

FRANCE AS A MIDDLE POWER IN THE SHADOW OF GREAT POWERS AFTER THE PANDEMIC

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Abstract: This study examines France's strategy in the Indo-Pacific region to explore how a European middle power tries to maintain its status in the emerging focal point of global politics. Based on the concept of middle global power, the paper explores the limits of France's autonomous regional foreign policy. The paper argues that the best strategic option for France is to seek cooperation with other regional partners, notably Australia, beside the two superpowers, China and the United States. However, the dramatically increased tensions between the United States and China since the second part of the Trump administration have resulted in important changes in the Indo-Pacific region, such as the strengthening of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, which makes it increasingly difficult for France to maintain its independence as a regional great power image. This changing reality for France is illustrated through a case study of the AUKUS Treaty.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, middle power, France, Quad, Australia, AUKUS, China, Covid-19

Introduction

France has been a dominant power over the centuries due to its colonies globally, and it is still striving for a great power status today, although in the last few decades this ambition has become really challenging. It is true that France is the only country from the European Union that has colonial territories overseas and keeps a nuclear arsenal, but its capacities are overshadowed by the two biggest global actors, the United States and China (Fisher, 2013). Although France's focus has always been on the

Atlantic region, the French elite has had to recognize that the gravity of the world order in the twenty-first century has shifted toward the Indo-Pacific (Haruko, 2020). The aim of this paper is thus to explore the strategy of France in the Indo-Pacific and how it fits into the traditional global middle power concept, characterized by France's foreign policy ambitions after World War II. The study identifies the main goals France has regarding its role in the Indo-Pacific region and what kind of tools it uses to keep its power, as well as examining the challenges it faces to keep its importance and significance.

The paper first discusses the concept of the global middle power. The second section identifies France's interests and goals in the Pacific region. The following section explores France's regional strategies, with special emphasis on its alliance with Australia. The paper then shows how the escalation of the US-China rivalry affects the application of the French concept of middle global power in the Indo-Pacific region and the strategic response of the region. Then, through a case study of AUKUS, it is argued that France can hardly be seen as a potent global actor in the Indo-Pacific. The conclusion points out that an autonomous and independent French Indo-Pacific policy is essentially an illusion, an important conclusion for the French government to draw.

The Middle Global Power Concept and Charles De Gaulle's Strategy

Middle powers are states with mid-range levels of power, between small states and great powers (Shin, 2015). However, it is difficult to measure who could be considered a middle power, as it depends on many factors (for example, territory, and the size of the economy or the military). Middle powers are defined as states that do not have enough hard and soft power to make an impact on the international order, but they can be major actors at the regional level, like Canada, Australia, France, India, or Indonesia. 'Middle' is often categorized based on the size of the country, the size of the military, and other characteristics.

According to former Minister of Foreign Affairs Hubert Védrine, there are differences between middle powers (Bonifacio, 2000). In the case of France, the concept of middle power could be examined based on their

diplomatic impact. France plays a global role, hence Védérine considers France a global middle power because of its overseas territories and historical background. Since France still has an impact on the world, Védérine states that France could be more precisely described as a global middle power. Furthermore, the middle power concept is also determined by the diplomatic approach of the states.

It was Charles De Gaulle's "grandeur" strategy that made France a global middle power (Oi-Siang, 2019). First, it was very important to maintain the global prestige of France, which also has a strong legitimacy element in French domestic politics. Second, it was important to maintain the sovereignty of the country, despite the fact that the unchallenged superpower of the Western bloc during the Cold War was the US. Third, it was considered important for France to seek partners outside the two superpowers, to balance them out. Lastly, they needed to promote the integration of Europe, which would have given France the opportunity to strengthen its international role as the most powerful country (Briancon, 2016). This global ambition can be illustrated by the fact that in one of his speeches in 1967, Charles De Gaulle declared that the nuclear strategy could be a defence in all directions (Hamill, 1989).

By the twenty-first century, the situation has changed because the focus of the global stage has been directed to the Pacific, prompting many to think that the twenty-first century can be labelled the "Pacific century" (Rieren, 2002). Even Zbigniew Brzezinski has acknowledged that the main geopolitical actors of the world order have started to direct their focus towards the Pacific. The reason why the Indo-Pacific has become more important is that more than USD 5 trillion in trade passes through these strategic waters annually, connecting key players in the global economy such as the US, China, Japan, and India.

Moreover, the Indo-Pacific region is a geopolitical buffer zone between the established power of the US and its military alliance system, and a rising China. The aim of the US alliance system is the Free and Opened Indo-Pacific (FOIP), which is trying to block China from rising further on the grounds of protecting the rules. In the age of the Pacific century, France's status as a global middle power is facing countless challenges. The growing gap in capacity between France and the other powers can only be remedied if France pursues a very effective foreign policy and thus

emerges as an influential player in the Indo-Pacific region. The following section describes how France intends to defend its position as a global actor on the stage of world politics (Pascal, 2021).

France's Key Steps to Keep its Middle Power in the Pacific and the Indo-Pacific

This section studies the key steps in French foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific. Cui Hongjuin, Director of the Department of European Studies at the China Institute of International Studies, portrays France's role in the Indo-Pacific region with the following words: "France was the first European country to formally adopt an Indo-Pacific Strategy. France may believe that the Indo-Pacific region will be the main battlefield of great power competition, and it is now interfering in the region to try to show its major power status" (Onishi, 2021). Since Emmanuel Macron became President of France in 2017, he has put a lot of effort into building a strong foreign policy both in the Asia-Pacific and the Indo-Pacific (Salloum, 2021).

France indeed takes keeping its power and prestige in the area seriously. This means for them more than just having a nostalgia for the "la gloire" era. The presence of France in the Indo-Pacific is of importance from a sovereignty point of view. Still more than a million of French citizens live in France's overseas territories, which also includes 93% of its exclusive economic zone (EEZ), approximately 9 million km². President Macron has emphasized that the defence of this area is essential for France both in economic and in security terms, hence the military presence in the region is a basic element of French foreign policy (Lowy Institute, 2019). Beside defending France's regional interests, its major goals listed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are the following:

- strong involvement from France in settling regional crises, the safety of the main shipping routes, as well as fighting terrorism, radicalization, and organized crime;
- strengthening and increasing France's strategic and global partnerships in the region;
- a greater role in regional organizations to contribute to the development of multilateralism;
- a commitment to promoting common goods.

France has chosen two instruments to achieve its Indo-Pacific objectives. First, it has increased its military presence. French naval exercises have become increasingly intense, and around 8,000 soldiers and dozens of ships are positioned on several bases. Second, France, in keeping with its global middle power tradition, has sought regional partners who also seek to balance the US and China in order to maintain their strategic space. Since France does not want to unconditionally support the US in line with the concept of middle global power, Paris has decided to search for other regional partners. Of the regional players, Australia was France's choice, a country that was also keen to cooperate with an external power in the shadow of the two great powers. Finally, France is the only country in the Indo-Pacific region that has a territory there. This gives France the opportunity to represent the interests of the EU, making France a more influential player in the Indo-Pacific game.

French-Australian Bilateral Dialogue as a Hope for France to Keep its Middle Power Status

In the Indo-Pacific region, the ideal candidate was Australia, which is both a regional power and is culturally closer to France than other Asian players. Another important consideration was that although Australia had been a US military ally since World War II, by the 2010s its foreign trade had become absolutely dependent on China, which prompted Canberra to pursue a more cautious foreign policy, lest it create tensions with Beijing. The French-Australian relationship has a long history that goes back centuries due to the colonization of the European great maritime powers. Their bilateral partnership has strengthened since the 1980s (Bhatty & Ahmad, 1996), and the cooperation between the two states has focused on the security sector. A challenge was posed by emerging powers, above all China, but there are also important threats such as piracy, terrorism, or nuclearism in the Pacific. Regarding the nuclear question in the Pacific, there has long been a kind of confrontation between Australia and France because Australia has always been against nuclear weapons, which the Rarotonga Treaty (also called the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty) has only strengthened. The Treaty of Rarotonga was signed in August 1985 by eight members of the South Pacific Forum. The Treaty is now in force for 12 of the 15 Forum members: Australia, the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, New Zealand, Niue, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, and Western

Samoa. Tonga signed the Treaty on 2 August, 1996, but it has not ratified it yet. France signed the Treaty with the United Kingdom and the United States, and they signed all three Protocols on 25 March, 1996 (Protocol, 2011). The Treaty aimed to prohibit the testing of any nuclear explosive devices. It also prohibits poisoning the sea with hazardous waste such as radioactive materials. Three Protocols extend the provisions of the Treaty to states outside the zone: Protocol I declares that states with territories in the region need to prohibit the testing of nuclear explosive devices to their territories; Protocol II commits the five declared nuclear weapon states not to use or threaten to use any nuclear explosive device against the Parties to the Treaty or on territories of Protocol Parties within the zone; while Protocol III commits the five nuclear weapon states to not testing any nuclear explosive devices within the zone (Protocol, 2011).

In the shadow of a more assertive China, the French-Australian partnership has further strengthened in the 2010s, especially after Macron had been elected President of France in 2017. (Soyez, 2018). France wanted to deepen its relationship with the Pacific and protect French interests in the Indo-Pacific. In 2016, the French Naval Group agreed with Canberra to build ocean-going submarines for Australia. The two countries first decided to organize joint military exercises, and the partnership was deepened when France and Australia signed the Joint Declaration of Strategic Partnership in Paris on 19 January, 2012. The importance of the agreement for the parties is shown by the fact that Australia's Defence White Paper mentioned the program as one of the most important events in the strategic development of the region (Payne, 2016). The main purpose of the program was to establish supportive cooperation between Paris and Canberra in order to build strong security, which was a basic element of the long-term partnership between the two countries. Under the contract, the parties agreed to deepen industrial cooperation, which includes information on the technology and building capability of the submarines (Atnia, 2017). Article 14 emphasizes the importance of the research and the technological development focusing on mainly technological breakthroughs in the naval domain (Atnia, 2017). One of the most significant parts of this contract was Article 15, which refers to navy-to-navy cooperation, jointly organized exercises, crew training, and active participation and strong cooperation in military exercises (Atnia, 2017).

In the Shadow of the US-China Rivalry: The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and the Role of France

France's ambitions to become a major power in its own right in the Indo-Pacific region have been challenged by the dramatic changes in the international system and the growing tensions between China and the US. The conflict between the two countries became open during the Trump administration. However, the tensions had started earlier. The US Pivot towards Asia, launched by the Obama administration in 2012, already identified China as a challenge to American interests in the Indo-Pacific region. The American ambition to contain China, however, has created a situation resembling a "Thucydides trap," characterized by militarization on both sides and making war a reality (Arezin, 2019). The situation is fast developing something like a new Cold War, and it is turning multipolarity into bipolarity (Arezin, 2019). These changing circumstances obviously narrow the strategic autonomy of other actors and force them to choose a side. The Indo-Pacific region, which has become the clashing zone of the two superpowers, was quickly affected by the open competition between China and the US. One such defining process in the region is the strengthening of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) between the United States, India, Japan, and Australia. The Quad considers France its Francophone Western ally, and it invites France to naval drills in the Indo-Pacific to challenge China (Huger & Raj, 2021). The first exercise of the naval drill was called exercise La Perouse, named after a French naval officer and explorer who lived and served at sea in the eighteenth century, and it was held in 2019, without India. This was a three-day naval drill. The drill "will provide an opportunity for these five like-minded, high-end naval forces to develop closer links, sharpen their skills, and promote maritime cooperation throughout a free and open Indo-Pacific," the French embassy in New Delhi said in a statement. The drill was followed by the maiden summit of the Quad leaders, held virtually on 12 March, 2019, and it was considered a determined and important moment in Asian geopolitics (Sharma, Lassus, 2021). This virtual event was followed by US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's visit to India, whose tour also included Japan and South Korea. The four Quad nations cooperated in a maritime exercise after the November 2020 Malabar drill in the Indo-Pacific. With France, the four nations are expected to take this cooperation to a new

level. In April 2021, the Quad partners (Australia, Japan, and the US) gathered in a French-led naval drill in the Bay of Bengal, as the nations aim to strengthen Indo-Pacific maritime security (Sharma, Lassus, 2021).

The maritime spaces connecting the entire Indo-Pacific also constitute a major security issue for France. The original aim of Quad is the maintenance of the international law and the freedom of navigation, which France shares. Moreover, by cooperating with Quad, France is taking the opportunity to strengthen diplomatic ties with India through this diplomatic step to play a larger role in the region (Huger & Raj, 2021). Paris and Delhi have agreed to work together to maintain security and the freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean (Rohan, 2018). As a consequence, President Emmanuel Macron and Prime Minister Narendra Modi have made closer ties through a military logistics and support agreement, so this new military coalition intends to work at the operational level (Pajon, 2021). This shows that Paris has not completely abandoned its strategy of cooperation with the Central Powers, despite the changed context (Pascal, 2021). From France's point of view, India is a great partner because, in addition to its willingness to take action against China's growing number of embassies, it is a major player in the region in terms of strategic importance, and it is also a nuclear power. France's moves have also been supported by Australia, for similar strategic considerations. The established trilateral dialogue aims to conduct political consultations, coordinate diplomatically, exchange intelligence, conduct military exercises, transfer and share technology, and build capacity (Grare, 2020).

In the great power rivalry between the US and China, the Covid-19 pandemic marked a new stage, as a result of which the war of narratives has further increased tensions. This has also had an impact on the Quad cooperation. In March 2020, the Quad members held a meeting with representatives from New Zealand, South Korea, and Vietnam to discuss their respective approaches to the Covid-19 pandemic. This grouping of key Indo-Pacific states is called "Quad Plus" (Pajon, 2020).

Quad and Quad Plus have increasingly become the framework within which France could realistically represent its regional goals. The changing French role is illustrated well by the Jeanne d'Arc naval mission (Mahadzir, 2021). According to the mission, the French Amphibious Ready

Group (ARG) has participated in various large-scale exercises with the navies of partner countries present in the Indo-Pacific zone (India, Australia, Japan, and the United States) (Pascal, 2021).

The fading of France's global middle-power tradition also reflects the changing image of Europe in the Indo-Pacific region. In the past few years there has been a dramatic change in attitudes in European countries toward China. The Netherlands and Germany, following the path of France, are positioning themselves as actors in the Indo-Pacific region (Duclos, 2020). In the autumn of 2020, France, Germany, and the Netherlands wrote together a 'non-paper', later joined by other countries from the European Union, e.g. Poland, Italy, Portugal, and Sweden because they also found the importance of the EU position in the Indo-Pacific useful. These countries were on the same page about the importance of the four areas of trade, connectivity, maritime security, and global issues (Duclos, 2020). They emphasize peace and security in the region, and they have also worked out a Guideline for their long-term strategy. However, European countries with an effective independent military force have no choice but cooperate with the US and the member states within Quad.

These processes mean that in the growing bipolar international system France will not be able to act like a global middle power in the Indo-Pacific region. The ideal to create independent foreign policy based on the cooperation of middle powers like Australia has declined due to the growing bipolarity. France cannot follow De Gaulle's strategy anymore to act alone without the United States because France's middle power is limited in spite of its military presence in the Indo-Pacific (Hamill, 1989).

The next section describes this new status of France, arguing that France's middle power has become more symbolic. This will be illustrated through a case study of the AUKUS Agreement.

The AUKUS Agreement as a Reflection for France About Its Vulnerability

AUKUS is a trilateral security pact for the Indo-Pacific region between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, announced on 15 September, 2021. The pact includes cooperation on cyber capabilities,

artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and additional undersea capabilities. Under the pact, Australia will acquire new long-range strike capabilities for its air force, army, and navy, including nuclear-powered submarines. The pact will focus on the military. Michael Shoebridge, Director of Defence, Strategy and National Security at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, highlights the importance of the pact. “A nuclear submarine has enormous defence capabilities and therefore ramifications for the region. Only six countries in the world have nuclear submarines. They are a really powerful deterrent capability without giving them nuclear weapons” (Tewari, 2021). The Australian decision is partially a result of the aim of the US geopolitical strategy to make their allies participate in containing China. In addition, the dramatic deterioration in relations between Australia and China in recent years and Beijing’s desire to change Australia’s behaviour through economic pressure may have been decisive factors. The growing sense of threat may also have suggested to Australia that it was entrusting its security to the US, the only country that could actually protect it. Therefore, the Australian government was willing to make a gesture to Washington by denouncing the previous submarine treaty with France, thus plunging diplomatic relations between Australia and France to a low point. Australia has argued that it is cancelling the submarine project because the French submarines were diesel-electric submarines, while the US and UK are providing nuclear ones. From Australia’s point of view, this was a necessary step to defend themselves against the assertiveness of China. According to the French, Australia’s decision was a ‘stab in the back’ (McGurik, 2021).

The Agreement has created a crisis for France, leading to stronger Anglosphere relations in the region; hence, AUKUS also shows that the power of France is not enough to balance the growing influence of China in the Indo-Pacific, and other actors do not see France as a capable actor (Bowen, 2021). This evaluation is in line with the view of the French ambassador to the United States, Philippe Étienne, who stated after the incident that France is no longer a great power (Onishi, 2021). Others also agree. According to Arnaud Danjean, member of the European Parliament and a former defence official and diplomat, “We need a French policy in the Pacific because we have commercial, economic and territorial interests there, but the means we have now don’t allow us

to be a credible alternative to the United States in facing China,” (...) “The Pacific is the playground of the great powers, the preserve of the United States and China” (Onishi, 2021).

Conclusion

This study investigated whether France is capable of keeping its global middle power status in the new geopolitical centre of the twenty-first century, the Indo-Pacific. The paper argues that despite a coherent and cost-effective strategy, France can hardly act as an independent actor in the region. In an increasingly bipolar world, France can only represent its regional interests primarily as a junior partner of the US, particularly the defence of its overseas territory and exclusive economic zones. The case study of AUKUS underlines the fact that France’s lack of capacity is not only obvious in Paris but also for the regional actors, shattering the illusion of previous grandeur.

The AUKUS agreement is the best proof and reflection of how the rivalry between the great global powers has become more serious in the Indo-Pacific, and middle powers have no other choice but choose a side between the US and China. Australia’s investment in nuclear-powered submarines and the new agreement with its Anglo-Saxon alliances could well be the start of a new trend in the Indo-Pacific region and an important step in counterbalancing efforts against China. France and other middle powers must recognize that the world order has started to move toward the beginnings of a bipolar structure.

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