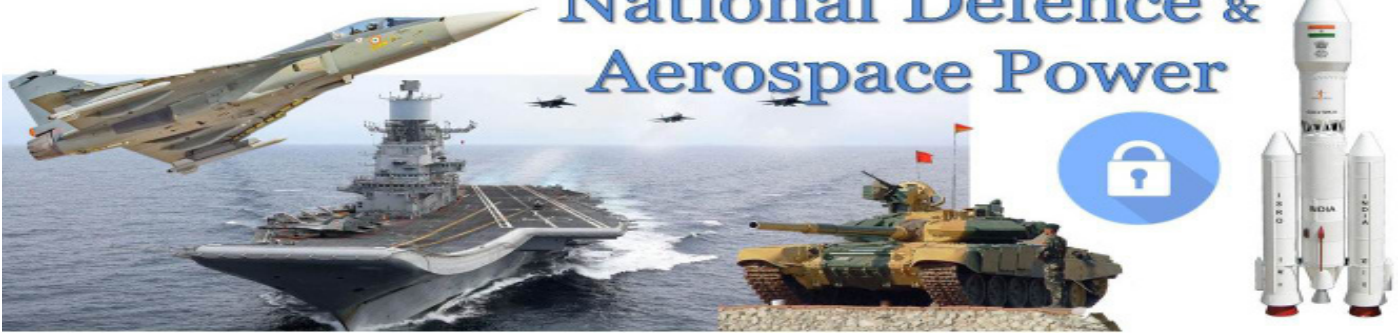




National Defence & Aerospace Power



FRANCE, INDO-PACIFIC OUTLOOK AND AUKUS TENSIONS: ASSESSING INDIA'S POSITION

Mahima Duggal

Research Associate, Centre for Air Power Studies



In a telephonic meeting between Indian Minister of External Affairs, S. Jaishankar and the French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian on September 18, 2021, New Delhi and Paris discussed recent developments in the Indo-Pacific and the worsening Afghanistan situation. Both sides pledged to collaborate on a shared plan of “concrete actions” to safeguard a “truly multilateral international order” while resolving to pursue a deeper Indo-Pacific partnership based on “political trust”.¹ This agenda took further shape during the Foreign Ministers’ meeting in New York

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along the sides of the United Nations General Assembly in September, which resulted in a “comprehensive” discussion on contemporary issues and reaffirmation of a “solid” strategic partnership in the United Nations Security Council.² In an example of growing synergy between them, India and France signed an Memorandum of Understanding to find innovative energy transition solutions on October 6, 2021.³

Interestingly, the conversation assumed merely a day after France recalled its ambassadors to the United States and Australia for consultations with President Emmanuel Macron following the launch of the landmark AUKUS pact and cancellation of the Paris-Canberra submarine deal. The development indicates the need for a recalculation of France’s Indo-Pacific outlook. Where does India stand in this reassessment? New Delhi is a critical partner in France’s vision for the region; with France-US and France-Australia ties shrouded in tensions, Paris’ partnership with India will undertake further

significance moving forward.

France's Quest for Recognition as an Indo-Pacific Power

Although a geographically distant mainland state, France has made Indo-Pacific a key concept of its foreign policy since 2018 when Macron first announced his policy and objectives towards the region in a speech in Sydney.⁴ To realise this, Paris has accelerated its efforts to engage with the Indo-Pacific to establish itself as a credible player in the highly contested geopolitical space.

This has included escalated participation in regional organizations—such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM+), Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Pacific Islands Forum, Pacific Community and the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP)—and transnational initiatives like the International Solar Alliance (ISA) alongside India, the Pacific Initiative for Adaptation and Biodiversity, and the Climate Risk and Early Warning Systems (CREWS) Initiative.⁵ Simultaneously, in the military domain, France augmented its naval operational activities in the Indo-Pacific, such as via the deployment of a frigate in the East China Sea to counter illegal North Korean activity,⁶ an attack submarine in the South China Sea, and led a naval exercise (La Pérouse) with the Quad states India, Japan, Australia and the United States.⁷ These activities demonstrated not only France's deep commitment to the region, but also that it envisages itself as a resident regional power.⁸

Unlike other European powers, France holds extensive territories in the Indo-Pacific (like the Mayotte, La Réunion, New Caledonia and French Polynesia islands) that give it the world's second-largest exclusive economic zone (EEZ) across the region.⁹ Further, these territories also make France a littoral neighbour of five Indian Ocean and 12 Pacific Ocean nations. Amongst these, India ranks as one of France's topmost strategic partners and a centerpiece of its regional strategy. Not only does New Delhi feature in France's Indo-Pacific engagements (like the Paris-Delhi-Canberra axis and the gradually shaping Paris-Delhi-Tokyo trilateral), but it is also a major defence partner. As part of their steadily rising bilateral trade (USD 10.75 billion in 2020), defence trade is key, with India procuring 36 Rafale fighter jets and six Scorpene submarines amongst other essential military hardware. India-France cooperation crucially extends to the maritime, space, civil nuclear and climate action domains, with Paris taking up the responsibility of the Maritime Resources pillar of India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI). In essence, India has advanced as a substantive strategic partner for France's regional ambitions, even as both sides look to further bolster ties to imbibe their full potential.

Despite being plagued with several issues (such as cost overruns and delays) since its inception in 2016, the Franco-Australian submarine pact played a crucial role in Paris' Indo-Pacific strategy as a sign of its abiding commitment to the region and values like freedom of navigation.

French Fury over AUKUS: Paris Sidelined?

India's criticality in France's regional outlook only becomes more important in light of the recent announcement of an Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) Indo-Pacific alliance. Aimed at bolstering joint capabilities, the AUKUS involves sharing of advanced technology (like artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and cyberwarfare) from the UK and US to Australia, and first major initiative under this domain comes with the US and UK providing nuclear propulsion technology transfer and technical assistance to build a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines.¹⁰ This prompted Canberra to (rather callously and without any notice or consultation) cancel its €56 billion conventional submarine deal with France – a move Paris called a “stab in the back” from Canberra and reminiscent of former President Donald Trump's ‘America First’ ideology – “brutal, unilateral, unpredictable” and “insufferable”.¹¹

France is concerned that AUKUS could indicate Paris is being shut off from the slowly strengthening US network of security alliances and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific. The move has already resulted in repercussions in the region, with France pulling out of the much-lauded strategic Paris-Delhi-Canberra axis formed in 2020.

France's fury, evidenced by its public reaction and the unprecedented move to recall its ambassadors, roots from not just the economic fallout of the breakup but also, and more importantly, its impact and implications for France's regional strategy. Despite being plagued with several issues (such as cost overruns and delays) since its inception in 2016,¹² the Franco-Australian submarine pact played a crucial role in Paris' Indo-Pacific strategy as a sign of its abiding commitment to the region and values like freedom of navigation. For Paris, the decision undermined its regional presence and efforts to structure a strong partnership with Quad state Australia, thus sidelining France as a European ally in the Indo-Pacific. In other words, France is concerned that AUKUS could indicate Paris is being shut off from the slowly strengthening US network of security alliances and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific. The move has already resulted in repercussions in the region, with France pulling out of the much-lauded strategic Paris-Delhi-Canberra axis formed in 2020.¹³

Implications for India

India has welcomed AUKUS as a sign of Washington's readiness to transfer more advanced military technologies (like nuclear propulsion) with its Indo-Pacific partners.¹⁴ Considering the overlapping interests and membership of the Quad and AUKUS, India and Japan likely saw the possibility of eventually merging the groupings to form a concerted force to counter Chinese aggression and uphold shared values in the region. For India, the new coalition symbolises Washington's strong commitment and resolve to deter China, thus setting the stage for more vigorous security architecture in the region that helps stabilize the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁵

Yet, with the US ruling out India and Japan's potential inclusion¹⁶ in what has become an Anglo-Western bloc, there clearly remains a gap between India and the US in the absence of a security alliance treaty. While India is an increasingly close security partner of the US, based on their four foundational security agreements, New Delhi's proclivity to avoid binding alliances in favour of strategic pointed alignments and issue-based multilateral coalitions precludes it from access to new sensitive tech (including nuclear).

New Delhi will remain deeply invested in the Quad partnership with the US (alongside Australia and Japan) as well as its bilateral ties with Washington.

On the other hand, for France, AUKUS marks a breach of trust between traditional allies – particularly because of how the AUKUS deliberations and cancellation of the submarine contract were hidden from Paris despite their direct impact on French interests and goals in the Indo-Pacific. In fact, in high-level diplomatic US-France discussions over the past month, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken repeatedly assured Paris that the France-Australia submarine deal was a crucial element of France's role in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁷ Now, this cancellation as well as the abrupt and rather undiplomatic manner in which the US and Australia handled the issue with France will likely force Paris to recalculate its strategy in the Indo-Pacific, and increased focus on India can be a part of such a rethinking.

In essence, AUKUS can act as an impetus for India and France to escalate their cooperation through increased exchanges and concrete collaborations in areas ranging from security and defence to the economy and climate change. As France revisits its Indo-Pacific approach and explores ways to further engage with and demonstrate its commitment to the region, collaborations in the Indian Ocean can feature at the forefront of its new strategy. Paris and New Delhi are already coordinating their stances in regional multilateral institutions; moving forward, they can establish joint projects in third countries in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) to further boost their engagement. Such projects could span areas like infrastructure and connectivity development, digital connectivity support, blue economy and climate change.

That is not to say that the US and Australia will not remain key Indo-Pacific partners for both India and France. Macron and Biden are already set to meet in October 2021 to clear tensions and mend ties; Paris is also sending back its ambassador to the US for “intensive work” with US officials.¹⁸ In India's case too, New Delhi will remain deeply invested in the Quad partnership with the US (alongside Australia and Japan) as well as its bilateral ties with Washington. The high momentum in India-US ties and India's position towards the Quad is visible in Prime Minister Modi's ongoing visit to Washington for the second Quad Leaders' Summit (the first one in-person) as well as a private meeting with President Joe Biden and Vice President, Kamala Harris. In other words, the AUKUS

security alliance is not likely to become obsolete or lose its immense importance in the member states' Indo-Pacific outlooks.

Nevertheless, the AUKUS debacle has demonstrated the need for “intense and mature diplomacy to tap into opportunities beyond binaries”.¹⁹ For France, the incident is a clear notice that transatlantic frictions, which dominated under Trump’s presidency, will continue to plague the US-France ties. It was a reminder of the US poor track record as a senior partner in alliances where its interests diverge. Moving forward, France (and perhaps even the EU), will consider more serious policies like strategic autonomy – which India regards essential in its foreign policy thinking. Under such conditions, India and France can find more to unite them and greater synergy to drive their partnership forward.

The very fact that India-France discussions featured Afghanistan as a key area for cooperation adds credence to their potential for an effective and critical partnership in the Indo-Pacific, and IOR and South Asia particularly.

France already places equal importance (if not more) on the Indian Ocean as compared to the Pacific via its rather extensive and inclusive definition of the Indo-Pacific (“from Djibouti to Polynesia”).²⁰ If India can act adeptly and effectively, it can position itself as the foremost partner for Paris in the region. Notably, the Modi administration has already taken steps to emphasize its ‘friendship’ with France and Paris’ importance to the Indo-Pacific meta-narrative as well as a driver of the EU’s pivot to the region. Apart from the Jaishankar-Le Drian telephonic conversation discussed earlier, India also reached out to France on September 21 (before beginning his US trip on September 22) to discuss closer collaborations and highlight the “great value”²¹ that India places on its “cherished” Strategic Partnership with France, including within the United Nations Security Council.

Similarly, in a sign of the importance Paris places on India moving forward, Macron stressed that the India-France relationship was a close one, based on “mutual trust and respect”. Not only did both states pledged to bolster economic cooperation, but Paris also committed to reinforcing India’s strategic autonomy by supporting its industrial and technological base. The very fact that India-France discussions featured Afghanistan as a key area for cooperation adds credence to their potential for an effective and critical partnership in the Indo-Pacific, and IOR and South Asia particularly. Both can deepen their maritime connect via the IPOI; potentially, France could be considered as India looks to purchase new submarines.

With a livid France withdrawing from the Paris-Delhi-Canberra trilateral talks (that were set to take place on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in September 2021), it is crucial that India and France accentuate their bilateral ties. Ultimately, the Indo-Pacific security architecture will be characterized by an assortment of alliances and partnerships; a deepened India-France partnership, built on trust, equality and congruence of interests can be a critical regional axis.

Notes:

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- ² Bhavya Sukheja, “Jaishankar Discusses Indo-Pacific With French FM; Calls India & France ‘solid Partners’,” *Republic World*, September 22, 2021, <https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/us-news/french-foreign-minister-le-drian-meets-eam-jaishankar-discuss-cooperation-in-indo-pacific.html>. Accessed October 8, 2021.
- ³ “NTPC inks MoU with French energy major EDU for cooperation in international power sector,” *Business Today*, October 7, 2021, <https://www.businesstoday.in/industry/energy/story/ntpc-inks-mou-with-french-energy-major-edu-for-cooperation-in-international-power-sector-308725-2021-10-07>. Accessed October 8, 2021.
- ⁴ Emmanuel Macron, “Speech at Garden Island, Sydney Naval Base,” *Élysée*, May 3, 2018, 2021, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2018/05/03/discours-a-garden-island-base-navale-de-sydney>. Also see, Emmanuel Macron, “Speech by President Emmanuel Macron – Ambassadors’ Conference 2018,” *France Diplomacy*, August 27, 2018, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/the-ministry-and-its-network/news/ambassadors-week/ambassadors-week-edition-2018/article/speech-by-president-emmanuel-macron-ambassadors-conference-2018>. Accessed on September 21, 2021
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- ⁷ “France to lead quad naval exercise in Indo-Pacific with China,” *France24*, April 2, 2021, accessed September 21, 2021, <https://www.fr24news.com/a/2021/04/france-to-lead-quad-naval-exercise-in-indo-pacific-with-china.html>.
- ⁸ See Pierre Morcos, “France: A Bridge between Europe and the Indo-Pacific?,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, April 1, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/france-bridge-between-europe-and-indo-pacific>. Accessed on September 21, 2021
- ⁹ The Indo-Pacific region: a priority for France, n. 5.
- ¹⁰ “Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS,” *Statements and Releases, White House*, September 15, 2021, accessed September 22, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/15/joint-leaders-statement-on-aukus/>; Aditi Khanna and Lalit K Jha, “US, Britain & Australia announce new trilateral Indo-Pacific alliance ‘AUKUS’,” *The Print*, September 16, 2021, <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/us-britain-australia-announce-new-trilateral-indo-pacific-alliance-aukus/734364/>. Accessed on September 22, 2021
- ¹¹ Jules Darmanin and Zoya Sheftalovich, “‘Stab in the back’: France slams Australia, US over move to ditch €50B submarine deal,” *Politico*, September 16, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-slams-australia-us-e50b-submarine-deal/>. Accessed on September 22, 2021
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¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ PTI, "U.S. rules out adding India, Japan to AUKUS," *The Hindu*, September 23, 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/us-rules-out-adding-india-japan-to-aukus/article36624520.ece>. Accessed on September 23, 2021

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Centre for Air Power Studies

P-284, Arjan Path, Subroto Park, New Delhi 110010

Tel: +91 11 25699130/32, Fax: +91 11 25682533

Editor: Dr Shalini Chawla e-mail: shaluchawla@yahoo.com

Formatting and Assistance: Dr Hina Pandey, Mr Shantanu Roy Chaudhury, Mr Rohit Singh

The views expressed in this brief are those of the author and not necessarily of the Centre or any other organisation.