regional states to secure

supply chains, enhancing EU–Asia connectivity, and fostering collaboration in innovation, public health, maritime resources, climate change, and other vital domains. The second dimension encompasses efforts to ensure fair economic exchanges and adherence to the rule of law by advocating for “sustainable practices in financing development,” “defending international trade rules, and modernizing the WTO” (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2022, p. 57). The third dimension underscores the importance of creating business opportunities for French companies in the region by providing governmental assistance, such as export support policies and encouraging blue economy initiatives. The final and fourth dimension centers on providing financial and technical support for public common goods, in order to assist regional states to address global challenges, such as climate change and public health. Specific policies rest on extending substantial assistance through France’s development aid agencies and collaboration with the EU and other industrialized nations. A prominent example of this collaborative approach is the KIWA Initiative program, which provides technical assistance and funding opportunities for local and regional projects focused on enhancing climate change resilience. Financial support for this program comes from Australia, Canada, the EU, France, and New Zealand, with program implementation overseen by the French Development Agency (AFD). The KIWA Initiative collaborates with the following three regional organizations: the Pacific Community (SPC), the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP), and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). This intricate network of coordination has enabled France to establish bilateral and multilateral partnerships with key stakeholders, significantly augmenting its influence in regional affairs.

France also actively engages in coordinating efforts with regional states and organizations to promote the blue economy. This policy has led to close collaboration between France and India, culminating in the signing of a pivotal “Roadmap on Blue Economy and Ocean Governance” agreement in February 2022. The agreement underscores the commitment of both states in developing a shared vision of ocean governance based on the rule of law. Encompassing critical aspects like maritime trade, naval industry, fisheries, marine technology, scientific research, and more (Press Trust of India, 2022), this agreement epitomizes bilateral collaboration, bolstered by the support and participation of the Indian Ocean Committee (IOC) and Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).

Diplomatic Instruments

Diplomatic instruments involve the French government's deliberate efforts to deepen existing relationships and forge new connections with Indo-Pacific states and regional organizations. State visits, active participation in projects and programs, political speeches, and the signing of agreements all play pivotal roles in enhancing France's visibility and discourse power—a significant objective of its Indo-Pacific strategy. They are also especially crucial for France to pursue multilateralism in the region. Examples of these efforts encompass strengthened collaboration with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and active support for the IOC and the IORA to advance economic, social, environmental, and health development. Of particular significance is France's unique position as the only major power holding full member state status in both the latter two organizations.²

An integral aspect of France's approach towards promoting multilateralism is its proactive advocacy for increased European engagement in the Indo-Pacific, particularly within the EU context. The 2021 release of the *EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific* stands as a testament to France's success in driving this endeavor and marks a significant milestone in European involvement in the region (Mazzucchi, 2023, p. 5). Building upon this, France continues to advocate for strengthening the partnerships between the EU and Indo-Pacific states/regional organizations. Given the comprehensive nature of France's Indo-Pacific policy, the EU's active involvement undoubtedly stands as a pivotal element influencing the strategy's potential for success.

By employing a combination of military, economic, and diplomatic policy instruments, France's Indo-Pacific strategy appears to offer a significant degree of flexibility, as these instruments serve multiple purposes and can complement one another. While the military instruments primarily focus on security issues, enhanced military cooperation can provide opportunities for arms sales and technology cooperation, as well as the protection of maritime resources. Economic instruments can strengthen both hard power and soft power

² The IOC currently has five state members: Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, Reunion (France), and Seychelles. The IORA has 23 member states and 11 dialogue partners. France was originally a dialogue partner of the IORA and was granted official membership in 2020.

influence, depending on whether they are used to facilitate economic interdependence or to provide the support for the development of public goods. Diplomatic connections are important for trust building and can thus promote defense and economic interests, while elevating France's state image and reputation. The potential contributions of these three instruments to its national key interests are as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of Potential Contributions of the Three Policy Instruments

Instruments Interests	Military instruments	Economic instruments	Diplomatic instruments
Security	Building capability and partnership	Enhancing economic interdependence	Building trust
Economy	Facilitating arms trade and markets	Securing economic ties and commercial opportunities	Strengthening cooperation
Leadership	Conducting military training, protecting public goods	Providing developmental aids and public goods	Increasing discourse power and promoting multilateralism

FRANCE'S INDO-PACIFIC POLICY: A MANIFESTATION OF FOREIGN POLICY CONVENTIONS?

As France's Indo-Pacific policy draws increasing attention, the ensuing question pertains to whether this policy design is more of a continuation of the French foreign policy tradition or represents a departure from it. The earlier analysis in this paper suggested that France's foreign policy tradition is deeply entrenched in Gaullist philosophy. Therefore, it is important to assess the extent to which the Indo-Pacific policy is guided by the Gaullist doctrine. To answer to this question, this paper provides an evaluation on the basis of the four key characteristics of Gaullism as has been identified by Hoffmann (1984) and Gordon (1993): an insistence on foreign policy independence, an opposition to US domination and NATO intervention, an aspiration for the restoration of national prestige and influence, and an emphasis on defense capability. First, in the aspect of foreign policy independence, the Gaullist principle is evident in Macron's political statements and

French policy documents. For instance, while addressing the 73rd United Nations General Assembly session, Macron proposed a “third way” approach to “forge together a new model, to find together a new world balance” (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2018). Similar to de Gaulle, Macron’s “third way” approach envisioned France as a balancing power between the US and China that could contribute to establishing stable global order by promoting multilateral cooperation. This notion was reiterated in *France’s Partnerships in the Indo-Pacific*, which argued Paris’s intention to “champion a third path in the Indo-Pacific, for responding to today’s upheavals with all well-intentioned powers” (p. 2).

Regarding the US, the current French administration holds a dual perception of it: an important ally and a global hegemon aiming to sustain its dominance. As Frecon (2022, p. 4) has put it, France persistently adheres to the principle of treating Washington as “friends, allied, but not aligned.” France’s attitude toward NATO is also mixed. Macron once publicly questioned the organization’s effectiveness, labeling it as “brain dead” and advocated for the need to enhance defense cooperation among European states (Marcus, 2019). However, he has also continued to recognize NATO’s strategic importance for France and European defense at the same time. The invasion of Ukraine by Russia since February 2022 has further complicated the French government’s assessment of NATO. All in all, these developments reflect France’s pragmatic considerations and a moderate adjustment of the Gaullist doctrine.

The third aspect concerning France’s relentless pursuit to reclaim its pre-WWII power status apparently remains influential in the state’s Indo-Pacific policy. This is evident in Macron’s characterization of France as “a great power of the Indo-Pacific” (Scott, 2019, pp. 77–78) and his emphasis on the state’s “universal vocation” to champion “humanism” (Staunton, 2019). Coupled with the “third way” concept, Macron’s aspiration to position France as a key regional player in the Indo-Pacific, vis-à-vis China and the United States, is evident. Lastly, defense policies stand at the core of France’s Indo-Pacific strategy. As outlined in *Strategic Update 2021*, France has discerned the imperative to strengthen its defense capability in response to the rapidly shifting power dynamics in the region. To achieve this goal, the document argued for the necessity to maintain nuclear deterrence as “the keystone” of French security, complemented by traditional forces (pp. 26–28). Buttressed by the “2019–25 Military Planning

Law (MPL),” which provided “unprecedented financial support” (p. 28) for the reconstruction of the French armed forces, such a strategy reflects the Gaullist ambition of establishing and maintaining strong defense capability.

It is clear from the above analysis that France’s Indo-Pacific strategy is a clear manifestation of its foreign policy conventions. As a regional stakeholder, France deploys a wide array of policy tools, including security, economic, and diplomatic means, to safeguard its interests and bolster its influence in the Indo-Pacific. It does so by pursuing its unique French approach rather than aligning itself with the US-led alliance, thus adhering to the principle of refusing to subordinate to superpowers. The regular visits of the French military to the region exemplify the nation’s commitment to upholding the primacy of the French nation-state and national defense. Macron’s insistence on visiting China with the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, demonstrates the strategic use of the EU’s collective strength to balance China’s influence while underscoring France’s leadership in this effort.

While France’s Indo-Pacific policy reflects a continuation in the pursuit of the state’s *Grandeur*, there are also noteworthy deviations from the Gaullist tradition. This is demonstrated by the improvement of the France–US relationship compared to that in the Cold War era and Paris’s more cooperative attitudes toward NATO despite Macron’s criticisms. These policy adjustments underscore Macron’s pragmatism, a characteristic shared by many French state leaders over the past decades.

REVIEWING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF FRANCE’S INDO-PACIFIC POLICY

As outlined earlier, France’s Indo-Pacific strategy encompasses a wide array of concerns ranging from security and economy to multilateralism and public common goods. It is thus, important to assess the effectiveness of such a strategy. Given the relatively short time since the official policy announcement, this section offers a preliminary analysis based on the currently available evidence. It particularly focuses on two key policy areas frequently emphasized in France’s Indo-Pacific narratives, namely security/defense and

partnership building, while also paying specific attention to France's ambition to act as a "balancing actor" between China and the US.

Assessing the Security and Defense Policies

France has engaged in a series of prominent bilateral and multilateral military endeavors over the past years to showcase its defense capabilities and enhance security collaboration with other key stakeholders. These actions also send a resolute message regarding French determination to protect its national interests and uphold regional stability and openness. Noteworthy examples include the 2019 La Perouse joint exercises, which later evolved into a regular biennial France–QUAD joint exercise, with India's participation in 2021 and 2023. France has also bolstered its military presence in proximity to Japan, as exemplified by the Jeanne d'Arc 21 exercises with Australia, Japan, and the US in southwestern Japan in May 2021 (Made, 2021). In 2023, France launched its largest joint military exercises, codenamed "Orion," with NATO allies, demonstrating an ambition to demonstrate its military prowess globally (Momtaz, 2023). Moreover, to support its defense capabilities and security activities, the French parliament recently passed the Military Programming Law 2024–2030 in July 2023, which is the highest 7-year defense budget thus far. This surge in the military budget signifies a consensus among political elites to advance the state's military capability.

However, there are also challenges. Despite aspirations to enhance military capability, France's global military ranking fell from 5th to 9th, according to the GlobalFirepower (2024) index. This decline indicates a hurdle in France's aspiration to play a pivotal regional role. Domestic and regional divisions also pose challenges to its security ambition. On the one hand, French public attitudes toward France's global involvement are divided. According to a recent survey, while 53% of French respondents consider military support to Ukraine beneficial, 47% are worried about its potential impact on the proliferation of conflict (IFOP, 2023). On the other hand, there are disagreements among European leaders about how to address security issues in the Indo-Pacific security challenges. A vivid example of this is Taiwan. These divisions could undermine Macron's leadership in European integration and jeopardize his goal of pursuing greater security through European cooperation.

Assessing France's Partnership Building

France has undertaken significant strides in forging partnerships, notably through Macron's vision of the Indo-Pacific axis involving France, India, and Australia. India now acknowledges France as a critical security provider, and a set of bilateral agreements, such as the "Joint Strategic Vision of India–France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean region" and a pivotal agreement concerning reciprocal logistics support, were signed by both sides. The latter accord granted both states the rights to utilize each other's naval bases, a move lauded by Prime Minister Modi as a "golden step" in their bilateral relations (Siddiqui, 2019). Furthermore, a substantial military contract was inked during Prime Minister Modi's visit to France in the summer of 2018, encompassing the acquisition of 26 Rafale Marine fighter jets and three Scorpene military submarines, illustrating the mutual commitment to deepening strategic cooperation (Leali, 2023).

France also secured a mutual logistics support agreement with Australia. Building on these progresses, the foreign ministers of the three states engaged in the first Trilateral Ministerial Dialogue in May 2021, reiterating their dedication to "advancing their shared values and working together to achieve a free, open, inclusive, and rules-based Indo-Pacific" (Ministry of External Affairs, 2021). Although this forward momentum was disrupted for months following Australia's unilateral termination of its diesel-powered submarine deal with France and its subsequent turn to the US and UK for nuclear-powered submarine procurement, as well as the announcement of the Australia–UK–US trilateral security pact (AUKUS), the two capitals eventually worked to rebuild relations. The Second France–Australia Foreign and Defense Ministerial Consultation was successfully held in Paris in January 2023, marking a significant step towards diplomatic reconciliation and rekindling the prospects for trilateral cooperation.

Assessing the Capability to Be a Balancing Actor

France's aspirations to act as a balancing power in the Indo-Pacific face strong challenges since the US continues to increase its regional influence through initiatives like the QUAD and AUKUS. Additionally, France's cautious approach to avoid direct confrontation with China, given its economic reliance on the Chinese market, has at times caused a divide between Paris and other European capitals. A notable incident occurred during Macron's visit to China with

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in April 2023, where the Chinese government provided distinct treatment due to the European Commission President's less accommodating stance on security issues. This has invited criticisms by some European leaders. To address these challenges, Macron has gradually replaced the "balancing actor" narrative with an emphasis on France being an "alternative policy-provider" to the US and China. This strategic shift toward a more pragmatic approach provides Macron with greater flexibility, allowing France to differentiate itself from the two big powers, while also actively participating in US-led cooperation efforts (Pajon, 2023). This is exemplified by Paris's commitment to fostering multilateral cooperation on clean energy and climate resilience in the Indo-Pacific. This issue has been a major concern for regional states, yet largely neglected by the Trump administration (Unny, 2020). Another example is Macron's visit to Sri Lanka, where he suggested that France could offer an alternative to Indian and Chinese policies to assist the debt-ridden states. This suggests that, while China's soft power ambitions have encountered substantial challenges among developing countries in recent years (Lee & Zulkefli, 2021), France is actively endeavoring to establish diplomatic appeal to them.

While France's determination to provide an "alternative policy provider" is unquestionable, it is also within its Indo-Pacific policy that the physical limitations of France, being a regional and middle power, has become evident. In terms of military power, as the world's 9th largest military power, the sustainability of France's military presence in this region is questionable. As a result, a globally wide power projection is a bridge too far for a middle-ranked military power. This is why, to many Indo-Pacific countries, a reliable military alternative to the US is unthinkable, if not impossible. When it comes to economic influence, it is questionable for France to position itself as a credible economic alternative to China in the Indo-Pacific region as China has exerted a far greater economic impact in the area compared to France.³ This substantial disparity in economic dominance, in turn, significantly constrains France's ability to be seen as a viable economic alternative.

³ For instance, in 2021, China accounted for 15.23% of exports and 18.93% of imports in the Asia and Pacific region and 6.01% of exports and 16.98% of imports in the South Asia region. By contrast, France had a much smaller role in both regions, with only 1.01% of exports and 1.31% of imports in Asia and the Pacific, and 1.57% of exports and 0.68% of imports in South Asia. For the source of data, see the WITS database (<https://wits.worldbank.org>).

Last but not least, in terms of diplomatic independence, how can France effectively exercise its diplomatic power in the Indo-Pacific if it is not perceived as a credible alternative to either US or Chinese influence? Other than facing challenges in this regard due to its relatively smaller military power compared to that of the US and weaker economic connections compared to those of China, France's diplomatic ambition is also hindered by its reliance on US military support, and NATO to address global and regional conflicts, as well as its dependence on the Chinese market for business profits.⁴ All of these factors combined suggest a highly challenging future for France to resist great-power dominance and play an effective “alternative policy provider” role in the Indo-Pacific.

CONCLUSION

France's regional strategy exhibits distinct characteristics compared to those of its European counterparts. Rather than being driven by the need to respond to a shifting power structure, France's Indo-Pacific strategy is proactive, aiming to secure its territorial interests and enhance its position of influence in the region. In this context, France's Indo-Pacific strategy represents both a continuation and a modification of the Gaullist doctrine. Its prioritization of nuclear defense, insistence in not taking sides between the US and China, distrust of US intentions, and efforts to establish leadership in the Indo-Pacific align with its long-standing foreign policy convention. However, pragmatic geo-strategic considerations drive France to maintain a cooperative relationship with the US and NATO. This blend of traditional and pragmatic policy orientations offers important insights into potential policy continuity and volatility in the future. On the one hand, as the principles of restoring national influence and insisting on foreign policy independence are least likely to change, as evidenced by the attempts by Paris to distinguish itself from the US and China regarding foreign policy orientation, it is highly probable that France will continue its engagement with regional stakeholders through partnership-building and soft power diplomacy. On the other hand, France's management of relationships with the US, China, and NATO is more likely to fluctuate over time, given that realistic

⁴ Recent evidence of France's continuing reliance on the Chinese market can be observed in Macron's visit to China in 2023. During this visit to China, he brought with him a delegation of approximately 50 prominent business leaders and successfully secured several commercial deals with Chinese companies.

calculations of national interests play a pivotal role in this type of policymaking.

Regarding the effectiveness of its Indo-Pacific strategy, France has established a comprehensive network of military partnerships in the region. Cooperative military actions and agreements of this nature provide ample opportunities for France to bolster its military presence and operational capabilities. Additionally, by engaging with regional states and organizations, France has forged close economic and financial ties with regional organizations, such as ASEAN, IOC, and IORA, thereby enhancing the EU's involvement in the Indo-Pacific region. These multilateral ties are instrumental in elevating France's diplomatic influence, potentially serving as valuable assets in the pursuit of a regional strategy independent of the shadow of the US–China rivalry. There are still significant challenges ahead, however. The most critical one lies in France's ability to formulate a coherent policy position regarding the US–China competition and offer attractive policy alternatives to its Indo-Pacific partners. It also needs to craft a sustainable plan to continue mobilizing domestic and multilateral resources for developmental assistance. Given that a substantial part of France's Indo-Pacific policy is anchored in the provision of public goods, a failure to deliver on existing commitments could significantly undermine French credibility and reputation.

For the Indo-Pacific region, France's eagerness to play an influential role offers a diplomatic alternative. The establishment of deeper connectivity between the EU and the Indo-Pacific holds significant potential for reciprocal economic, developmental, and even security benefits. Nevertheless, France's engagement in this region is unlikely to alleviate the tension resulting from the US–China competition, given that these two powers exert the most significant impact on regional political-economic dynamics. This is especially true in areas concerning maritime disputes, supply chain security, and technology competition. This is because France's physical capabilities as a regional and middle power impose unavoidable constraints on its policy influence. In other words, the disparity between France's willingness and capabilities sets the boundaries of its Indo-Pacific strategy. These material limitations can explain why France has demonstrated more pragmatism and adaptability in its Indo-Pacific strategy. The fact that France's proactive attitudes in the Indo-Pacific cannot fully compensate for its material power shortcomings validates the realist assumptions regarding the material bases of power (Mearsheimer,

2001; Waltz, 1979). Nonetheless, there is a possibility that France's growing presence and the strengthening of its soft-power influence in the Indo-Pacific region could provide it with increased bargaining leverage in its interaction vis-à-vis the US and China. In sum, the present paper has to a certain extent answered the question whether Gaullism can shine, and how in the Indo-Pacific through a thorough analysis of France's foreign policy from various perspectives.

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