

## Chapter 3

### FRANCE'S STRATEGY TOWARDS CHINA'S ACTIONS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA AND THE FIRST ISLAND CHAIN

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At a time when international agreements can be broken, norms contested or interpreted, and institutions bypassed or rendered inoperable by major powers, voices have emerged to uphold international maritime law, the freedom of navigation and innocent passage as well for a free and open Indo-Pacific. Among many nations, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) countries as well as Canada, India, the European Union (EU) and individual European countries have joined their efforts. Among them France has distinguished itself through especially innovative and active participation.

Ultimately, France's strategy is anchored in one conviction: law, not force, must govern the seas. As Beijing expands its footprint across the South China Sea, France responds with endurance rather than escalation – through presence, partnership, and principle. Its goal is to ensure that the Indo-Pacific remains open and governed by norms respected by all parties.

This chapter argues that France's enduring Indo-Pacific Strategy seeks to uphold maritime legality through presence and partnership rather than power projection. It aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of France's strategy in Southeast Asia as a dimension of its broader Indo-Pacific Strategy. Its content will be structured in different sections: “A resident power in the Indo-Pacific”, “Assessing the risks of escalation”, “Military presence and diplomacy: key tools of France to manage escalation”; and concluded with specific policy recommendations, such as reinforcing France's Indo-Pacific presence through a permanent naval force, the development of its regional intelligence capabilities, or the creation of a strategic command dedicated to the South China Sea, Southeast Asia or the First Island Chain, or the Europeanising its regional engagement, with German, Dutch, and Italian contributions, could be further expanded.

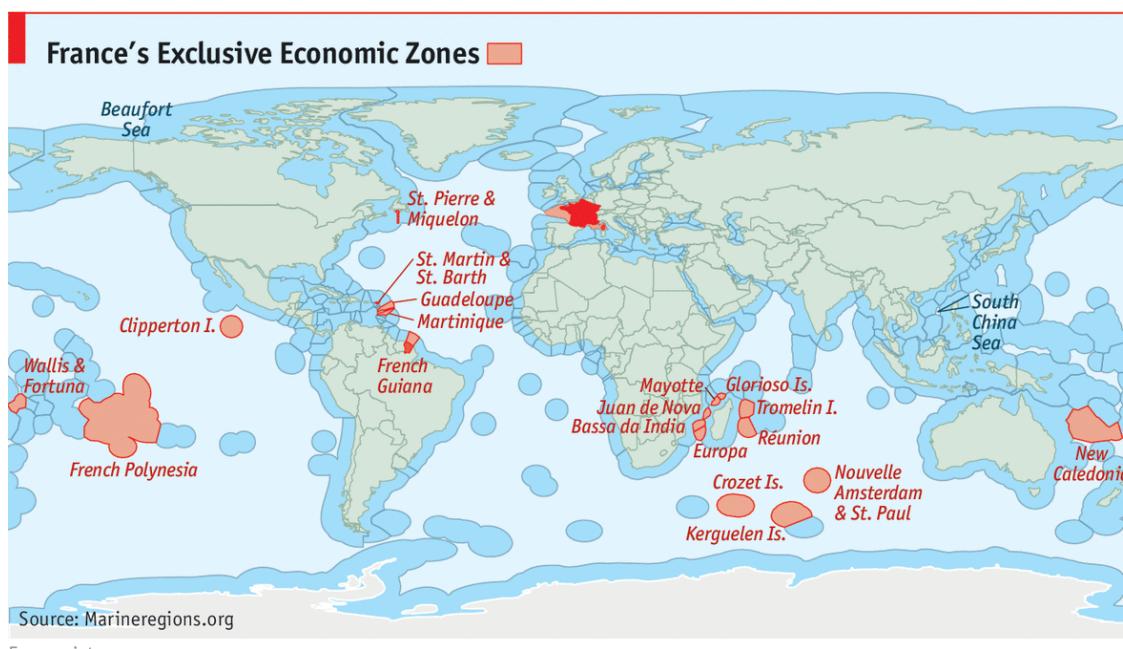
#### **A resident power in the Indo-Pacific**

Over the past ten or more years, China, but also Malaysia and Indonesia have been criticising the deployment of naval assets by Western powers. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs refer to these deployments, even if they include local involvement, as “foreign interference”.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, several western powers, such as the Australia, Canada, France, and United States are in fact regional powers.

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<sup>1</sup> “China Slams Philippines for Courting External Forces, Destabilizing South China Sea,” *China Daily*, August 9, 2025, <https://en.people.cn/n3/2025/0809/c90000-20351119.html>.

France's overseas territories – La Réunion, Mayotte, New Caledonia, French Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna, Clipperton, and the Scattered Islands in the Indian Ocean – extend French sovereignty over nearly nine million square kilometres of maritime space, and are home to almost two million citizens. With 93 per cent of its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) located in the Indo-Pacific, France's prosperity, security, and global influence are intimately linked to the region's stability. Today, France is the only European nation that is both a resident Indo-Pacific power and a permanent member of the UN Security Council.



**FIGURE 1: FRANCE'S OVERSEAS TERRITORIES AND MARINE EEZS**

Source: “*Drops in the Ocean: France’s Marine Territories*,” *The Economist*, January 13, 2016, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2016/01/13/drops-in-the-ocean-frances-marine-territories>.

The South China Sea and the First Island Chain are central to this strategic environment. They form the connective tissue between the Indian and Pacific Oceans and the heart of the world's commercial seaborne routes. The latest version of the French Indo-Pacific Strategy<sup>2</sup> (issued in July 2025) sets out three enduring priorities for these waters:

<sup>2</sup> “French Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific”, French Ministry of Defense, May 2019, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/dgris/asie-oceanie-amerique-latine/strategie-francaise-indopacifique>. This document is based on the 2017 Strategic Review and the 2013 White Paper. In February 2022, the French Foreign Office published an updated version under the title “French Strategy in the Indo-Pacific”. A third iteration was made available in July 2025. Please see *Defence and National Security Strategic Review* (French Republic, 2017), [https://franceintheus.org/IMG/pdf/defense\\_and\\_national\\_security\\_strategic\\_review\\_2017.pdf](https://franceintheus.org/IMG/pdf/defense_and_national_security_strategic_review_2017.pdf); “*Livres*

defending international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS); ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight; and promoting a rules-based order that resists coercion and preserves openness.<sup>3</sup>

### Assessing the risks of escalation

France considers the South China Sea and the first island chain to be the Indo-Pacific's most likely flashpoints for crisis or war.<sup>4</sup> The Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) China Power Project recorded 73 major incidents between 2010 and 2020 involving military and paramilitary vessels in the South China Sea.<sup>5</sup> Other sources now count more than 125 significant incidents between 2001 and 2025, with a near doubling of occurrences between 2020 and 2025 compared to the previous decade, targeting mostly the Philippines.<sup>6</sup> These confrontations – ranging from ramming and water-cannoning to laser targeting and collisions – illustrate a dangerous normalisation of coercion at sea.

China's pattern of behaviour reveals a comprehensive spectrum of means of coercion directed against all its maritime neighbours – South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Malaysia, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia. These means<sup>7</sup> include area denial,<sup>8</sup> or 'Anti Access Area Denial' (A2AD), hybrid warfare,<sup>9</sup> (known in the Philippines as 'illegal, coercive, aggressive, and deceptive', or 'ICAD'), and grey-zone tactics.<sup>10</sup> These different means of coercion are for the most part deployed by a number of maritime actors, including the People's Liberation Army Navy or PLAN and two militarised auxiliary forces, including the coast guard and the maritime militia, militarised in 2021 and placed under the People's Armed Police (PAP) and the Central Military Commission (CMC).

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Blancs [Defence White Paper]," Ministry of Armed Forces, 2013, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/dgris/politique-defense/textes-reference/livres-blancs>. See also, *France's Indo-Pacific Strategy* (French Republic, 2022), [https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/en\\_dcp\\_a4\\_indopacifique\\_022022\\_v1-4\\_web\\_cle878143-1.pdf](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/en_dcp_a4_indopacifique_022022_v1-4_web_cle878143-1.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> "The Indo-Pacific: A Priority for France," French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, July 2025, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/regional-strategies/indo-pacific/the-indo-pacific-a-priority-for-france/>.

<sup>4</sup> The First Island Chain is a virtual line connecting the territories separating China from the Pacific Ocean, starting from the Japanese island of Kyushu, the Ryu-Kyu archipelago, Taiwan, the Philippines, and the island of Borneo.

<sup>5</sup> "Are Maritime Law Enforcement Forces Destabilizing Asia," CSIS-China Powers, accessed November 30, 2025, <https://chinapower.csis.org/maritime-forces-destabilizing-asia>.

<sup>6</sup> The author of this paper collaborated with an Indonesian scholar, with the authorisation of CSIS-China Power and CSIS AMTI, and using open-source information, to update the initial database.

<sup>7</sup> The author, in his working papers, has listed three hundred different means of coercion employed by China covering twelve domains (infrastructures, economy, lawfare, communication warfare, political warfare, education and research, HADR...) and three conceptual silos (area denial, hybrid warfare, and grey zone tactics).

<sup>8</sup> Area Denial or A2AD: Capacity to deny an adversary access to a given geographic area or to expel him from that same area. It can be localised or projected, active or passive, direct or indirect, lethal or non-lethal

<sup>9</sup> Hybrid Warfare: Use by a country of means of confrontation other than war, such as legal warfare, political warfare and social warfare

<sup>10</sup> Grey Zone Tactics: Use by a country of aggression short of war such as water cannoning or ramming

The cumulative effect is a state of permanent tension in which coercion is calibrated to remain below the threshold of open conflict.

From France's perspective,<sup>11</sup> which is mirrored by the CSIS prediction, several escalation scenarios stand out as plausible and increasingly interlinked. The first is a maritime embargo or blockade around the main island of Taiwan, designed to isolate it economically and politically without a formal declaration of war. Such an action could be preceded or accompanied by the takeover of smaller, exposed islands such as the Kinmen, Matsu and Wuqiu islands, Pratas Island (Dongsha), or Itu Aba (Taiping) – moves that would test US and regional deterrence without triggering an immediate all-out conflict. Another scenario involves a high-intensity confrontation in the West Philippine Sea, following repeated clashes between Chinese and Filipino vessels around the Spratlys and Scarborough Shoal. Equally alarming is the risk of a complete blockade of the Taiwan Strait, an event that economists warn could cripple global commerce. Bloomberg Economics has estimated that such a blockade could result in a collapse of up to 10 per cent in international trade,<sup>12</sup> 16.7 per cent in China and 40 per cent in Taiwan, given that more than half of the world's container traffic and nearly all advanced semiconductor exports transit through these waters.

The most extreme hypotheses remain a full-scale invasion of Taiwan or a high intensity conflict in the South China Sea, both of which would almost certainly provoke the intervention of the United States and allies. Probable impacts would include the rerouting of thousands of ships per day toward the eastern part of Taiwan, through the Bashi Channel, or through the Sunda Strait and the Java Sea toward the eastern side of the Philippines. These measures would raise the cost of cargo insurance and lengthen journeys, while making them much costlier and riskier. For France and Europe – heavily dependent on these routes for import and export (manufactured goods, raw materials, electronics, consumer goods), and for Asia – heavily dependent on oil and gas imports (between seventy and eighty per cent for China, Japan, and South Korea) – the strategic and economic consequences would be catastrophic.<sup>13</sup>

In this environment, Paris perceives a progressive and already significant erosion of predictability in regional security. China's rejection of the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration UNCLOS arbitral ruling (*Philippines v. China*),<sup>14</sup> which concluded that there is an absence of historic rights for China in the South China Sea, undermines the universality of maritime law. Meanwhile, the massive land reclamation and militarisation

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<sup>11</sup> "The Indo-Pacific: A Priority for France," France Diplomacy, July 2025, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/regional-strategies/indo-pacific/the-indo-pacific-a-priority-for-france/>.

<sup>12</sup> Jennifer Welch et al., "Xi, Biden and the \$10 Trillion Cost of War Over Taiwan," *Bloomberg*, January 9, 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/newsletters/2024-01-09/economy-risks-latest-taiwan-war-would-cost-world-10-trillion>.

<sup>13</sup> Welch et al., "Xi, Biden and the \$10 Trillion Cost of War Over Taiwan."

<sup>14</sup> "The South China Sea Arbitration (The Republic of Philippines v. The People's Republic of China)," Permanent Court of Arbitration (CPA), July 12, 2016, <https://pca-cpa.org/en/cases/7/>.

of seven artificial islands in the Spratlys, conducted between 2013 and 2016, consolidates a network of coercive control. The First Island Chain, once a geographic boundary, has become a crowded theatre of overlapping deterrence and vulnerability. For France, the greatest danger is not deliberate aggression but inadvertent escalation – a chain reaction born of tactical misjudgement, nationalism, and absence of dialogue.

## **Military presence and diplomacy: key tools of France to manage escalation**

### **Physical presence as strategic signalling**

France has often used military presence and diplomacy as key means of maintaining French influence over the Indo-Pacific region. From a peak of 150,000 military and civilian personnel mobilised during the nuclear tests period between 1963 and 1996, France's military footprint has diminished considerably in the Pacific Ocean, reaching as few as 7,000 personnel for the entire Indo-Pacific, including Abu Dhabi and Djibouti, and 3,000 for the sole South Pacific area.<sup>15</sup> However, it is stepping up its diplomatic engagement, as discussed in the next section.

France's Indo-Pacific military approach intends to deter coercion and demonstrate commitment to legality, by maintaining a strategy of persistent, lawful presence. French naval and air operations across the South China Sea and the First Island Chain underscore that freedom of navigation and overflight are rights,<sup>16</sup> not privileges. Regular deployments of the carrier strike group (2019, 2024, and 2025),<sup>17</sup> helicopter carriers (2018, 2019, 2023, and 2025),<sup>18</sup> frigates (2018, 2019, 2021, 2023, 2024, and 2025),<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Renaud Meltz, “Les effectifs et la main d’œuvre du CEP [CEP staff and workforce],” April 3, 2025, <https://dictionnaire-cep.upf.pf/notice-cep/les-effectifs-et-la-main-doeuvre-du-cep/>.

<sup>16</sup> Jay Dharmadhikari, “The Safety of Maritime Areas Requires Respect for International Law,” United Nations Security Council, August 11, 2025, <https://dictionnaire-cep.upf.pf/notice-cep/les-effectifs-et-la-main-doeuvre-du-cep/>.

<sup>17</sup> “France’s Carrier Strike Group Mission Demonstrates the Nation’s Capacity to Project Its Military Power in the Indo-Pacific,” Indo-Pacific Defense Forum, October 20, 2025, <https://ipdefenseforum.com/2025/10/frances-strike-group-projects-power-across-indo-pacific/>. France has conducted similar deployments in 2019, 2024, and 2025. “France’s Charles de Gaulle Aircraft Carrier Sets Off for Asia,” *France 24*, March 5, 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20190305-frances-charles-de-gaulle-aircraft-carrier-sets-off-asia>; Kosuke Takahashi, “French CSG to Call in Japan during Indo-Pacific Deployment,” *Naval News*, December 18, 2024, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2024/12/french-csg-to-call-in-japan-during-indo-pacific-deployment/>. See also, “French Navy Wraps La Perouse 2025 Exercise in Indopacific,” *Naval News*, February 3, 2025, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2025/02/french-navy-wraps-la-perouse-2025-exercise-in-indopacific/>.

<sup>18</sup> Deepanraj Gansen, “French Amphibious Battle Group Arrive in Singapore,” *The Strait Times*, June 8, <https://www.straittimes.com/singapore/french-amphibious-battle-group-arrive-in-singapore>; “Helicopter Carrier, Frigate Kick off French Navy’s Annual Asia-Pacific Mission,” *Naval Today*, February 27, 2019, <https://www.navaltoday.com/2019/02/27/helicopter-carrier-frigate-kick-off-french-navys-annual-asia-pacific-mission/>; Dzirhan Mahadzir, “French Navy to Set Sail for Round-The-World Deployment,” *USNI News*, February 3, 2023, <https://news.usni.org/2023/02/03/french-navy-to-set-sail-for-round-the-world-deployment/>. See also, “French Navy Wraps La Perouse 2025 Exercise in Indopacific.”

<sup>19</sup> “French Navy Starts Annual Jeanne D’Arc Mission,” *Naval Today*, February 17, 2018, <https://www.navaltoday.com/2018/02/27/french-navy-starts-annual-jeanne-darc-mission/>; “Helicopter Carrier, Frigate Kick off French Navy’s Annual Asia-Pacific Mission.”; Dzirhan Mahadzir, “French

submarines (2019, 2021, and between 2024 and 2025),<sup>20</sup> and maritime patrol aircraft symbolise France's operational reach, technical and logistics mastery and its determination to uphold the principles it defends diplomatically. These deployments, which have increased regularly between 2018 and 2025, are conducted with transparency and restraint, ensuring that France's presence stabilises rather than provokes.

Supporting these operations is a network of 7,000 permanent military personnel deployed across key positions: Djibouti, La Réunion, New Caledonia, and French Polynesia. Under the dual Indian Ocean (ALINDIEN) and Pacific Ocean (ALPACI) commands,<sup>21</sup> these forces ensure France's ability to monitor sea lanes, conduct humanitarian operations, and respond rapidly to crises. France's Defence Mission to the US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) in Hawaii facilitates operational coordination with United States and allied forces (e.g. QUAD members, South Korea, the Philippines) while preserving France's independent decision-making. This delegation to INDOPACOM was recently strengthened.<sup>22</sup>

Complementing this posture are the annual long-range air projection missions, or *Pegasus Missions* (*Missions Pégase*),<sup>23</sup> which link France's European bases to its Pacific territories. Rafale fighters, A400M transports, and A330 Multi Role Tanker Transport (MRTT) tankers transit across Asia toward French Polynesia, with stops in India, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Australia, demonstrating interoperability and endurance. At sea, French warships regularly conduct port calls and joint exercises

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Officials: Jeanne D'Arc Deployment Enhances Interoperability with Partners," *USNI News*, June 13, 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/06/13/french-officials-jeanne-darc-deployment-enhances-interoperability-with-partners>; Mahadzir, "French Navy to Set Sail for Round-The-World Deployment," "US, French Naval Forces Conduct Operations in Philippine Sea," *Reuters*, August 15, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-french-naval-forces-conduct-operations-philippine-sea-2024-08-15/>. See also, "French Navy Wraps La Perouse 2025 Exercise in Indopacific."

<sup>20</sup> David Scott, "Naval Deployments, Exercises, and the Geometry of Strategic Partnerships in the Indo-Pacific," Center for International Maritime Security, July 8, 2019, <https://cimsec.org/naval-deployments-exercises-and-the-geometry-of-strategic-partnerships-in-the-indo-pacific/>; "French nuclear submarine patrolled in South China Sea – Navy," *Reuters*, February 10, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/asia-pacific/french-nuclear-submarine-patrolled-in-south-china-sea-navy-idUSL1N2KF1J7/>; Dzirhan Mahadzir, "French Carrier Deployment Clemenceau 25 Begins," *USNI News*, December 3, 2024, <https://news.usni.org/2024/12/03/french-carrier-deployment-clemenceau-25-begins?>. See also, "French CSG Ends Its Clemenceau 25 Deployment in the Indo-Pacific," *Naval News*, April 28, 2025, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2025/04/french-csg-ends-its-clemenceau-25-deployment-in-the-indo-pacific/>.

<sup>21</sup> Admiral in charge of the French naval forces in the Indian and Pacific Oceans (French: "Amiral commandant les forces maritimes françaises de l'océan Indien / Pacifique"). Please see, Patrick Decloitre, "French Regional Military Exercise Moves to Wallis," *RNZ*, March 2025, [https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/pacific/545789/french-regional-military-exercise-moves-to-wallis?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/pacific/545789/french-regional-military-exercise-moves-to-wallis?utm_source=chatgpt.com).

<sup>22</sup> Author interaction with senior French official

<sup>23</sup> Pegasus Missions (French: Mission Pégase), organised every year since 2018. Please see "Mission PÉGASE," Ministry of Armed Forces, accessed November 30, 2025, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/operations/mission-pegase>.

throughout Southeast Asia – from Singapore and Cam Ranh to Jakarta and Manila – underlining France’s permanent access and growing regional integration.

### **Diplomacy and institutional expansion**

France’s operational presence is matched by an expanding diplomatic and institutional engagement, including becoming an active party or an observer at a number of regional forums such as the Pacific Community, the Pacific Islands Forum and the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission. It has also established regular cooperation with Australia and New Zealand under the Kiwa initiative, and many other projects. Since 2022, Paris has also been an official Development Partner of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), aligning its regional efforts with the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and participating in the East Asia Summit and the ADMM-Plus. France’s goal is to reinforce ASEAN’s centrality and promote an inclusive, law-based order in which no regional actor is forced into binary choices.

A decisive step has been the establishment of a full-fledged Defence Mission in Manila,<sup>24</sup> marking the Philippines as a key anchor of France’s regional policy. This mission supports maritime domain awareness, defence cooperation, and high-level dialogue as illustrated by the recent conclusion of the ‘Blue Talks’ conference series, a program established in 2025 between France and the Philippines, and meant at boosting bilateral discussions on a variety of topics, such as the blue economy, environmental protection, state action at sea, maritime security and state action at sea, in a Track 1.5 format.<sup>25</sup> France and the Philippines are now negotiating a Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) to formalise joint exercises, logistics, and port access. Once concluded, this agreement would better institutionalise France’s military presence in the South China Sea and enhance operational flexibility.<sup>26</sup>

Beyond the Philippines, France has deepened partnerships with Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. Paris also drives the EU Coordinated Maritime Presences initiative, enabling European navies to maintain a lawful, visible, and continuous presence in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>27</sup> Through these mechanisms, France and its partners uphold the rule of law while avoiding the divisive optics of bloc politics. The approach is clear: cooperate with all, align with none, and uphold legality for all.

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<sup>24</sup> “PH Navy Welcomes New French Defense Attaché,” PH Navy Website, September 10, 2024, <https://navy.mil.ph/article.php?news=phnavywelcomesnewfrenchdefenseattaché>.

<sup>25</sup> “Blue Nations: Strengthening France-Philippines Cooperation for Protection of Marine Biodiversity,” French Embassy in the Philippines, June 5, 2025, <https://ph.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/blue-nations-strengthening-france-philippines-cooperation-protection-marine-biodiversity-june-5>.

<sup>26</sup> Frances Mangosing, “Philippines, France nearing deal to boost combat drills,” *Naval News*, October 8, 2025, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2025/10/philippines-france-nearing-deal-to-boost-combat-drills/>.

<sup>27</sup> See France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy, section 5.2 - “A European strategy for the Indo-Pacific”

## Confronting coercion without escalation

Beyond the demonstration of presence, France's response to coercion relies primarily on diplomatic and institutional instruments. While its naval and air operations convey resolve, Paris's approach to tensions in the South China Sea and the First Island Chain remains fundamentally non-military. France firmly opposes the militarisation of artificial islands, the harassment of civilian and military vessels, and unilateral reinterpretations of maritime law. Yet it avoids inflammatory rhetoric and refrains from joining anti-China coalitions. Its purpose is to defend legality without polarising the region.

This balance rests on three complementary tools. The first is political signalling – consistent advocacy at the UN, EU, and ASEAN forums reaffirming that maritime claims must conform to UNCLOS and that the 2016 ruling remains binding. The second is operational demonstration, including freedom-of-navigation transits through the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea conducted transparently and lawfully. The third is capacity building, through initiatives by the French Development Agency (AFD), Expertise France,<sup>28</sup> and the EU's CRIMARIO II programme,<sup>29</sup> which enhance partners' maritime law enforcement, crisis response, and environmental protection.

Through these mechanisms, France confronts coercion not with force but with legitimacy and resilience. By strengthening partners' governance capacities and reinforcing the authority of law, it constrains the effectiveness of grey-zone tactics. France thus acts as a stabiliser, elevating the costs of escalation.

## Comprehensive security and regional resilience

France's concept of Indo-Pacific security is comprehensive. It integrates defence, diplomacy, and environmental stewardship under a single framework. The degradation of ecosystems in the South China Sea, the overexploitation of fish stocks, and rising sea levels all contribute to economic insecurity and geopolitical tension. France therefore links maritime governance and climate resilience as mutually reinforcing pillars of stability.

Through AFD and Expertise France,<sup>30</sup> Paris finances projects on blue-economy development, sustainable fisheries, and coastal adaptation in Vietnam, Indonesia, and the

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<sup>28</sup> Expertise France is France's interministerial agency for international technical cooperation, created to strengthen public policies and institutions in partner countries. It designs and implements technical cooperation projects aimed at strengthening governance, security, climate action, health, education, economic development, and more in partner countries, in close cooperation with local public institutions, as well as with civil society actors and private sector companies. Its official website is <https://www.expertisefrance.fr/fr>.

<sup>29</sup> The EU Crimario (Critical Maritime Routes Indo-Pacific) program is a European Union-funded maritime security and capacity-building initiative designed to strengthen safety, security and governance across the Indo-Pacific. Its core capability revolves around a maritime capacity-building project aimed at enhancing Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA). Official website: <https://crimario.eu/>.

<sup>30</sup> Expertise France the French public agency for international technical cooperation, which designs and implements projects to sustainably strengthen public policies in developing and emerging countries. It is a

Philippines. These programs enhance institutional capacity and mitigate competition over maritime resources. France also exports its model of state action at sea, which integrates coast-guard coordination, environmental protection, and humanitarian response – a framework now emulated by several ASEAN partners.

At the global level, France connects these efforts to its leadership in climate and ocean diplomacy, building on COP 21 and the High Seas Treaty.<sup>31</sup> Its Indo-Pacific territories serve as platforms for oceanographic research and scientific cooperation. This soft power of knowledge and sustainability complements France's hard power, reinforcing trust and long-term stability through transparency and shared data.

### **Industrial, economic, and strategic partnerships**

France's influence in the region is also sustained by its defence-industrial and economic presence. French companies – Dassault Aviation, Naval Group, Thales, MBDA, Airbus, and Safran – have built a reputation for advanced technology, reliability, and political neutrality. France is now the third-largest defence supplier in the Indo-Pacific, after the United States and Russia.<sup>32</sup>

This approach can be seen as an extension of what France has successfully applied with India where the bilateral strategic partnership stands as a model of technical and technological cooperation, encompassing *Rafale* fighters, *Scorpène*-class submarines, radar systems, and joint production.<sup>33</sup> France perceives the success of its cooperation with India as a flagship of its Indo-Pacific Strategy, which implies that it could be extended to other countries involved in the South China Sea disputes. For instance, in Indonesia, recent contracts for *Rafale* jets and *Scorpène* submarines mark a new era of defence collaboration. Malaysia and Singapore operate French-designed systems for submarine and air surveillance, while Vietnam and Taiwan retain long-standing ties in shipbuilding and defence electronics. Across the region, these relationships reinforce deterrence, interoperability, and confidence in France as a long-term, trustworthy partner.

These industrial networks complement France's military and diplomatic posture. They help regional states achieve self-reliant deterrence without exclusive alignment to any single power. In parallel, French investment in infrastructure, clean energy, and maritime services strengthens the economic dimension of France's Indo-Pacific strategy, creating an integrated ecosystem of influence that links security, economy, and sustainability.

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subsidiary of the French Development Agency (AFD) group and works in key development areas like governance, security, climate, health, and education

<sup>31</sup> The “Conference of the Parties” or COP is the supreme decision-making body of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)

<sup>32</sup> Data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), cited by the French organisation GIFAS, <https://www.gifas.fr/press-summary/la-france-3eme-exportateur-mondial-d-armement-623c568f2a3d0>

<sup>33</sup> Sebastian Strangio, “France, Indonesia Sign Agreement That Could Lead to Further Defense Purchases,” The Diplomat, May 29, 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/05/france-indonesia-sign-agreement-that-could-lead-to-further-defense-purchases/>.

## **Outlook and policy recommendations: Sustaining credibility through consistency**

Looking ahead, France expects the South China Sea and the First Island Chain to remain zones of intense strategic competition. China's coercive practices are likely to persist, while the broader US-China rivalry will shape the regional tempo. France's main challenge will be to maintain credibility through consistency – deploying regularly, engaging diplomatically, and investing economically despite domestic and global constraints.

Policy recommendations in support of this goal include **reinforcing France's Indo-Pacific presence**. Measures such as the consolidation of the Defence Mission in Manila, the forthcoming Visiting Forces Agreement, the reinforcement of the Défense Mission to the United States INDOPACOM in Hawaii, and the steady rhythm of naval and air operations should be supported as long-term commitments.

Other options toward this end could include **the creation of a strategic command dedicated to the South China Sea, Southeast Asia or the First Island Chain within the ALPACI**. Additionally, **a limited increase of France's permanent military presence in the region, including a permanent naval force, could be based in either Papeete or Nouméa**. **Developing regional intelligence capabilities** could also add weight to France's posture and facilitate increased cooperation with the QUAD.

The Europeanisation of regional engagement, with German, Dutch, and Italian contributions, could be further expanded. **Agreeing to field European member country naval and air platforms with mixed-crew personnel** could support this aim. A similar initiative could be to **grant these European countries greater access to French Pacific bases**. Both measures could also magnify France's influence through multilateral legitimacy.

If France succeeds in sustaining the equilibrium it successfully built – assertive yet non-confrontational, autonomous yet cooperative – it will not only safeguard its own interests but also help the region avert the crises that now loom. In the South China Sea and along the First Island Chain, France thus stands as both a resident power and a guardian of legality, demonstrating that even in an era of great-power rivalry, strategic autonomy and fidelity to law remain France's most credible instruments of peace.