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Introduction

Under President Emmanuel Macron, who has been in office since 2017, France has sought to restyle itself as an Indo-Pacific power. During a visit to Sydney in late 2017, Macron (2017) announced his plans to develop an Indo-Pacific 'axis' including both Australia and India. This axis, Macron (2017) proposed, was motivated by both "*the evolution of Chinese strategy in the region*" and doubts regarding the posture of the US under the Trump administration. Macron further discussed France's emerging strategy during 2018 visits to China and India, culminating in the publication of France's first Indo-Pacific strategy document in 2019 (Grare, 2020). This document was updated just before Russia attacked Ukraine in February 2022 and called on France to defend its regional interests in the face of the growing military might and assertiveness of China (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2022). France has also actively contributed to the formulation of the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy, ratified in 2021. Paris' growing focus on the region reflects a shift in its strategic thinking and its role as a 'resident' power in the Indo-Pacific: while its political and economic power are concentrated in metropolitan France, its possession of oversea territories in the Indian and Pacific Oceans make it the sole European stakeholder geographically anchored in both oceans.

As geopolitical and geo-economic competitions and tensions between China and the United States ramp up, France has sought to offer a 'third way' to regional countries, namely one focused on France and Europe (Ross, 2023). As part of this, Macron has sought to separate France's and the EU's strategic destiny from what he views as an increasingly unreliable partner in the United States. Macron's emphasis on a third way offered by France in the Indo-Pacific is thus connected with the notion of strategic autonomy that has dominated much of his personal and his administration's discourse over the past years. Although the French notion of strategic autonomy intensified due to the volatility linked to the Trump administration, Macron's calls for a more autonomous and strategically independent France (and, by extension, EU) have remained steadfast in the Macron government's approach to a Biden-led United States (Chivvis & Droin, 2022).

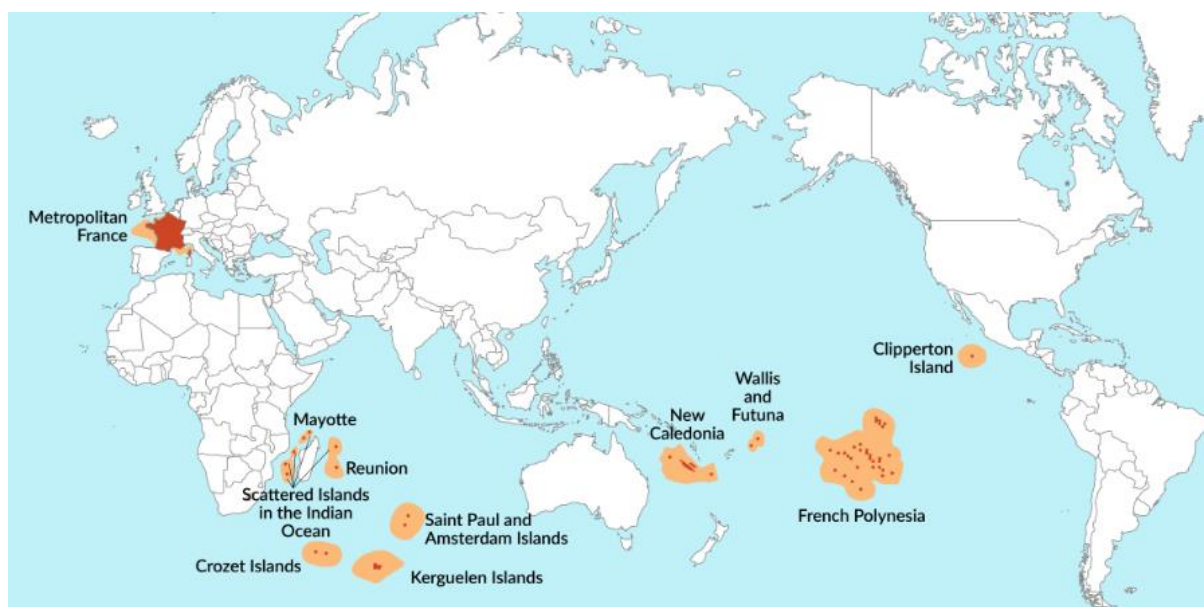
This paper examines France's third way and its prospects and limitations. Initially, the paper briefly examines France's regional presence in the Indo-Pacific. It subsequently studies the concept of strategic autonomy and France's Indo-Pacific strategy, particularly focusing on the strategy's commercial dimensions and its collaboration with partners such as India, Japan, and Australia. The paper then examines the resource constraints impairing Paris' ability to practically deliver on the stated objectives before developing a series of policy recommendations that focus on enhancing climate change resilience in the region.

France in the Indo-Pacific

France's colonization of parts of the Indian and Pacific Oceans has created an imperial territorial legacy that sees Paris remaining a resident regional power in the region in the 21st century. In the Indian Ocean, the French holdings include Mayotte off the coast of Mozambique, Réunion, located east of Madagascar, and the French Southern and Antarctic Lands, which are commonly abbreviated as TAAF (Amsterdam Island, the Crozet Islands, the Kerguelen Islands, Adélie Land, and the Scattered Islands). Out of the French territories in the Indian Ocean, Mayotte and Réunion are by far the most significant, with populations of around 315,000 and 885,000 respectively. Both Mayotte and Réunion are formal overseas departments

of the French State, meaning that they are fully integrated into the legal, political, and administrative framework of the French Republic, are subject to French law, and enjoy the same legal status as the mainland departments. They are, for instance, represented in the French National Assembly and Senate and participate in the EU's single market. In the Pacific, French Polynesia consists of 118 islands and atolls and is a French overseas collectivity, as are the collectivities of New Caledonia and Wallis and Futuna. Overseas collectivities enjoy a greater degree of political autonomy and have more space to develop their own legal frameworks, which differentiates them from fully integrated overseas departments and regions. While overseas collectivities are formally represented in the National Assembly, they have significant autonomy in the development of economic policies and the approach to managing cultural and linguistic diversity, amongst other things. Further, there is Clipperton Island, an uninhabited atoll under French jurisdiction (for all French overseas territories, see Figure 1). In total, around 1.6 million French citizens live in the various overseas administrative regions (Frécon, 2022).

Figure 1: French overseas territories in the Indo-Pacific



Source: Millon (2022).

Taken together, its overseas holdings in the Indo-Pacific bestow France with the second-largest exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the world after the United States (Claudet et al., 2021). Within these EEZs, France has exclusive rights to explore and exploit marine resources such as fish, minerals, and hydrocarbons, and possesses access to major trade routes. Crucial sea lines of communication that are located in close proximity to France's regional EEZs include the Mozambique Channel, which links the southern Indian Ocean with its northern counterpart and enables trade access to the Mediterranean Sea via the Red Sea. In total, France's EEZs in the Indo-Pacific account for 93% of the total national EEZ (Frécon, 2022). Most of the overseas territories also see the permanent stationing of French military personnel (Millon, 2022) and position France in the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

French rule in these overseas regions is not uncontested. In the Indian Ocean, Comoros lays claim to Mayotte whereas Mauritius and Madagascar have questioned Paris' sovereignty over Tromelin Island and the Scattered Islands (Grare, 2020). France's partial legitimacy deficit is

most prevalent in New Caledonia, where parts of the indigenous Kanak community have long pushed for independence from France. France has sought to legitimize its presence in New Caledonia by holding a series of referendums, most recently in 2021, which have been broadly boycotted by the Kanak opposition (Fisher, 2022). As France's territorial holdings in the region are the outcome and historical legacy of French imperialism in the region, Macron's recent statements that the Pacific now faces a form of "*new imperialism*" in the face of Chinese expansion (Caulcutt, 2023) did not sit well with opposition figures in New Caledonia. In response, one New Caledonian pro-independence party accused Macron of an "*imperialist and condescending*" attitude to independence, formulated in a "*paternalistic, imperialist, neo-colonial*" view of New Caledonian politics (cited in Fisher, 2023). Further, the overseas territories are at the forefront of climate change disasters, most notably rising sea levels, which will require more concerted government action (Magnan et al., 2022). French paternalism, a continued colonial legacy, and the policy challenges posed by climate change are thus key factors in shaping the contemporary relations between France and the territories in the region.

Amid geoeconomic shifts that have seen the growing economic power of Asian economies, the Indo-Pacific has become increasingly important for France's global trade portfolio. In total, 14% of all French exports and 17% of all imports, excluding armaments, pass through the Indo-Pacific (Duggal, 2022). Between 2009 and 2019, French commercial interactions in the region grew by 49% (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2019), and there are more than seven thousand French companies now present in the region alongside a total investment volume of \$109 billion in foreign direct investment (Duggal, 2022). French investments in the region rose by 75% between 2008 and 2018 and the presence of French corporations increased by 40% between 2010 and 2016 alone, illustrating the rapid intensification of France's economic links with the region (Morcos, 2021). Although most of France's international trade still occurs within the regional context of the EU single market, China in particular has emerged an increasingly more important bilateral trade partner for Paris (Santander Trade, 2023). France's regional presence is thus defined both by its role as a resident power in the Indo-Pacific as well as the region's growing economic significance as an investment destination, a target for exports, and a source of imports.

In sum, France's growing focus on the Indo-Pacific derives from both Paris' role as a resident power in the region, which reflects the country's colonial legacy, as well as the growing commercial significance of regional markets. In this context, the timing of France's foreign policy shift toward the region is inherently linked with growing geopolitical volatilities, most notably intensifying strategic competition between China and the United States.

Strategic autonomy and France's approach to the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as a more central component in French foreign policy under Macron as the growing competition between China and the United States has come to threaten regional stability. On the back of significant economic growth trajectories prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, China has bolstered its military spending and has grown increasingly assertive in its conduct in territorial disputes, including in the Himalayas and the East and South China Seas (Crisis Group, 2021; Strating, 2021). Beijing has also ramped up its military presence in the Taiwan Strait (Tsui, 2022) and effectively abolished Hong Kong's autonomy (Maizland, 2023). Beijing's treatment of the Uighur population has further undermined China's global image and the French parliament recognized China's conduct in Xinjiang as constituting a genocide in early 2022 (France 24, 2022). The United States has pushed back against China's effort to undermine the US-led regional order by deepening its defense relationships with

Australia, India, and Japan, and implementing a series of policy measures that seek to restrict China's access to cutting-edge technology required for the development of advanced AI technologies, semiconductors, and quantum computing (Allen, 2023). The Biden administration has doubled down rather than reversed the protectionist policies initiated by the Trump government (Chapman, 2023). While primarily targeted at China, US industrial policy also creates detrimental market effects for third countries by redirecting investment flows to the United States, indicating that "*distinguishing allies and adversaries is a second-order priority for US legislators*" (Lee-Makiyama, 2023). France has thus criticized US industrial policy alongside other European countries (Horobin & Delfs, 2022). As both China and the United States focus on securing narrow national geoeconomic objectives, this competition generates new policy challenges for third countries while destabilizing the extant regional order.

In recent years, France has sought to maximize on the market opportunities linked with China. In March 2019, Macron and Xi finalized a series of business agreements worth \$15 billion as well as a \$34 billion order from China for Airbus-supplied planes (Duggal, 2022). These agreements build on commercial frameworks developed by Macron's predecessor, François Hollande, who had promoted the sale of French civilian aircraft to China and emphasized the need to cooperate with China in order to address climate change challenges. As discussed above, bilateral trade between the two countries has been growing over the past years, with bilateral trade volumes exceeding \$100 billion for the first time ever in 2022, marking a year-on-year increase of 14.6% (Donnellon-May, 2023). Macron has actively pushed for an expansion of bilateral trade, including during a 2023 visit to China (Chrisafis & Hawkins, 2023). Similar to other European economies, most notably the German one, China's market significance is simply too pronounced for French policymakers to ignore. As such, France has rhetorically stressed the need to de-risk the French and European economy from China but has not aligned with calls for a full-scale economic decoupling from China (Wong & Tang, 2023).

At the same time, French foreign policy under Macron has sought to reconcile these commercial interests with broader geostrategic concerns vis-à-vis Beijing. Macron has repeatedly lamented China's growing military assertiveness in East Asia and the Indian Ocean (Grare, 2020). While not openly rejecting the prospects for Belt-and-Road investments (BRI) in Europe, Macron suggested that BRI-linked "*roads cannot be those of a new hegemony, which would transform those that they cross into vassals*" (cited in Rose, 2018). Via the EU's Global Gateway initiative, announced in 2021, France and the EU also aim to establish the EU as a more prominent financier of global infrastructure development (Tagliapietra, 2022). As noted, Macron expressed concerns during his 2023 visit to the Pacific that "*There is in the Indo-Pacific and particularly in Oceania new imperialism appearing, and a power logic that is threatening the sovereignty of several states – the smallest, often the most fragile*" (cited in The Guardian, 2023). On the EU level, Macron has also supported the formulation of policy measures that aim to protect EU markets and firms against price shocks and more competitively priced imports from China (Horobin & Nussbaum, 2023). In his policy, Macron has thus sought to broadly address both commercial private sector interests as well as broader concerns about the strategic volatilities generated by enhanced trade exposure.

At the same time, the concerns toward China have not motivated a clear French alignment with the United States. France has partially cooperated with the US and the Quad in regional naval exercises, for instance in the 2021 *La Pérouse* exercise in the Bay of Bengal, which involved all Quad members (Duggal, 2022). Yet, France has been frequently critical of US policy in the region over the past years. The Trump years, Trump's explicit criticism of NATO, and a seeming lack of willingness for the US to consolidate NATO, as well as a general focus on

'America First', heightened French (and European) concerns regarding abandonment by the US (Barnes & Cooper, 2019). While the Biden administration has reassured its commitments to European defense and European partners, most visibly in the context of the war in Ukraine, a focus on supporting narrow geoeconomic interests, including at the expense of European partners, has permeated bipartisan policymaking in Washington (Lee-Makiyama, 2023). Furthermore, the upcoming presidential elections in the United States in 2024 are likely to further undermine the US' political focus on Europe. In April 2023, Macron proposed that "*the great risk*" the EU faces is that it "*gets caught up in crises that are not ours, which prevents it from building its strategic autonomy*" (Anderlini & Caulcutt, 2023). Even under Biden, then, it has remained "*French doctrine to treat Washington as "friends, allied, but not aligned" in order to maintain room for manoeuvre*" (Frécon, 2022). During a 2023 visit to Bangladesh, Macron framed France's pivot to Asia as Paris offering a "*third way*" for regional countries that did not aim to be dragged into the competition between Beijing and the US (Rose, 2023). This notion of a third way epitomizes France's unwillingness to simply align with what it views as an increasingly volatile and unreliable United States.

This skepticism towards the United States under Macron marks a continuity in French foreign policymaking that views France as possessing and pursuing 'grandeur', a form of exceptionalism, in foreign affairs (Rieker, 2017). During the Cold War, Charles de Gaulle's skepticism about the United States' dominance in NATO and concerns about American control over Western defense strategies led to France's withdrawal from NATO's integrated military command structure in 1966 (Haftendorn, 2011). France's decision to develop its own nuclear weapons program in the 1960s, the so-called Force de Frappe, was also partly driven by skepticism about the reliability of US nuclear protection. In 2003, French President Jacques Chirac strongly opposed the US-led invasion of Iraq, blocking UN-led military action against Iraq in the UN Security Council, and expressing doubts about the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq as well as concerns about the regional consequences of military action (Marfleet & Miller, 2005). Macron's attempt to develop an approach that involves the US but does not simply align with Washington consequently marks a mainstay of French strategic culture over the past decades.

Under Macron, the concept of strategic autonomy has emerged as the key buzzword in French foreign policy discourse. For both Europe and itself, France aims to develop and sustain foreign policy capacities that allow policymakers to make security-related decisions more independently from the US (Vohra, 2023). Within the EU, Macron has taken a series of measures to intensify the push for French and European strategic autonomy. France has played a leading role in initiatives such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), which aims to improve EU defense capabilities, and Macron has championed the idea of a more integrated and capable European defense apparatus (Simon & Marrone, 2021). France also played a key role in launching the European Intervention Initiative, also known as the E2I, a defense cooperation framework outside the EU and NATO structures that involves a coalition of European countries committed to rapid military response and crisis management (Zandee, 2019). Macron has occasionally expressed skepticism about the direction of NATO, warning that the alliance could become "*brain-dead*" (The Economist, 2019), and urged the EU to become an actor that could act "*strategically*" without being dependent on Washington (Dersimonian, 2023). In July 2023, France blocked the establishment of a NATO office in Tokyo, with French representatives arguing that it was not within NATO's geographical purview to become involved outside of a transatlantic context (Lau & Kayali, 2023). Under Macron, France has increased its defense budget to meet NATO's target of spending 2% of GDP on defense (Barbero, 2023) and has been a strong advocate for the EU playing a leading role in global affairs, including regarding diplomacy, development, and climate action. All

these steps signal an attempt to enhance strategic autonomy and manage the growing strategic tensions between Beijing and Washington.

In the Indo-Pacific, Macron's desire for French and European strategic autonomy has manifested in the idea of the third way. Following Macron's election in May 2017, the new administration adopted the Indo-Pacific concept, which had previously been introduced by the Quad countries and was criticized by China (Grare, 2020). The 2017 Strategic Review of Defense and National Security published by the Macron administration soon after his electoral victory highlighted that growing volatility "*pushes certain countries to doubt their allies*" and that growing regional instability constituted a challenge to key regional French interests (Grare, 2020). As discussed, Macron began formulating France's emerging strategic approach during speeches in China and India, emphasizing that France had to focus on asserting its interests in the face of a rising China and uncertainties in the Paris-Washington relationship, including by expanding cooperation with regional actors such as Australia and India that would form the 'pillars' of France's growing regional engagement (Grare, 2020). The first Indo-Pacific strategy document, published in 2019, suggested that "*China's increasing power and territorial claims, as well as the global competition under way with the United States, are weakening the balance of power in the region*". The document included several policy priorities (see Figure 2) France has sought to address in the subsequent years.

Figure 2: Key objectives of the French 2019 Indo-Pacific strategy

Policy component	Formulated objectives
Geographical understanding of the Indo-Pacific	The document defines the Indo-Pacific as encompassing the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea, and the Western and Central Pacific. It emphasizes the region's growing strategic importance due to its economic dynamism, growth potential, and the presence of traditional and non-traditional security challenges.
Role and rule of international law	The document reaffirms the commitment to upholding international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and advocates for the freedom of navigation and overflight, as well as the peaceful resolution of disputes in accordance with international law.
Strategic autonomy and diversification of relations	France seeks to enhance its strategic autonomy in the Indo-Pacific by strengthening its partnerships with regional countries and organizations, including through independent actions and cooperation with European and regional partners, most notably Australia, India, and Japan.
Maritime security and safety	France commits to reinforcing its military presence in the region, conducting joint exercises, and contributing to addressing non-traditional security challenges (such as terrorism and piracy).
Regional multilateralism	The document emphasizes regional multilateralism, especially in UN-based frameworks, to address regional challenges, including climate change, environmental protection, and sustainable

	development. The document also proposed enhanced collaboration through existing regional initiatives, including the Indian Ocean Initiative (IOC) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).
Climate change	France highlights the urgent need for action on climate change in the Indo-Pacific and pledges support to regional efforts to combat climate change, protect marine biodiversity, and promote sustainable development.
Commercial interests	Paris aims to boost its regional presence by promoting trade, investments, and partnerships. It emphasizes the importance of regional connectivity, including transport and digital infrastructure projects.
Partnerships	France seeks to deepen its partnerships with countries in the Indo-Pacific, including India, Australia, Japan, and ASEAN member states, to foster closer political dialogue, security cooperation, and economic relations.
Coordination and mediation platforms	France proposes the establishment of an Indo-Pacific Consultative Forum, a platform for dialogue and coordination among like-minded countries to address regional issues.
ASEAN centrality	France supports existing regional architecture, including the ASEAN-led forums, and aims to strengthen its engagement within these frameworks.

Source: Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (2019).

To deliver on the objectives outlined in the 2019 document, France took a series of initial steps that reoriented its military posture in the Indo-Pacific. The Macron government has increased the presence of French naval assets in the Indo-Pacific by ramping up the regional deployment of vessels, submarines, and maritime patrol aircrafts. In total, the French Navy aims to base twelve naval vessels, six patrol boats, and about 30 aircraft in the region alongside the stationing of 7,000 personnel (Takahashi & Rahmat, 2022). These troops are part of France's broader regional military presence, which includes three military commands and, as part of this, four infantry regiments and multiple gendarmerie units (Barry & Decis, 2021). Growing naval deployments signify France's growing ambition to project military power in the region and operate as a more present regional stakeholder.

France has also sought to expand its economic engagement in the region. Paris has promoted the finalization of bilateral trade agreements between the EU and countries in South and Southeast Asia, for instance via the EU's negotiation of the EU-Singapore Free Trade Agreement (EUSFTA), which provides French companies with enhanced access to the Singaporean market and serves as a steppingstone for broader engagement in the region. The EU is currently further engaged in bilateral negotiations over separate FTAs with Australia, India, Indonesia, and Thailand, while an FTA with New Zealand is being ratified (European Commission, n.d.). The government has also encouraged French private sector firms to invest in Southeast Asian countries, particularly in sectors like energy, transport, and telecommunications (Monier, 2022). This push for investment in Southeast Asian economies is linked to the French government incentivizing national firms to reduce their exposure to

Chinese market volatilities by diversifying their operations (Kitamatsu, 2023). While pushing to establish France as the first European dialogue partner for ASEAN (Robinson, 2022), France has also ramped up its provision of aid delivery, with the national development agency L'Agence Française de Développement (AFD) increasingly disbursing financing in South Asia. Bangladesh alone has received loans worth \$1.15 billion since 2021 (Milhiet, 2023). Reconfiguring supply chains to reduce vulnerabilities consequently plays a key role in structuring the French approach whereas development financing promotes a more active regional role for France.

India has emerged as a key partner for Paris in South Asia, especially due to the growing volume of French arms sales to India. French defense manufacturers have sought to capitalize on the quagmire produced by Russia's war against Ukraine, which has exposed India's vulnerabilities to supply disruptions in access to kit needed for the maintenance of Soviet and Russian legacy equipment (Caulcutt, 2022). Today, France is India's second-largest defense partner after Russia as India aims to reconfigure its defense acquisitions approach. India has finalized the acquisition of the French Rafale fighter jets over the past years and growing defense collaboration further entails the joint development of equipment components, such as aircraft engines (Sen & Philip, 2023). Alongside the export of combat aircraft, India has further agreed to the acquisition of French-built submarines, bringing the total volume of the Rafale/submarine deal to €12 billion/around \$12.5 billion (Ross, 2023). These defense-focused acquisitions and exchanges build upon previous contacts vis-à-vis defense transfers and the export of enriched uranium from France to India that date back to the 1970s (Jaffrelot, 2023). In 2018, France and India also signed an agreement for defense logistical support, which will be key to coordinate future military-to-military cooperation (Brewster, 2019). In France-India relations, defense-related diplomacy has subsequently played a key role.

Closer ties between New Delhi and Paris are backed by political consensus on both sides and important trade and investment interactions. Prior to Macron's trip to India for the G20 summit in the Indian capital in September 2023, Modi had attended the French Bastille Day celebrations in July 2023 as a guest of honor. A joint communique published following Modi's visit read that,

"In the turbulence and challenges of our times, this partnership means more than ever before – upholding the international law; advancing cohesion in a fragmenting world; reforming and reinvigorating the multilateral system; building a secure and peaceful Indo-Pacific region; addressing global challenges of climate change, clean energy, health, food security, poverty and development" (Élysée, 2023).

In the wake of the meeting, Macron and Modi finalized the 'Horizon 2047' roadmap, which aims to enhance French-Indian cooperation on digital public infrastructure, critical technologies such as AI and quantum technologies, growing defense cooperation via joint technology development and the expansion of joint drills, expanded nuclear cooperation, and enhanced collaboration on space technology (Anand, 2023). Furthermore, the roadmap aims to facilitate closer people-to-people ties and explore the green transition, for example by promoting hydrogen research and exploring avenues to fund energy transformations (Anand, 2023). Additionally, France and India will seek to revitalize trade: while France's exports to India have been growing, Indian exports to France have somewhat declined, and France is only India's fifth-largest trade partner within the EU (Anand, 2023). Although commercial ties subsequently possess potential for expansion, France and India clearly view one another as increasingly important regional partners.

France and Tokyo have significantly deepened their bilateral security cooperation since 2019, including through defense sales and an expansion of military exercises. The French-Japanese strategic partnership was formally launched in 1995, followed by the creation of a bilateral 2+2 dialogue in 2014 (Regaud, 2021). In 2016, Paris and Tokyo struck an agreement on the transfer of defense equipment and technology, thus paving the way for the joint development of new-generation underwater minesweeping technology (Pajon, 2018). Two years later, they concluded an acquisition and cross-servicing agreement (ACSA) that permitted the sharing of defense supplies and services, which helps to facilitate coordination in peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) operations and facilitates more ambitious joint exercises. Although Macron had blocked the creation of a Tokyo-based NATO office, France recommitted in June 2023 to deepening joint exercises with Japanese forces and forming a bilateral working group on economic security issues (Nikkei Asia, 2023), a move that echoed Japan's growing focus on enhancing national economic security (Suzuki, 2023). French and Japanese forces also recently completed a joint air force drill (Dominguez, 2023) and Japan has aligned its sanction regime toward Russia with the sanctions proposed by European and North American partners (Al Jazeera, 2023). These policy measures are consistent with the desire expressed in the 2019 document to diversify relations and deepen collaboration with non-traditional security partners in the region.

Although France had repeatedly identified Australia as a key regional partner, the announcement of the AUKUS security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States in September 2021 significantly hurt the bilateral relationship. Australia and France had signed a defense logistics agreement in 2018, and Australian forces have played a key role in aiding French law enforcement activities in fishery-related issues in the South Pacific (Brewster, 2019). In 2016, Australia had entered a contract with the French arms manufacturer Naval Group that would see Naval Group construct a series of attack submarines for the Royal Australian Navy. In September 2021, the conservative Morrison government announced that Australia would instead acquire nuclear-powered submarines in cooperation with the US and the UK, leading to the scrapping of the Naval Group deal. French politicians were outraged by the decision, with Macron publicly accusing Morrison of lying and recalling the French ambassador from Canberra (France 24, 2022a). In 2022, Morrison's liberal successor Anthony Albanese announced that Australia would pay Naval Group a total of \$550 million in penalties (Taylor, 2022). While this episode has undermined the bilateral relationship, Canberra and Paris continue to engage in various forms, including bilateral 2+2 dialogues (Piper, 2023), and both countries have since expressed their commitment to bilateral defense and security cooperation (Edel & Morcos, 2022). Especially climate change-related cooperation has been boosted by the more proactive policy positions of the Albanese government, which stand in contrast with the more *laissez faire* approach of the Morrison administration (Staunton, 2022). Australia-France relations are ultimately in recovery mode following the AUKUS spat.

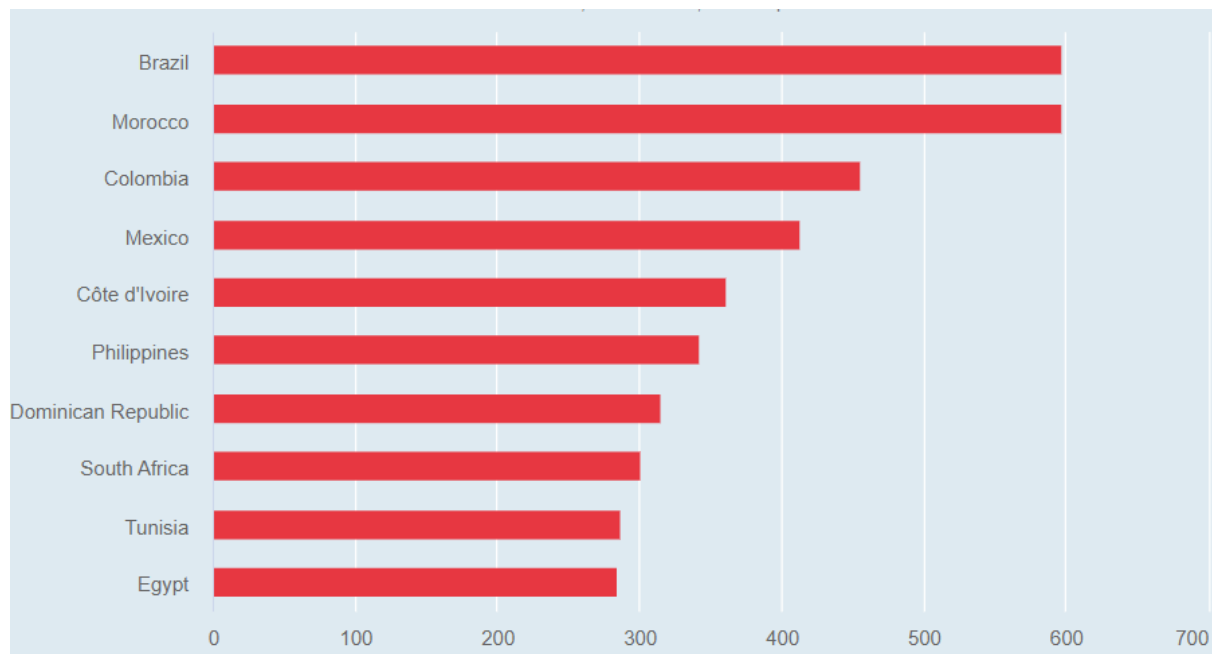
Everything considered, France's strategic approach in the Indo-Pacific and its narrative surrounding a third way for regional countries is rooted in Paris' concerns toward both China and the US. At a time of growing strategic volatility, Macron has sought to position France as a more active resident power in the region by ramping up its military presence, expanding the pursuit of commercial deals, and deepening its diplomatic portfolio in the region. This approach is broadly consistent with historically embedded notions of French grandeur.

Policy challenges and prospects

France's third way in the Indo-Pacific reflects an ambitious policy approach by the Macron government that plays upon French concepts of grandeur and embodies the push to maintain France as a significant global player in both military and economic terms. What could be described as the 'Macron doctrine' is firmly linked to a Gaullist foreign policy approach and also promotes a stronger Europe in security, economic, and industrial terms, advocates for multilateralism, is underpinned by a perception of France as an independent and balancing power in international affairs, and manifests through a continued security presence in the former African colonies and the Indo-Pacific strategy (Duclos, 2021). Whether Macron can fully deliver on this aspirational, encompassing agenda, however, remains to be seen.

The perhaps biggest limitations to France's regional geoeconomic ambitions are the underlying resource constraints. While France's regional commercial presence is expanding, it remains limited relative to other Western countries, thus reducing French leverage in the region. As France has remained heavily focused on ensuring European unity at a time of geopolitical upheaval in Europe, resources are likely to be concentrated closer to the metropolitan mainland. Despite the rhetorical emphasis on the region, development financing provision also remains primarily focused on Africa, the Middle East, and South America (see Figure 3). All in all, Paris' economic and development footprint in the region is not insignificant but relatively limited when compared to countries such as Japan, the United States, and most notably, China. Amid domestic resource constraints and other spending priorities, the ability to deliver on the aim of expanding France's economic and commercial footprint are limited at a time when economic nationalism has become more commonplace.

Figure 3: Largest recipients of French overseas development assistance in 2021



Source: OECD (n.d.).

The concerns regarding resource constraints also extend to France's military posture, limiting the Macron administration's ability to deliver on the formulated geopolitical objectives. In Europe, the protracted war in Ukraine signifies that geopolitical volatility will remain a shaping

factor in the coming years, irrespective of the war's ultimate outcome. As countries bolster military expenditures, these expenditures will likely be focused on generating and maintaining conventional forces at home and within the European context. The French Navy, which would be the main strategic asset in the Indo-Pacific, also remains engaged in the Mediterranean Sea and around African coasts. More broadly, French naval forces are thinly stretched and the vast geography of the Indo-Pacific poses inherent logistical challenges for France's naval presence and engagement efforts that could only realistically be bridged through a dramatic increase in military expenditures. Delivering the required support will require both changes in posture and, crucially, expanding acquisitions. Given that most of the share of already limited defense acquisition plans would go into Europe-focused kit, it appears unlikely that a significant expansion of French capacities in the region can transpire. As a result, France will continue to rely on the cooperation of regional partners, including Australia and the US.

Both in Europe and the Indo-Pacific, the resource constraints facing France and other European powers heavily complicate Macron's push for strategic autonomy. The US has remained the largest national provider of military and financial aid to Ukraine since the start of the war (Masters & Merrow, 2023) and EU-level efforts of providing military support have often been limited in scope due to the nature of decision-making processes within EU bodies. Although Washington does not feature prominently in the official Indo-Pacific strategy, France's interests align with that of the US and are broadly supportive of a US posture and presence in the region, as evidenced by France's leading of naval Quad exercises in 2021 (Sharma & Penel-Lassus, 2021). While France is unlikely to play any active combat role in the scenario of a Taiwan contingency as it aims to protect commercial interests in the region, this marks a partial disconnect between policy discourse and practice: while Macron has pushed for strategic autonomy in Europe, both France and the EU remain largely dependent on the US to maintain support for Ukraine and, by extension, generate deterrence for Europe and NATO. In the Indo-Pacific too, France's resource constraints prevent it from acting as a more autonomous strategic actor.

Although its security-related activities are thus likely to be limited to surveilling its regional EEZs and potentially providing logistical support to more prevalent regional militaries, France can make a series of other security policy contributions. In concert with and through the EU, France can play a crucial diplomatic role by actively engaging with regional forums and organizations, most notably ASEAN-linked platforms, the IORA, and the IOC. This can facilitate dialogue on regional issues, promote conflict resolution, and contribute to the development of norms and rules governing behavior in the region. Additionally, France can contribute to the response to non-traditional security challenges, for instance by expanding its participation in regional HA/DR efforts, offering aid, medical assistance, and disaster relief capabilities.

While boosting trade and investment, France should further focus on facilitating inclusive development. As part of its economic engagement, France can contribute to standard-setting processes while facilitating investment in key emerging industries, such as renewables. To promote sustainable heritage tourism, government agencies could assist in the preservation of cultural heritage sites and the conservation of natural spaces in the Indo-Pacific. This contributes to cultural diversity and promotes tourism, which can boost local economies. Government bodies can additionally expand training programs and technical expertise in various sectors, such as healthcare, education, and governance. Lastly, promoting gender equality, female empowerment, and women's labor force participation can allow France to boost female access to education and economic opportunities.

The perhaps most crucial component of France's regional policy must be the contribution to sustainable development and climate action in the Indo-Pacific. For instance, France could provide financial assistance, technical expertise, and technology transfers to promote the adoption of clean energy sources such as solar, wind, and hydroelectric power. The AFD could also allocate a portion of France's development assistance budget to be used for climate resilience projects, emissions reduction efforts, and supporting climate-related research in the Indo-Pacific. Additionally, AFD financing could focus on encouraging sustainable agricultural practices in the region, including organic farming, efficient water use, and agroforestry. Infrastructure financing must focus on bolstering the construction of climate-resilient infrastructure, such as resilient buildings, flood protection systems, and sustainable urban planning. French security forces could collaborate with Indo-Pacific nations to protect marine ecosystems and combat illegal fishing practices, including by supporting the establishment and management of marine protected areas and contributing to the conservation of coral reefs and marine biodiversity. Government bodies could further expand their collaboration with international organizations, such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Green Climate Fund (GCF), to mobilize resources and expertise for climate action in the region while establishing mechanisms for monitoring and reporting on progress in achieving regional climate and sustainability goals. Incentive programs could foster public-private partnerships between French companies and Indo-Pacific businesses to promote sustainable practices and technologies, especially in industries with significant environmental footprints. Lastly, the government must encourage French financial institutions to invest in green projects and sustainable businesses in the Indo-Pacific while facilitating partnerships between French and local banks to promote green finance.

Ultimately, the grandeur Macron seeks to practice by expanding France's regional footprint will likely face significant strategic challenges that will be difficult to overcome and are linked to inherent resource constraints and diverging political priorities. That does not have to mean that a more present France in the region cannot positively contribute to regional policy efforts. Growing strategic volatility indeed creates policy blind spots that the current competition does not adequately address, most notably in regard to climate change action and resilience. These policy domains can be targeted by French policy and can carve out a niche for France as a resident regional power.

Conclusion

This paper has retraced the emergence of France's Indo-Pacific strategy, which links to its proposed 'third way' for the region and is situated in the broader and intensifying geoeconomic and geopolitical competition between China and the US. France is a resident power in the region due to its holding of overseas territories in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans, which bestow Paris with economic advantages. Mirroring its emphasis on strategic autonomy in the European context, Macron has sought to develop an approach (more) independent from the US on how France (and, by extension, the EU) interacts with the broader region. In practical terms, this approach has focused on bolstering multilateral institutions, expanding commercial ties, and deepening security collaboration with Australia, India, and Japan. Whereas AUKUS has hampered deepened ties with Australia, France-India relations are on a positive track and promise a closer engagement in the coming years.

Macron has formulated a set of strategic ambitions that France will likely struggle to deliver on. Its immediate geoeconomic and geopolitical influence is limited by geographical distance and resource constraints. These resource constraints have been and will likely be further

exacerbated by defense priorities that will firmly keep France focused on the European context for the time being. While France's plans may therefore have to be less ambitious in the short term, Paris can focus on addressing regional concerns that its overseas territories share with other regional actors and especially smaller island nations for which climate change is by far the largest security threat.

Both independently and in collaboration with the EU, France can seek to positively influence strategic outcomes in the region by bolstering resilience and providing development support in a way that caters to regional needs and priorities.

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