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To what extent will AUKUS reshape France's strategic partnerships in the Indo-Pacific?

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Introduction

In recent decades, the Indo-Pacific (IP) region has been on the rise. Today, the region represents 60% of the world's population and 36% of global GDP. (Gouvernement, 2022: 28; Ministère des Armées, 2019: 2) Yet, the region has also been home to growing points of tension, for instance in the South and East China Seas (SCS/ECS), drawing increasing attention from European Union (EU) member-States (MS) such as France. The latter, which considers the IP to extend “from Djibouti to Polynesia”, is the only EUMS with territories in the IP: Réunion, Mayotte and the French Southern and Antarctic Territories in the Indian Ocean; New Caledonia, French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna in the Pacific Ocean. (Morcos, 2021b; Grare, 2021; Gouvernement, 2022: 17) These territories are inhabited by 1.65m inhabitants, constitute 93% of France's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) (making France the country with the largest EEZ in the world), and are protected by 7,000 troops permanently stationed in the region. (Gouvernement, 2022: 17; Meijer, 2021: 6) This presence throughout the region has led France to become the first EUMS to publish its IP strategy, a strategy partly based on protecting French interests in the region, contributing to regional security, preserving access to common areas, participating in maintaining the balance of power in the region, and anticipating the risks brought about by climate change. (Gouvernement, 2022: 54) However, France's involvement in the IP took an unexpected turn in September 2021 when Australia, one of France's main partners in the region along with Japan and India, broke off its €35bn “contract of the century” with France for 12 Shortfin Barracuda diesel-electric submarines, instead signing an agreement with the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) named “AUKUS” for nuclear-powered submarines, a move seen by France as a “backstab”. (Tertrais, 2021; Makinsky, 2021: 1-2; Sabbagh et al., 2021)

In light of this, this paper will evaluate to what extent AUKUS will reshape France's strategic partnerships in the Indo-Pacific. This paper will argue that whilst AUKUS will likely encourage France to diversify its strategic IP partnerships, it is overall nonetheless unlikely to have significant long-term consequences.

This paper will first evaluate the consequences of AUKUS on France's relationship with the AUKUS States, before assessing its post-AUKUS relationships with other IP resident-States. Lastly, this paper will discuss the potential for greater EU involvement in the IP post-AUKUS.

I. France and the AUKUS States in the Indo-Pacific

AUKUS had an immediate impact on France's relationship with the AUKUS States. Nonetheless, this section will demonstrate that, aside from Australia, AUKUS is unlikely to have long-lasting ramifications on France's IP relationships with the US and the UK.

A. Pre-AUKUS situation

Australia

In the decade prior to the AUKUS agreement, the Franco-Australian relationship strengthened considerably as France sought to make Australia a key IP partner.

In 2012, the two countries signed a strategic partnership, later on upgrading it to an enhanced strategic partnership in 2017. (Bondaz, 2021; Meijer, 2021: 22) In 2016, Australia chose the French *Naval Group* to build 12 diesel-electric submarines for the SEA 1000 Future Submarine Programme, the largest defence contract ever awarded by Australia and the largest ever granted to a European defence company. (Meijer, 2021: 22-23) The same year, Australia mentioned France as one of its partner countries along with Japan, New Zealand and the United States in its Defence White Paper. (Morcos, 2021c) In 2018, at the Garden Island military base in Sydney, French President Macron described France as an IP power for the first time in the country's history and advocated for the establishment of a "Paris-Delhi-Canberra" axis to counter China's growing influence in the region without relying on the US. (*Ibid.*; Niquet & Péron-Doise, 2021a) This desire materialised with the organisation of the first Trilateral Dialogue between the three countries in September 2020, followed by a Trilateral Ministerial Dialogue in May 2021. (Bondaz, 2021; Morcos, 2021b)

United Kingdom

In recent years, the UK, as the other only European State realistically capable of projecting power in the IP, gradually started increasing its involvement in the region, occasionally cooperating with France.

Although the UK does not possess the same presence in the IP as France does, possessing only the British Indian Ocean Territory and the Pitcairn Islands, as well as facilities in Qatar and Bahrain, the region has become a key aspect of the country's post-Brexit "Global Britain" strategy, as symbolised by its "Indo-Pacific Tilt". (Brooke-Holland, 2021: 1, 3, 8; Niquet & Péron-Doise, 2021b: 2; Wintour, 2021) To protect Freedom of Navigation (FON) and the Rules-Based International Order (RBIO) and play a greater role in the region in response to events such as tensions in the SCS and events in Hong Kong, the UK gradually deepened its cooperation with Australia, Japan, India, South Korea, and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) member-States. (Brooke-Holland, 2021: 3-8; Paskal, 2021) The UK has also cooperated with France in the region, for instance in the context of the Combined Taskforce 150 and in the French-led *Croix du Sud* exercise, the largest humanitarian disaster relief exercise in the South Pacific. (Meijer, 2021: 28; Morcos, 2021c)

United States

In recent years, although the US did not constitute a privileged partner for France in the region to the same extent as Australia, India and Japan, France instead advocating for a third path-like approach amidst growing Sino-American competition in the IP, France also gradually increased its IP cooperation with the US. (Duchâtel & Kefferpütz, 2022)

With five treaty alliances in the IP (Australia, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines and Thailand), the US does not seem to consider France as a major partner in the region. (The White House, 2022: 4) Nonetheless, the two have still cooperated in the IP, for example through the establishment of the Indo-Pacific Security Dialogue in 2016 and exercises such as the first Trilateral Amphibious Exercise in 2017 along with Japan. (Meijer, 2021: 26-27)

Overall, to varying degrees, France had in the past decade significantly increased its cooperation with the AUKUS States in the IP prior to AUKUS.

B. Potential post-AUKUS trajectory

Australia

Given Australia's key role in France's IP strategy, its "sudden" decision to cancel the submarine contract and sign the AUKUS agreement means that the Franco-Australian relationship is unlikely to return to pre-AUKUS levels.

Whilst Australia's decision to cancel the submarine contract with *Naval Group* was justified as having been caused by skyrocketing costs, construction delays and nuclear submarines having a longer autonomy and being more discrete than conventional ones, as France also offered to Australia the possibility of acquiring nuclear submarines (which Australia refused), this move suggests instead that Australia is moving away from this idea of neutrality between the US and China. (Heath, 2022; Gross & Mallet, 2021; Tertrais, 2021) In the days following the AUKUS agreement, Paris recalled its ambassador in Canberra and has since removed Australia from its list of key partners in the IP, declaring that it is re-evaluating its relationship with the country and will only continue to cooperate on a case-by-case basis. (Belin, 2021; Nussbaum, 2022; Gouvernement, 2022: 41)

Ultimately, whilst Australia may remain an important partner for France in the IP, it is undeniable that AUKUS marks a deep shift in their bilateral relationship, not only due to Australia's treatment of its French partner, but also as it moves away from the third path-like approach currently advocated for by France in the IP.

United Kingdom

Given the rather limited Franco-British cooperation on IP matters, it is to be expected that AUKUS will have limited consequences on their long-term relationship in the region.

AUKUS is undeniably a further blow to Franco-British relations which have been strained by post-Brexit disputes. (Billon-Galland & Kundnani, 2021) France considers the UK as the "fifth wheel" in the AUKUS agreement, accusing the UK of using it as a pretext to push forward its "Global Britain" agenda. (Niquet & Péron-Doise, 2021b: 2; Boffey, 2022) Despite this, France and the UK, being close defence partners, especially since the signing of the 2010 Lancaster House Treaty, both also being

permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and nuclear-weapon States, and with the UK being the only other European power capable of realistically playing a role in the IP, as symbolised by the deployment of the HMS Queen Elizabeth Aircraft Carrier Strike Group (UKCSG21) to the IP in March 2021, the two countries have a clear rationale to work together in the region in the future. (Brooke-Holland, 2021: 1; Tertrais & Duclos, 2021; Billon-Galland & Kundnani, 2021)

Overall, AUKUS is unlikely to have significant long-term consequences on Franco-British relations in the IP, not only due to their more limited cooperation in the region compared to pre-AUKUS Franco-Australian relations, but also as the two countries have generally solid relations on defence matters and a clear interest in cooperation.

United States

Despite France also recalling its ambassador in Washington in the aftermath of the AUKUS agreement, its relationship with the US is looking as if it will be the fastest to recover out of its relationships with the three AUKUS States. (Morcos, 2021a)

The US is the AUKUS State having expressed the most desire to address French grievances. Presidents Macron and Biden met on the side-line of the G20 Conference in October 2021 leading to the publication of a joint statement reaffirming the value of the Franco-American partnership and the launch of numerous bilateral initiatives in the field of energy, new technologies, outer-space and cybersecurity. (Belin, 2021; Morcos, 2021a) The following weeks also saw an unprecedented number of high-level visits to Paris, with Secretary of State Blinken, National Security Advisor Sullivan and Vice-President Harris all visiting Paris, and Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin meeting with his French counterpart Florence Parly. (Morcos, 2021a) With regards to the IP, the US have declared that they will increase their support to French and European air and maritime deployments to the region, and have regularly mentioned Europe's pivot to the IP in their IP strategy. (*Ibid.*; The White House, 2022: 5) Consequently, France has declared in its post-AUKUS updated IP strategy that it will maintain close relations with the US, "an ally and major player in the Indo-Pacific". (Gouvernement, 2022: 41)

Overall, aside from France's relationship with Australia which is unlikely to return to pre-AUKUS levels in the short term, AUKUS is unlikely to have long-term consequences on France's IP relationship with the UK and the US.

II. France and other Indo-Pacific resident-States

Aside from Australia which was one of France's main partners in the IP, France's partnerships in the region did not centre around AUKUS States, with States such as Japan and India already playing a significant role in France's IP strategy. Post-AUKUS, France will not only look to consolidate its existing partnerships with these States but might also seek the diversification of its IP partnerships with

States such as South Korea and certain ASEAN member-States who may be drawn to France's third path-like approach in a time of growing Sino-US competition. However, in doing so, France may quickly be confronted by its limited relevance in the region.

A. Pre-AUKUS situation

India

With China's influence in South Asia on the rise, for example with Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) infrastructure projects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Hambantota Port case in Sri Lanka, and with Sino-Indian border tensions in the Himalayas, India increasingly feels threatened by China. (Baruah, 2021; Phalnikar, 2022) Simultaneously, India, a historically non-aligned State, has been reluctant to openly engage in an alliance with the US against China and has adopted a position similar to France's one. (Phalnikar, 2022; Chatterjee Miller, 2022)

France and India have gradually increased their partnership. Their bilateral strategic partnership was launched in 1998, focusing primarily on defence, civil nuclear power, space and security. (Gouvernement, 2022: 40) In 2016, France signed a deal with India to supply it with 36 *Rafale* fighter aircraft. (Bondaz, 2021) France is the only non-neighbouring country with whom India conducts coordinated patrols, and the two countries hold an annual defence dialogue. (Phalnikar, 2022; Baruah, 2020) Today, India is listed as one of France's main IP partners with the two cooperating through regional organisations such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), both Indian-led initiatives which France respectively joined in December 2020 and in July 2020, and the French-led Indian Ocean Commission (COI), which India joined as observer in March 2020. (Gouvernement, 2022: 40)

Japan

Japan has also increasingly been preoccupied by the rise of China in the IP, notably with Sino-Japanese tensions over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands and with China's challenge to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). (Koga, 2020: 56) Consequently, Abe Shinzo launched in 2016 the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy, aiming to preserve FON and the RBIO. (*Ibid.*: 49) Despite having a treaty alliance with the US, the fluctuating US commitment to the IP in recent years has encouraged Japan to seek relationships with new partners such as Australia, India and France. (*Ibid.*: 53)

The Franco-Japanese bilateral partnership was launched in 1995 and was rebranded as an "Exceptional Partnership" in 2013. (Gouvernement, 2022: 40-41) The two countries have held annual 2+2 ministerial consultations with the countries' respective ministers of defence and foreign affairs since 2014. (Meijer, 2021: 22) The two countries have also held joint Franco-Japanese naval training exercises such as one in 2019 which involved the *Charles de Gaulle* aircraft carrier. (Koga, 2020: 66)

October 2020 saw the first session of the Franco-Japanese Working Group on the Indo-Pacific focusing on issues such as maritime safety and security, the environment and health, with Japan being mentioned as one of France's main IP partners in the latter's IP strategy. (Gouvernement, 2022: 41)

ASEAN and ASEAN member-States

In recent years, France has developed its relationships both with ASEAN and its member-States, with ASEAN and its member-States generally having a similar position to France's third path-like approach to the IP.

With regards to ASEAN, France became an observer member of ASEANAPOL in 2019, became a development partner of ASEAN in March 2021 after having provided €1.5bn in official development assistance (ODA) to the region between 2014 and 2017, and is currently an observer-status candidate for the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM). (Gouvernement, 2022: 42-42)

On a bilateral basis, France has developed relationships with Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam. France and Singapore launched a strategic partnership in 2012, have organised joint military exercises and have cooperated on defence research and development such as radar and submarine detection technologies. (Meijer, 2021: 23) France is also Singapore's 2nd largest arms supplier after the US. (*Ibid.*) Additionally, France signed strategic partnership deals with Indonesia in 2011 and Vietnam in 2013, and although it has not done so yet with Malaysia, it has been the country's largest arms supplier between 2009 and 2018. (*Ibid.*: 23-24)

B. Potential post-AUKUS trajectory

India

Post-AUKUS, France will seek to increase its partnership with India, the remaining partner of the "Paris-Delhi-Canberra" axis, as illustrated by the importance given to India in the post-AUKUS update of France's IP strategy. (Gouvernement, 2022: 40)

Nonetheless, despite the immediate consequences of AUKUS for France, India maintains close partnerships with other IP powers such as Australia, Japan and the US through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and annual bilateral 2+2 meetings, although AUKUS, unlike the Quad, focuses exclusively on hard security, with currently no plans for India to join AUKUS. (Baruah, 2020; Chatterjee Miller, 2022) India's close relationship with other IP powers, and France being a relatively small player in the IP in the context of a rising China beg the question as to whether the Franco-Indian partnership will increase significantly post-AUKUS despite France seemingly wishing to do so.

Japan

As with India, France will also seek to increase the role of Japan in its IP strategy, with the two countries reaffirming “their commitment to promoting cooperation to contribute to the rules-based, free and open Indo-Pacific” during a 2+2 meeting in January 2022. (Kyodo News, 2022)

Nonetheless, Japan maintains close relationships with the AUKUS States, mainly the US and Australia. Japan has been an ally of the US since 1951 and in 2007 signed a Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation with Australia, and further cooperates with these two countries through the Quad. (Koga, 2020: 58-59) Relations with the UK are not as developed, although have been increasing in recent years as symbolised by the Japan-UK Joint Training Exercises during the deployment of the UKCSG21 to the region. (Tsuruoka, 2021) Although the nuclear-powered submarine aspect of AUKUS has not particularly been well received in Japan, and despite there currently being no plans for Japan to join AUKUS, Japan has officially welcomed the AUKUS agreement, particularly as it demonstrates US commitment to the region in the context of a growingly assertive China. (Niquet & Péron-Doise, 2021b: 5; Tsuruoka, 2021) As such, whereas France desires increased cooperation with Japan in the IP, France, despite being a relatively close partner for Japan in the region, is likely not a priority for the latter, and it is hard to envision a significant increase in cooperation beyond the current framework in years to come.

Other States (ASEAN member-States, South Korea)

With France’s partnerships with India and Japan having been already relatively significant pre-AUKUS, it is hard to envisage these partnerships increasing significantly post-AUKUS. Nonetheless, with relations with other IP resident-States being less developed, were France to seek diversification in its partnerships in the region, these would likely have greater potential.

ASEAN member-States have been relatively divided on AUKUS. Whereas Singapore, the Philippines and Vietnam have overall welcomed the agreement, Malaysia and Indonesia have been somewhat reticent. (Niquet & Péron-Doise, 2021b: 7) Indonesia is worried that AUKUS will create an arms race in the IP, bringing more instability to the region, and as a result could be further drawn to France’s third path-like approach to the IP. (*Ibid.*: 8) French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian visited the country in November 2021 and France and Indonesia agreed in February 2022 on a contract to provide the latter with 42 *Rafale* fighter jets, demonstrating the potential for greater Franco-Indonesian cooperation in the future. (*Ibid.*: 5)

France could also aim to increase cooperation with other like-minded IP countries such as South Korea. The latter has traditionally been reticent to engage in the IP, prioritising instead inter-Korean relations. (Kang, 2021: 6-10) However, in recent years, this has started changing somewhat with the “New Southern Policy” which saw South Korea increase its relations with ASEAN. (*Ibid.*: 11-12) Despite being a US ally, South Korea has also been reticent to antagonise China, its largest trading partner and a key player needed to improve inter-Korean relations. (*Ibid.*: 11) As such, it could be tempted by stronger cooperation with France, a country who shares similar views on strategic autonomy.

(Kang, 2021: 23) Such a partnership could be increased by having more frequent and intense bilateral dialogue on the IP, as well as through joint exercises. (*Ibid.*: 25) Nonetheless, newly-elected President Yoon Suk-yeol declared during his campaign that he would move away from strategic ambiguity vis-à-vis China, for instance by making South Korea join the Quad. (Kim, 2022) As a result, increased relations with France would likely not be a priority for the new South Korean government.

Overall, whilst France may wish on paper to diversify its IP partnerships, in doing so, it may be confronted with the reality that, despite being an IP resident-State, it is not a major player in the region.

III. France and the EU in the Indo-Pacific

Post-AUKUS, following the “backstab” by its American partner, France could be comforted in its idea that strategic autonomy is essential for the EU and could seek to increase EU IP involvement. Nonetheless, being the only EU IP resident-State as well as the only EUMS realistically capable of projecting power to the region, were France to keep wanting to play a significant role in the IP, overly relying on its EU partners would be a mistake.

A. The EU and the Indo-Pacific

In recent years, EUMS aside from France have gradually increased their presence in the IP, although EU-IP relations have been more economic-focused than security-based. The IP has 5 of the EU’s strategic partners and 4 out of 10 main trade partners. (Gouvernement, 2022: 68) The EU also has an economic partnership agreement with Japan and free trade agreements with South Korea, Singapore and Vietnam. (*Ibid.*)

However, the EU has gradually been getting involved in security matters in the region for instance with Operation Atalanta to fight piracy off the Somalian coast. (*Ibid.*: 69) Ships from the Portuguese, Italian and Danish navy also accompanied the *Charles de Gaulle* on a mission in the IP in 2019, and Germany and the Netherlands followed France’s example by adopting their own IP strategy. (Morcos, 2021b; Cabestan, 2022; Duchâtel & Mohan, 2020; Ang, 2021)

B. Towards a greater EU involvement in the Indo-Pacific post-AUKUS?

Whilst the EU has increasingly expressed a desire to get involved in IP security matters, culminating in the publication of the EU’s IP strategy on 16 September 2021, a day after the AUKUS announcement, there are nonetheless obstacles to greater EU involvement in the region. (Gouvernement, 2022: 70) EUMS neither have the same security interests that France has in the IP, nor the means to get involved meaningfully in the region’s security, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine having made IP

security temporarily irrelevant in the eyes of European States. (Bondaz, 2021; Billon-Galland & Kundnani, 2021; Duchâtel & Kefferpütz, 2022)

However, with the situation in Ukraine seemingly causing a shift in the EU's stance towards hard security, as illustrated by the German case, it is plausible that the EU could take a greater stance on IP security matters in the future to protect FON and the RBIO, although this is unlikely, at least in the medium-term period, with the eyes of Europe turned towards Russia. (Duchâtel & Kefferpütz, 2022)

Overall, despite gradually increasing its interest and involvement in IP security matters, the EU and its member-States, unlike France, have neither the interest nor the means to significantly get involved in IP security, especially in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Consequently, despite France's desire to bring the EU closer to the IP, especially post-AUKUS, France should not overly rely on its EU partners if it wants to play a greater role in the region.

Conclusion

The AUKUS agreement was perceived as a “backstab” by France and a serious blow to its efforts to be recognised as a legitimate IP player. Although it is unlikely to have any effect on France's overall IP strategy, especially its third path-like approach to the region, its damaged relations with Australia cast a shadow over the future of its partnerships in the region.

Although there is little hindsight available regarding the long-term consequences of AUKUS and with the AUKUS turmoil having died down, especially given the current situation in Ukraine, this paper nonetheless believes that AUKUS will overall have little long-term consequences on France's IP partnerships, or at least should not were France to play the role it desires in the region. Aside from its relationship with Australia which will undeniably be the most affected by AUKUS in the medium to long-term, its IP relationship with the other AUKUS States is unlikely to be significantly damaged, as illustrated by the Franco-US relationship already showing signs of recovery. Furthermore, although France has expressed a desire to diversify its partnerships in the region post-AUKUS for instance with other IP resident-States and EUMS, this is likely to prove more challenging in reality. For the former, although partnerships with like-minded countries such as Indonesia and South Korea could potentially increase post-AUKUS, France will eventually be confronted by the reality of its relatively limited role in the region. For the latter, despite France's desire to bring it closer to the IP, the EU does not currently have the means nor the interest to get significantly involved in the region.

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