

Strategic Competition & Security Cooperation in the Blue Pacific



Edited by Deon Canyon
Foreword by Alfred Oehlers

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Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies

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The Pacific Dimension of France's Indo-Pacific Policies and Security Cooperation

Christian Leclercq

It is not uncommon to express and analyze the politics of France through geographical precepts. This has been the case for a long time, vis-à-vis the Arab world, Africa and, of course, Europe. On the eastern borders, the terminology proved to be more fluctuating. It has even changed a lot in the last thirty years. From a territorial definition inherited from the end of the 19th century (Indochina), we were able to move on to more institutional designations. This is how Paul Mus's beloved Asia Angle came to be known as ASEAN in the contemporary political-diplomatic language. Even if some French speakers have tried to replace the English acronym with its French counterpart, ANASE or even ANSEA, they have had little success in imposing it in everyday language, in the media or in the academic arena. Making a new geographical area definition, your own or even collectively is never certain. The loosening of the Soviet stranglehold on Central Asia and its (re)connection to its neighboring areas since the beginning of the 1990s has not made, for example, the concept of Eurasia a real narrative dimension of French or European Union (EU) foreign policy. Conversely, the establishment of the Pacific Experiment Center (CEP) in 1962 gave the toponym "Pacific" a strategic dimension. The notion of Oceania, which was explicit until 1957 in the name of the French Establishments of Oceania (EFO), has been removed gradually from the political and military lexicon. In imaginaries, the reference to the eponymous ocean was however narrowed to its southern sphere. It is not uncommon, even today, to hear the South Pacific referred to as the states and territories of the island Pacific. This is all the more surprising given that France is located in the Pacific basin both south of the equator (New

Caledonia, French Polynesia, Territory of the Wallis and Futuna Islands, French Southern and Antarctic Territories (TAAF)), but also in the north of the hemisphere (Clipperton Island).

Undoubtedly, France sometimes struggles to approach the Pacific as a whole, but by being territorialized in the Indian Ocean (Mayotte, Reunion) and the Pacific Ocean, France is one of the few states in the world which can legitimately affirm that it is, by nature, Indo-Pacific (I-P) and there are vital interests since they are linked to its territorial and maritime possessions. Oceanic bicephalism is also included in the orthographic expression of the I-P since a dash links the two maritime facets. This method of writing is also far from being new since it is found in the name of the Indo-Pacific Fisheries Council (IPFC) zone, of which France was the first of the eight founding members to file the instruments of ratification (June 30, 1948). This point of history is not without importance because it reminds us that the term Indo-Pacific is far from being new. It is not intended to be a “hedging strategy” aiming to give another name to its Asian policy or to avoid any alignment in order to maintain strategic leeway. The I-P concept was, in a certain way, “French” well before its rebirth in recent years and its updating by politico-military thinkers. Historically, it is also wrong to say that it was “invented” by the Americans and that to use it would be a follow-up to the policy of the United States. Some Frenchmen, like the oceanographer Raoul Serène (1909 - 1980), also played an eminent role in the establishment of the first I-P institution. Oceanography and wise management of the region were at the heart of the first I-P project bounded by the intertropical zone and promoted by France. Over the course of history, however, there is the passage of a latitudinal construction of the I-P to a longitudinal acceptance. Chronologically, the basis of an I-P approach is not justified by military forces, but by “a common interest in the development and judicious use of living aquatic resources.” The implementation of this objective had to involve cooperation with other international organizations (Article 5) and, in the first place, the United Nations system (FAO). The current geographical definition of the I-P is different from 1948, but the concept has been embodied from the beginning in a dedicated executive body and developed with a declared will to cooperate clearly with the globalized multilateral institutions. A lesson for the future!

Today, in any field, be it security, economic or promoting global public goods, there is still no institution(s) dedicated to I-P, nor a clearly ordered articulation with UN organizations. Aware of this organizational

“vacuum” and the necessity to bring multilateralism to life at the macro-regional level, France has proposed to hold a first Euro-Indo-Pacific forum of Foreign affairs ministers during its presidency of the EU in 2022. Its purpose will be to display the operationalization of the European Union's concept on defense-security issues, the economy (connectivity) and global challenges (climate, health). This meeting is an affirmation of French and European will to play a major role in the global governance of the I-P and to seek an inclusive and multilateral management free of its 2 antagonistic poles. This is so true that neither the People's Republic of China (PRC) nor the US were invited. While waiting for its multisectoral implementation, the I-P is often perceived as purely declaratory. This is particularly true if one wants to see in the affirmation of the I-P strategies of the middle powers only a will to exist where the new center of gravity of the planet is to be found, where the History of the world is to be built and where the expressions of supremacy of the two greatest recognized powers “meet.” In such a psychological and geopolitical context, declaring the I-P dimension of its foreign policy is a way of showing that one is in the direction of History. By taking a new look at the Pacific and the world, France needed an innovative vocabulary to say it. For the states attached to their rank, not hesitating to say *urbi et orbi*¹ their intentions to influence world affairs, to say that they have an I-P policy is to emphasize that they cannot be passive actors in international relations, especially where the global world is orchestrated. At a time when certain oracles are proclaiming the decline of Europe and its Member States in the United Nations Security Council, to assert oneself as a proactive and even dimensional actor in the I-P area is to seek to highlight the remanence of its influence, which was once all or part of the empires. It is also implicitly demanding to be associated with the (re)ordering of the world that is taking shape. If the I-P can make the EU more powerful, the Member States and the services of Brussels must guard against displaying ambitions beyond their means, failing which the I-P will show the extent of their weaknesses.

Accepting the I-P concept is anything but a follow-up attitude since it is a question of saying that the powers of yesterday have not given up on changing the course of the world. And to demonstrate that this is indeed not the case, the I-P concept is proclaimed as looking to the future, a vision of the world. To go beyond a tribute dimension, it is declined around multi-country partnerships and on the basis of mobilizing programs, like

1 “to the city (Rome) and the world”-- to everyone.

many French and EU public policies. The task is all the more difficult for France because relations between the five French Overseas Territories are distended. They have not experienced any dynamics of rapprochement of the I-P type in recent years. Intra-oceanic synergies between the French Overseas Territories of the Pacific were even quite rare, the Territory of the Wallis and Futuna Islands being somewhat of an exception by having contracted more and more its relations with New Caledonia (December 2003, November 2020) and French Polynesia (February 2019) including in its regional integration component. The statutes, history, internal political stability or even air and sea disconnections had a lot to do with it. It is true that we can speak of a France in the southwest of the Indian Ocean and of a “France-Pacific”, but it seems difficult to speak of a “France-Indopacific” because of its territories. Nevertheless, there is a political will to approach the I-P as a whole. Once again, this is evident in the writing. Whether they come from the French Ministry of the Armed Forces, the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs or the Government, the administrative documents made public speak of partnerships and of France’s strategy in the Indo-Pacific.^{2,3,4}

In French, the I-P is written bureaucratically today as a single word. This spelling is far from being insignificant. It carries in itself an area vision, running from the East African coasts to the Oceanic confines, the island of Clipperton in the North Pacific and French Polynesia in the South Pacific. On the scale of the two ocean basins, France is present both north and south of the equator. This singularity means, France has both territories under its sovereignty and/or pre-positioned military forces in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. This factor is unique to it in the Indian Ocean. On the contrary, in the Pacific, France shares with the United States this politico-military particularity, requiring examining all the security dimensions relating to its assets and people but also to submerged territories without permanent populations. For Paris, as for Washington, this requires taking full account of the tyranny of distances as well as of the politico-institutional regimes devolved, over time, to each of the territories. In a way, they have to co-manage part of their foreign policy.

2 La France et la SECURITE en INDOPACIFIQUE, Ministère des Armées, Paris, May 2019, 20 p

3 “Partenariats de La France Dans L’Indopacifique.” https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/fr_a4_indopacifique_16p_2021_v7_cle4ebce1.pdf.

4 https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/fr_a4_indopacifique_v2_rvb_cle425385.pdf

The conception of I-P and the implementation of the policies it induces can only be modified by the French Overseas Territories. This is particularly true in the Pacific region. Reconciling metropolitan ambitions and interests with those of each of the territories is a real headache, and often an unspoken one. Indeed, the central State must respect the constitutionalized competences of the President of the Government of New Caledonia and the President of French Polynesia, especially in international matters. In the same inclusive spirit, attention must be paid to the deliberative Assembly of the Wallis and Futuna Islands (cf. presidency, regional integration commission), while being aware that the statutory law of 1961 conferred all international competences on the prefect-administrator.

In addition to the parliamentary assemblies, the executive powers of New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and the Territory of the Wallis and Futuna Islands each have a seat in a territorial capacity, as full or associate members in regional political organizations (e.g., Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), Pacific Development Forum (PIDF)), thematic organizations (e.g., Pacific Community (SPC), Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP)) or even UN organizations (e.g., UNESCAP, UNESCO, WHO).⁵ This relational skein makes it possible to decline French positions with an “Oceanian” or even “Melanesian” or “Polynesian” tone (e.g., Polynesian Leaders Group (PLG)). The “Melanesian” sound is the most difficult to state, as the political and partisan positions are so divergent according to the communities. In addition, the independence fringe finds itself associated in inter-State fora where “Loyalists” are in principle excluded, and the French State even more. This is particularly the case with the FLNKS at the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) since its founding in March 1988, even if recently the treatment of economic subjects has required a rapprochement with the New Caledonian executive, or even with the Non-Aligned Movement.⁶ The place offered to partisan training to the detriment of a broader political platform, not to say more representative, offers it a network of solidarities where sovereign states are the spokespersons not only of a cause but the interests of a single actor on the Caledonian scene, however important it may be. Thus, on October 19, 2021, the Ambassador of Papua New Guinea to the United Nations spoke, on

5 C. Lechervy : L'intégration régionale de la France dans le Pacifique océanien, une diplomatie multimodale, *Le Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, n°140, June 2015

6 The free trade agreement signed on July 29, 2004 between the MSG Member States stipulates in article 3 that a permanent observer status is granted to the FLNKS until New Caledonia becomes a party to this agreement.

behalf of the MSG, before the United Nations Committee on Special Political Affairs and Decolonization in New York to ask France the postponement of the 3rd referendum on the full sovereignty of New Caledonia (December 12, 2021), by taking up the only arguments put forward by the FLNKS. This diplomatic expression reminds us that because of its politico-institutional links with its overseas territories, France is in the I-P region a power “from within” and “from without”. It can be said that it is almost the same for the EU. In the name of the statutes of the Overseas Countries and Territories (OCTA) and of the Outermost Regions (ROs) under European law, the island territories wish to embody the EU in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. They are anxious not to be considered as “simples’ partners” of Brussels, in the same way as the states belonging to the Africa - Caribbean - Pacific (ACP) group. To do so, they requested and obtained to be associated with regional projects conducted with sovereign states, in particular in the most important areas (economy, environment). It is, therefore, a new tripartite cooperative scheme France - OCTA (or RUP) - Island State(s), which is currently emerging.

In the Pacific, very clearly, Nouméa and Papeete wish to be relays from the EU to Pacific island states and territories (PICTs) and vehicles for escalating island concerns to Brussels, including on security matters. This reflexive ambition assumes that the EU and its Member States consider French territories as European assets for the Union’s foreign and security policy. Therefore it is a matter of convincing that the French presence in the region makes the EU an actor “resident” of the I-P and “resilient” to an excessive, not to say dangerous, polarization of the region. At the same time, the political leaders of the three French Pacific territories, who still do not work together enough to develop common positions due to the lack of tripartite platforms for exchange, must explicitly state their policies as those of their territory, of France and of the EU, and demonstrate the concrete concordance of the three approaches. This is a task in itself, because there is a constant temptation, including for domestic political reasons, to privilege the most regionalist of the dimensions according to a “pro-Melanesian” or “pro-Polynesian” scheme. Nevertheless, showing one’s primary belonging to the “Oceanian” or “Moana” family is often considered the most essential. At the PIF, it is true that the status of full membership was obtained with a hard fight and very recently (2016) for New Caledonia and French Polynesia. It was the same for the Territory of the Wallis and Futuna Islands; Mata Utu has only been an associated country with the PIF since September 2018. Regional integration is not only political or legal, it is also linguistic and even conceptual. The French

territories of the Pacific are thus all as attached as their neighbors to the Pacific Way. It remains to be seen whether this Oceanian narrative dimension is fully compatible with the I-P projects!

Doctrinally, the question arises in the same way for the ASEAN Way, especially whether Southeast Asia is to be considered as being quite “central” in the I-P area. In the meantime, as far as the nations of the Blue Pacific are concerned, we must be attentive to their way of asserting their “Pacificity.” The Pacific Way being as much an element of identity as a behavioral expression, it expresses a politico-diplomatic language aimed at consensus and the distinction of the geographical area. This vocabulary is expressed in a “calming” spirit, perhaps at the antipodes of an I-P dialectic, more anxiety-provoking, and capable of sending a quasi-warlike message. In some respect, Oceanic terminology is smoother, even easily mirroring the “silky” language of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It does not evolve less. By favoring more and more the semantic and identity expression “Moana” instead of “Pasifika,” certain Oceanic nations, in particular within the Polynesian Triangle, the island states and territories (re)define *de facto* “their” vision, not to say their expectations of the P pillar of the I-P. In this context, the powers that be that assert themselves as I-P must make this concept that of the different sub-regions. I-P must not simply and mechanically impose itself on PICTs. This narrative must become theirs. The P dimension of I-P is not intended to be driven solely by peripheral powers and, as far as French territories are concerned, by the metropolitan State. In fact, it cannot be strictly State-centered. In order for it to be appropriated by overseas communities, the I-P idea cannot be devoted solely to sovereign areas. It must also respect very hierarchical societies in which seniority continues to play a major role. The appropriation of the I-P by the societies and leaders of New Caledonia, French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna is absolutely essential for France to have lasting credibility with the sovereign states of Oceania. It is not built only with speeches. They forget each other too quickly. Only co-action offers the opportunity to anchor a “Pacific-France” acting by itself and by the autonomy of its territories. Sensitivities are not just an expression of ego. They remind us that the islanders have their own vision of the world and of “their” region, of their history as well as of their future.

The consequence of these anthropological realities is to encourage the metropolitan State to also think of itself as an island State. By adopting an island perspective, in practice, France finds itself sharing this similarity with less than half of the sovereign states of the I-P. As a counterpoint

to this, the I-P presents a real opportunity for the overseas territories to structure their regional integration policy, alongside France but also Australia, New Zealand, Japan, US or EU. The three French territories in the Pacific, if they are acting as a block of interests and with shared strategies, can both influence regional debates and orchestrate new partnerships, including in the area of soft security.

In the I-P region, France is first and foremost an island power. If this data is demanding for the Metropolitan State, the birth of Asian I-P (cf. ASEAN, Australia, China, South Korea, India, Japan, Taiwan) taking into account the PICTs requires for New Caledonia and French Polynesia to specify, to their inhabitants and their surroundings, their international project. This is a very complicated task when most of the political energies are turned towards the definition of institutional futures and all the hard security issues are in the hands of the central state. For the island states, thinking about the I-P and its Pacific component is not so easy, since the states are faced with “existential” challenges (e.g., collapse of tourism, indebtedness not very sustainable over the time, isolation in the name of the fight against COVID-19, rising sea levels, etc.) and very disruptive in the political life of nations but not necessarily requiring armed forces. We must also not forget the limited human resources that can be devoted to thinking about international relations in general and the I-P in particular. An intellectual effort that is proving to be considerable for states with very limited diplomatic tools and having relays in Asia that generally do not go beyond a few capitals: Tokyo, Beijing or Taipei. In such a pattern of setting up diplomatic missions, I-P exchanges are limited to only one or two Asian partners and three or four Western countries. Cross-linking with ASEAN via the PIF Secretariat is also not very efficient in this regard.

In an I-P project with two oceanic sides and having rejected the idea of apprehending the region under the name of Indo - Asia - Pacific (AIP), the clear and precise definition of the P pillar is imperative in order to understand the inclusiveness or know of the concept. There would be danger in not taking into account the small and micro-states if the P were to mean, for the biggest powers, an Asia-Pacific folded, once again, on its only states bordering on the western rim of the Pacific, forgetting in practice the 23 island states and territories of Oceania. The more we will be clear about the contours of the P, the more certain States (e.g., Fiji, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea) will be able to assert themselves as “bridges” between Oceania and the I-P, starting with Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia. However, this westward vectorialization could be profoundly

undermined if the five Micronesian states quickly leave the PIF. This "Micronesexit" can only have a lasting effect on Oceania's regionalism, since it will put an end to 30 years of integration. Strategically, its realization will give a very "South Pacific" connotation to the gathering of PIF states and territories, which is not in the political interest of France, especially since the non-sovereign American territories have never found a full place in it, even if it is certainly to the regret of several of their island leaders.

As an inclusive Pacific policy cannot ignore the geopolitical importance of the Micronesian area, France will have to be all the more active in this sub-region, since neither New Caledonia nor French Polynesia maintains very close relations, even if the recent statutory evolutions of the French territories to the PIF owe a lot to the presidents of the Federated States of Micronesia and Nauru. But *ceteris paribus*, no matter how strategically important the Micronesexit is, it will not fundamentally change the way Nouméa and Papeete see their Pacific and I-P integration. New Caledonia, which is much more of a sub-regional hub than French Polynesia, does not hesitate sometimes to call itself a French or even EU "aircraft carrier", a "bridgehead" or even an "avant-garde" to the Pacific, expressions that are hardly heard on the Polynesian side. Admittedly, the idea of a tricolor "aircraft carrier" cannot be consensual among all the New Caledonian leaders and a fortiori Kanak, for whom the Melanesian identity prevails. Therefore, to slip into a French I-P policy will be all the more complicated, especially if geopolitical subjects are perceived internally as an opportunity for the "Parisian" State to tighten the grip on sovereignty and for the Loyalists to agitate the Chinese threat to the country's heritage resources. Conversely, French Polynesia will slip more easily into a French I-P strategy, especially if it takes advantage of it and sees itself associated with it in practice, which would, it is true, be a (geo)political and major behavioral with History, the installation of the CEP having been in no way, as the collective memory strongly emphasizes, a co-decision of Fenua with the metropolitan State.

Demonstrating the "strategic" utility of the French territories in Oceania by developing new neighborhood relations and as a relay of vital concerns to Paris or even the EU takes and will take time. In the Pacific, France will therefore remain very close by its territories but also far away, even beyond the confines of the I-P. A two-sided reality, whatever the means committed, political, financial or material! However, the development of the international relations of the overseas territories, although not limited to the peripheral island states, is nevertheless densifying the

fabric of France's exchanges with the Pacific community as a whole. It was partly under pressure from New Caledonian and Polynesian elected officials that the 4th and 5th France-Oceania Summits were held under the presidencies of F. Hollande (Paris, December 26, 2015) and E. Macron (Paris, July 19, 2021). Their weight has forced France to give a regular rhythm to political exchanges at the highest level; a pledge of its determination and commitment in the region.⁷ In other words, nearly 60% of the summits bringing together the Heads of State and Government of the Pacific Islands around the President of the French Republic since 2003 have been held between 2015 and 2021, and half of them in Nouméa in a "France - Pacific Community" architecture (November 17, 2014 - May 4, 2018), the headquarters of the SPC being statutorily in Nouméa since 1949 and should stay there. Presidents F. Hollande and then E. Macron have each held four summits with the Oceanian leaders during their term of office. These meetings are very specific to France because these events do not rely on the architecture of the PIF. The France - Oceania summits saw invitations extended to participants from the United States and Japan, Chile and Timor-Leste, as well as to the general secretaries of sub-regional organizations (e.g., MSG, PIDF).

As for the meetings with the heads of state and government of the SPC, these are firsts. Ironically, Paris was during the sixties, seventies and eighties very hostile to give a political dimension to the organization having its seat on its soil, giving the implicit start to the creation of the PIF. France is, therefore, the only partner country of the Pacific Islanders to have built and perpetuated two types of interstate meetings at the Pacific level and to have extended them beyond full participants in the PIF format. What has been developed is bound to last. It was indeed decided to organize a 6th summit France - Oceania from the first part of the presidential mandate 2022 – 2027.⁸

In the I-P region, the Pacific holds a special place since it is the only region where leaders' summits are held at relatively regular intervals in the presence of the French president. In the Indian Ocean, the desire to presidentialize relations was illustrated in 2020 by the revision of the founding

⁷ The summit was held by video conference. It had been scheduled the previous year in French Polynesia and was postponed due to the spread of COVID-19.

⁸ The press release of the 5th summit announced the dates of 2023-2024 for the holding of the 6th edition. https://www.nouvelle-caledonie.gouv.fr/content/download/8432/64941/file/2021.07.19-CONCLUSION_DU_PREF%CC%81SIDENT_DF_LA_RE%CC%81PUBLIQUE_DU_5E_SOMMET_FRANCE_OCE%CC%81ANIE.pdf

Victoria Agreement in order to give the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) the means to carry out collective actions and to give a statutory place to the summit of heads of State and government. The upcoming synergies of the IOC and France-Oceania or France-Pacific Community leaders' summits will further underline the island dimension of the French approach to I-P. These island dynamics also reflect the extent to which the I-P strategy and partnerships are supported on the French side by the highest figure in the State: the President of the Republic. France's I-P words were solemnized by several speeches by President E. Macron, in particular during his successive trips to New Delhi (March 2018), Sydney (May 2018), Nouméa (May 2018), Tokyo (June 2019), Saint Denis de La Réunion (October 2019) and Papeete (July 2021) or in the foreword given to the government document for the summer of 2021. It is also a double French singularity to have seen the policy expose French I-P both from its metropolitan capital, its island territories and from the capitals of its so-called "strategic" partners (e.g., Australia, India, Singapore) but also through the voice of its Head of State. The French approach is much more assertive at the highest level of governance than that adopted by ASEAN or EU Member States. Many of France's partners have confined the expression of their I-P policy to the level of their Foreign affairs ministers, with heads of State or government being less forthcoming on a subject likely to assert strategic hostility to the rise of the PRC or a lukewarm attitude towards the logic of the alliance implied by the American desire to contain the policies of domination implemented by Beijing.

Over time, the Chinese threat in the I-P and island Pacific region has been highlighted by the President of the Republic. It reached its climax in July 2021. The President of the Republic did not hide, neither during the 5th France - Oceania summit nor during his trip to French Polynesia, his fears of seeing certain islanders increasingly subservient to Chinese interests, to the point of losing all or part of their sovereignty. This language is a message from one Pacific power to another. It nevertheless denotes particular attention to the protection of small and micro island states. In the I-P region, it should not be forgotten that 7.2% of UN member states have a maritime border with France and more than a quarter have oceanic proximity to France. Globally, 68.7% of the States adjoining the French Republic are in the Pacific. In this part of the world, no less than 12 States (2.4 times more than in the Indian Ocean) have a common border with

the French Republic. Unparalleled territorial connectivity since 65% of Oceania States has a maritime limit with France.

In terms of security, France's Pacific policy is linked to the contiguous nature of maritime territories, but with states that for the most part do not have an army to enforce their sovereignty. This reality is particularly significant in Polynesia and gives France and its military command in Papeete (ALPACI) a primary responsibility. The Polynesian centrality is important for the P pillar of the French I-P because one in two countries of the I-P having a territorial demarcation with France have it with French Polynesia and French Polynesia is the most populated territory of the sub-region. It represents more than 40% of the population of the non-American Polynesian world. A situation which is not set to change! French Polynesia has a demographic multiplier coefficient 1.5 times higher than its neighbors. But what is less known is that 45% of the states and territories of the Pacific with a French border have it with the Territory of the Wallis and Futuna Islands (Fiji, Samoa, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu). But it is the entire Polynesian area that determines the French I-P identity and its "Pacifcity"; not to be forgotten if Franco-Caledonian relations were to be radically transformed, and this even if 15% of the French soldiers based in the I-P region are in New Caledonia.

In Oceania, 72.7% of the Republic's neighbors are Polynesian States or territories in whole or in part. Not only are 25.8% of the countries having a border with France are Polynesians but the kilometers of seafront of the I-P, which must be taken care of, are overwhelmingly in the Pacific (71.9%) and in French Polynesia for the Pacific basin (56.4%). These physical realities mean that French "indo-pacifcity" imposes primary diplomatic attention to oceanic and environmental issues, the Pacific being in many ways the ocean of the Oceanians but also to a certain extent that of the French. In this context, cross-border maritime proximity is an issue.⁹ This is why also France is working to see the conclusion, as soon as possible in 2022, of an ambitious new treaty to protect biodiversity beyond national jurisdictions and to recognize areas of the ocean located beyond national jurisdictions as a common resource to be preserved for the benefit of present and future generations. In this context, maritime proximity and cross-border relations are dimension political issues. It is all the more important for France as 15 of the 31 states and territories with a maritime

9 The French coastal lines in the I-P area constitute 57.7% of the French coastline.

border with France are in the I-P region, as it does not hesitate to assert the honorary titles of second highest maritime ranking in the world and the first submarine nation in the world. It has taken care over the last few years (2015, 2019) to define a National Maritime Security Strategy in which it is concerned about the effects of the lack of anticipation in the I-P area of a competition for fishery resources which results in the massive influx of Asian fishing fleets in the South Pacific and is concerned about a Chinese policy which arouses suspicion by its lack of transparency in the scientific research activities on the climate that it carries out there.^{10,11}

In addition to their sovereignty missions, the Armed Forces of New Caledonia (FANC) and French Polynesia (FAPF) help to secure the maritime space surrounding French territories by participating in maritime surveillance operations in EEZs and zones of high seas adjacent to PICTs. These actions are conducted in close coordination with Pacific Quad partners (Australia, New Zealand, USA). As such, the 5th France - Oceania summit confirmed the principle of annual coastguard training as part of the exercises of the quadripartite initiative in the Pacific in support of the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA); the first of these courses being held in Papeete at the end of 2021 and the next in Nouméa in 2022.¹² To be more precise, and “to better cope with the predatory logic we are all victims of, I want to boost our maritime cooperation in the South Pacific,” President E. Macron said. In this perspective, he decided to launch a network of coast guards for the South Pacific around three main objectives: information sharing, operational cooperation and training. French forces are also mobilized to respond to natural disasters that strike the region within the framework of the FRANZ mechanism, with Australia and New Zealand. This instrument of civil-military projection has established itself as an effective tool and of very frequent use. This is good news as the recurrence and intensity of disasters increase due to climatic change, of which the

10 France is likely to further expand its I-P maritime area of responsibility. In 2018, she filed a dossier to do so off the Territory of the Wallis and Futuna Islands, French Polynesia, south-eastern New Caledonia and in the Crozet archipelago.

11 *Stratégie nationale de sûreté des espaces maritimes*. December 10, 2019. https://www.gouvernement.fr/sites/default/files/contenu/piece-jointe/2019/12/snsem_2019_finale.pdf

12 “Final Declaration - 5th France-Oceania Summit.” 2021. Elysec.fr, July 19, 2021. <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2021/07/19/final-declaration-5th-france-oceania-summit>.

PICTs are the first victims. The I-P policy of practical action and solidarity also needs to be well integrated into the network of regional institutions.

Since the signing of the Paris Agreements that ended the Third Indochina War just 30 years ago, France has been able to integrate itself in a national capacity in almost all the security forums of the I-P region. It participates in ministerial political meetings (e.g., South Pacific Defense Ministers' Meeting (SPDMM)) as well as in meetings of military hierarchs: chiefs of staff of the armed forces (Indo-Pacific Chiefs of Defense (CHOD)), navy chief at the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) and Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), high ranking officer to Asia-Pacific Intelligence Chiefs Conference (APICC) or the Asian Coast Guard Agencies Meeting (HACGAM). France has also been involved in regional initiatives such as the Pacific Environmental Security Forum (PESF). This very dense institutional network allows Paris to act both politically and from an operational point of view. These exchange platforms cover not only the PICTs but also quite often Asian continent states. In view of this overlapping, the emphasis on the Pacific pillar is essential because investment in Oceania cannot be interpreted as a simple extension of actions focused on Asia and the management of its stability. By this logic, we should avoid saying as in the past that by acting in this part of the world, we look to Australasia. The I-P is not the synonym of Asia, but the sum of sub-regions requiring institutionalized sub-unit approaches. However, it is important to avoid that multiple minilateral initiatives undermine the possibility of the emergence of an institutionalized I-P space.

The emergence of reticulated maritime information-sharing enclosures is the best example of the juxtaposition of regional institutions. The Information Fusion Center in Singapore has been complemented by the establishment of comparable instruments for the southwest of the Indian Ocean (Regional Maritime Information Fusion Center (RMIIFC) in Madagascar), cooperation in the ocean Indian (Information Fusion Center - Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in Gurugram (India)) and for the Southeast Pacific (Callao (Peru)). It remains to be seen how to fill the missing holes in the I-P space, for example, by creating a Security Information Fusion Center in the Indian Ocean (SIFCIO),¹³ or at the entire I-P scale.¹⁴

13 N. Regaud : From the Pacific Fusion Center to the Security Information Center in the Indian Ocean?, IRSEM, Strategic Brief, October 29, 2020

14 Canyon, Deon, Wade Turvold, and Jim McMullin. 2021. Review of A Network of Maritime Fusion Centers throughout the Indo-Pacific, Security Nexus 22 (February). <https://apcss.org/>

The same applies to the coordination of humanitarian assistance with the Regional HADR Coordination Center (RHCC) located in Singapore, or to the fusion of open information relating to security issues in the broad sense with the Pacific Fusion Centre created at the initiative of Australia and located in Port Vila.

The sharing of accurate information and developing of shared knowledge on safety and security at sea of all types (e.g., pollution, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing (IUU), piracy at sea, illicit trafficking, etc.) at the sub-regional level, reinforces cooperation and confidence between the PICTs and thus facilitates intervention and protection capacities. In addition to the regional role of the armed forces, other police forces in the hands of the French State contribute to integration policies and regional actions. This is notably the case for the police and customs services. Since the end of the 90s, on behalf of its French overseas territories, the State's civil servants have been sitting in most of the regional security organizations. This can be done in the name of two territories (New Caledonia, French Polynesia) as is the case for the meetings of the Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police (PICP), of the 3 territorial entities for the Pacific Immigration Development Community (PIDC) and the Oceania Customs Organisation (OCO) or even in the name of France itself (cf. the observer status at the Asia - Pacific Group on Money Laundering (APG)).

French participation in these institutions underlines how keen the State is to contribute to regional security, not by sending officials from its capital but by having those who are closest to the realities of the Pacific and work alongside local executives. A State-centered dynamic but which support the indigenization of the police forces and their territorial hierarchies and strengthen relations not only with the riparian states but even more with the countries having significant means of action and investigation, in the first place Australia, New Zealand and the United States. This construction of security cooperation from below makes France and its operational resources a very important partner. In all these fora, France can hope to boast of its peaceful place and seek synergies of action with the EU. However, regionally, France and the EU have conflicting statutes which may raise obstacles in Brussels and/or among EU Member States to the development of common strategies. In certain regional fora, France has a more eminent status than that of EU (e.g., Indian Ocean Commis-

sion (COI), SPC, PIF). It is also the only European Member State in few organizations (e.g., Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF)). At this time, the only exception to this tangle where France is a junior partner to the EU is with ASEAN. The Union is a “dialogue partner” of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and, since December 2020, a “strategic” partner, whereas France can only display a so-called “development partnership” (September 9, 2020). Everywhere else, Paris is justified in emphasizing its partnership history. In order to establish a European dynamic, it must, however, convince itself that it is not using the EU’s I-P strategy for its own purposes and sub-regional interests, that it is not over-militarizing European ambitions and that it is indeed seeking the collective interest in a region perceived as very distant by many Europeans, leaders and citizens. An excessive valuation of I-P through its military naval dimension is not without danger even in the European arena. It risks being taken as a lack of interest in the neighborhood of the EU, which would be unacceptable to many Europeans given the challenges posed by Libya, the recurrent tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean or the Russian forces demonstrations in the North Atlantic and the Baltic Sea. Moreover, some might see this as a neocolonial expression or a renaissance of gunboat policies whose belligerent consequences in the past have left many with bad memories.

The EU, in unveiling its I-P strategy, has indicated its willingness to secure maritime transits, contribute to capacity building, and enhance naval presence in the region. Obviously, some EU States feel a little more distant than others from this part of the world, but all agree that the new regional strategy of the EU can only have positive consequences. However, not all countries will have the same level of commitment but all have an interest in a EU strategy in the I-P mega-region. At the end of 2021, only four Member States (Belgium, Germany, Netherlands, Spain) declared themselves available to send warships to the I-P and thus add to a permanent French naval presence. This shows very limited capacities. However, a coordinated European maritime presence (CMP) in I-P and the Pacific would show that the EU will be a player in regional maritime security. This reinforcement of the operational commitment by ensuring a permanent maritime presence and coverage in the areas of interest established by the European Council, the promotion of new cooperation and partnerships at sea are intended to underline the reliability and sustainability of the Union’s commitments. However, it relies on a limited number of actors, because within the EU, 15% of States do not have a seafloor, 11% are neutral and more than 30% have means that allow them

to intervene mainly along their coastline. In this context, the generation of forces for distant operations is and will be a challenge, a constraint for the EU but also for NATO. The interoperability specific to the I-P, especially at the naval level, will be a new issue as it differs somewhat from the highly standardized transatlantic environment. In any case, Europeans are encouraged to militarize their presence in the I-P, even if the request is not so explicitly formulated. It is almost a prerequisite if Europeans are to exchange intelligence, cyber, anti-submarine warfare and connections of weapon systems with their Allies in the best possible way. This politico-technical dimension gives rise to and will give rise to many transatlantic debates, both from a doctrinal, partnership, operational and equipment supplier point of view. In this regard, President E. Macron called for strategic clarification within NATO, well before the announcement of the establishment of an AUKUS partnership. By declaring “for my part, China is not part of the Atlantic geography, or else my map has a problem”,¹⁵ the French President has clearly set a first limit, while knowing that the action of the PRC is not only deployed in the I-P region but from now on a more global scale, including in the Euro-Atlantic area and with reinforced cooperation with Russia. Beyond its nuclear and ballistic capabilities, the People's Liberation Army has moved closer to NATO's priority areas of interest, having installed its soldiers in Djibouti and showing a presence in the Mediterranean and the Baltic.

This westward march of the PRC opened NATO debates on the need for a global alliance. In Brussels, the conviction is emerging that the relevance of NATO for the United States could well be measured by the extent to which it takes into account the Chinese challenge. As a result, there is a new need for EU-NATO exchange platforms on China or EU-US exchanges on the I-P. At the same time, NATO will have to clarify the role of Global Partners from and in the region. The European message in these discussion channels will aim to say that the EU's I-P strategy does not ignore Chinese challenges and show complacency. In terms of communication, it is about defending European interests while having inclusive strategies, at least where possible. This makes some diplomats and think-tankers say that the EU seeks to propose a “third way” between the logics of exclusive alignment with the United States or the PRC. This formula smacks of Cold War times and deserves to be discussed or even better formulated because it was a dead end especially in Indochina. In the

15 *L'Espresso* June 12, 2021

meantime, the upcoming transatlantic discussions on I-P will bring the British and French to the forefront of the European scene, including because these two countries collect intelligence worldwide by their own, are space and nuclear powers, requiring permanent facilities in the I-P region.

Undeniably, London and Paris have common interests in the I-P region. In recent years, both countries have made great efforts, on their own, to develop coherent I-P strategies. Each has been careful not to limit them to expressing their vision of the future and an analysis of the risks. Both sides of the Channel have sought to ground strategic I-P projects in action and planning to bring together allies with local interests. A Franco-British rapprochement makes all the more sense to analysts since both states share a common history with the I-P, have pre-positioned forces there, have signed more or less binding defense agreements, and project common values at the heart of their political systems (i.e. attachment to democracy, freedom of navigation, promotion of the market economy, support for cooperative multilateralism). But if the United Kingdom ignores the EU in the I-P region for much longer, it will complicate the definition of Franco-British coactions. If it withdraws into the Anglosphere, it will be even worse, especially since France, unlike Britain, has never left the Pacific and its institutions. It has simply never claimed to withdraw east of the Suez. In Europe, everyone knows that a Franco-British engine in the I-P can only encourage the other Europeans, starting with Germany, to mobilize resources and to exercise more strategic influence. In Brussels, as in other European capitals, the positioning of London and Paris in the games of transnational organizations will be followed with great attention, especially if the debates to transform the G-7 into a D-10 with Australia, South Korea and India gain in consistency, if multi-party defense agreements are outlined with certain members of the Commonwealth (e.g., Australia, Brunei, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore) or with the Quad. Nevertheless, London's difficulties in implementing Brexit (cf. Northern Ireland, fishing licenses, London's anti-EU narrative,...) and its posture on the AUKUS cloud the prospects for cooperation, especially in the I-P region.

In terms of security architecture, even if we were still a long way from seeing the emergence of an Indo-Pacific Defense Treaty Organisation (IPTO), the announcement of the AUKUS has pushed potential partners further apart, while the I-P doctrines being asserted were gradually bringing them closer together. This is true with London but also with Canberra and Washington. The New Anglosphere Pact has given way to bitterness

and suspicion; states of mind that will last for some time yet. It also sent an inappropriate signal to the EU, both in timing and substance. Apparently despite its global weight, the EU and its Member States are still not considered serious geopolitical players. An attitude without surprise on the part of Great Britain still in its “Brexit” maneuvers but unwelcome on the part of the United States of J. Biden because it immediately generated angry reactions which one would be wrong to believe are only posturing to mark the disappointment of having lost an important commercial contract. France's irritation is all the more understandable since the contract value of its submarines was not so much financial or industrial as the sign of a long-term commitment by an Allied State, the EU only country with significant military forces in the Pacific. With Australia, it was the symbol in front of the I-P of a desire to move from a situation of good neighborliness between two riparian States to that of an affirmation of a politico-military alliance rooted in common interests, a similar understanding of security issues in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and shared democratic values. Around the “Future Submarine Program” (FSP), it is any ecosystem of military cooperation that was involved with, for example, an Australian liaison officer to the FANC or the definition of a five-year cooperation model.¹⁶

In practice and intellectually, the AUKUS has dissociated partners called upon to come to an understanding, which is bad news for the countries concerned and very good news for those who have hegemonic ambitions or are worried about seeing them appear in the I-P region a synergistic Western approach, especially since they have been working for a long time to divide Europeans and even Westerners on their relations to be maintained with Russia and/or China. These manipulations must be taken seriously so that disinformation activities that could call into question the relevance of the European approach to the I-P are immediately counteracted. The AUKUS, even in its infancy and imprecise as to its articulations with the Quad or with possible new partners, is a strategic game-changer. This is true for France but also for many others (e.g., ASEAN, New Zealand, PRC, South Korea).

As soon as it was announced, this led Paris to refresh its government document on France's I-P strategy, published three months earlier. Strictly speaking, it was not a doctrinal and operational overhaul, but it

16 *Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes*: July 26, 2021

demonstrated a willingness to adapt tactically to any new situation. In the longer term, the new Australian-American-British partnership in the Pacific contains in itself implications for the drafting of a military programming law to come into force in 2025 and whose work will be launched shortly after the presidential election of 2022. But as of today, the AUKUS is stimulating the French strategic review because its statement has accentuated the underlying idea since the Obama administration and its refusal to bomb Syria that the United States is, after all, an “unreliable ally”. In addition, the AUKUS partnership was immediately used by the PRC to justify new Chinese politico-military offensives, by overplaying the role of the aggressed power, which cannot be ignored from the point of view of the defense of French interests, particularly in the Pacific.

During the first meeting of China - Pacific island states foreign ministers in October 2021, Wang Yi used the constitution of the AUKUS to denounce an instrument endangering the nuclear-free zone of the South Pacific and pushing the region “on the brink of war”¹⁷ at the same time when for the first time Chinese and Russian warships patrolled together in the western Pacific, thus adding a naval dimension to the joint strategic air patrols scheduled each year since 2019 in-over the East China Sea and the Sea of Japan. In fact, the AUKUS partnership has been integrated by both Washington and Beijing in a logic of blocs, inducing a little more instability in the I-P region and making the Pacific islands a growing issue even as the Australian nuclear propulsion submarine program does not yet exist and the timetable for its launch is very, very uncertain, which is not the least of the paradoxes of Canberra’s choices. Consequently, the Anglosphere but also France found themselves caught more than ever in a squaring of the circle. Indeed, it is a question of both not making the I-P concept a strictly security mobilization tool, while invigorating its defense component so that it can be perceived as a credible affirmation of military commitments at the scale of any the region. In this context of growing geopolitical tensions, the island states will above all seek to protect their individual and collective autonomy and to fully control their Pacific narratives so that they are not dissolved in the I-P issues, at the risk of transposing their most brutal expressions to the heart of the Blue Pacific continent. It would be a mistake to propose a management of the I-P and its P-pillar based on a sum of fears, real or imagined, linked to China’s new globalized ambitions. Nevertheless, Western support for the sovereignty of the PICTs is all the

¹⁷ *Global Times* October 21, 2021

more important. This objective is probably shared by Paris and Canberra but the termination of the FSP contract will make it very difficult, at least in the short term, the synergies that France wanted to build with its neighbor. Even the cooperation envisaged in the FLA (France - India - Australia) trilogue will be affected, at least slowed down for some time. Not only will cooperation in the South Pacific be affected, but it is a good bet that other irritants have diminished in recent years (cf. the EU-Australia free trade agreement, the place of coal in the Australian energy policy, New Caledonia, etc.) will reappear, underlining the capacity for harm from one to the other. Not only will a geographical segment of I-P be disrupted, but its absence carries an even greater risk by encouraging the construction of an I-P policy based on a few partners, first and foremost India, Japan as a second partner and even a few South-East Asian nations (e.g., Indonesia, Singapore).¹⁸ This de facto deconstruction of an overall Indo-Pacific approach in favor of an imaginary axis linking three to four capitals, each of which would be the center of a sub-regional effort, would be a return to privileged partnerships with hardly any knock-on effects on an I-P scale, and even less so on a global level.

Not only has the announcement of the AUKUS so soon after the unilateral and disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan shaken the confidence of a key US ally, but it requires Washington to simultaneously pursue a policy of containment of China while rebuilding trust with its only European Ally with the will, the capacity for immediate politico-military action and the determination to act in the operational theatres farthest from its territory. A partner which also trains its armed forces with those of the region in an extended format and deploys first rank military resources.^{19,20} Fortunately for Washington and for Canberra that the geopolitical and Pacific interests of France are in no way aligned with those of China and that Paris does not hide seeing in the communist regime a “competitor” and a “systemic rival”. A long-term commitment, transcribed in the Treaty of Manila (1954), which was demonstrated even with weapons in hand

18 Tertrais, Bruno, and Michel Duclos. 2021. Review of *Après AUKUS - Comment Relancer Notre Stratégie Indopacifique ?* Institut Montaigne. October 4, 2021. <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/blog/apres-aukus-comment-relancer-notre-strategie-indopacifique>.

19 The joint biennial exercise *Croix du Sud* organized by the FANC in 2018 mobilized more than 2,000 soldiers from 11 countries.

20 e.g., *Quad* exercise in March 2021 with a helicopter carrier or the large-scale joint maneuver with Japan, Australia and the United States in May 2021 on the island of Kyushu with ships and, for the first time, ground forces.

in Indochina, Korea or on the occasion of sales of strategic superiority weapons to Taiwan (e.g., frigates, Mirage 2000-9, observation satellite,...). While this is not set to change, debates over I-P policy are no less deeply agitated and likely to be for a long time. They are not just the preserve of a few experts. They invited themselves to the parliamentary and partisan field. As I-P has been one of the foreign policy markers of President E. Macron's first term, the AUKUS and the manner in which discussions on the FSP program were brought to an end have become matters of French domestic politics. They even appeared as a component of the dialectic of opposition to the potential president-candidate, from the government left to the extreme right. The virulent debates that have been orchestrated since mid-September 2021 have, however, revealed several points of consensus on the fact that France has not been treated as a valuable trusted partner, a provider of security in the Indo-Pacific and that it has been deceived in particular by the highest Australian politico-administrative officials.

Even if foreign policy is rarely, if ever, a very profitable theme during election campaigns, one cannot underestimate that for a candidate-President diplomatic implementation is an element of his credibility and his legitimacy in front of all his opponents in search of a first supreme mandate. The diplomatic crisis born of AUKUS shook two narratives at the heart of the 8th President of the Fifth Republic's foreign policy: the one on the I-P but also the one devoted to the rise of a united Europe. Its echo will only be more lasting because these two axes are not intended to be substantially corrected for a long time. While the AUKUS is still a poorly identified object, it has become an essential subject in the development or even the implementation of the I-P policies of tomorrow. It is, therefore, all the more urgent that Washington, Canberra and even London define its outlines, starting with their closest Allies. Strategic surprises between Allies are the worst off when you have the same geopolitical concerns.