

RIETI BBL Seminar Handout

France's Evolving Indo-Pacific Strategy:
Priorities, challenges and adaptation

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France's evolving Indo-Pacific strategy: Priorities, Challenges and Adaptation

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OUTLINE

Why an Indo-Pacific Strategy?

France's strategy in the Indo-Pacific

Assets and Limits

Focus on France-Japan partnership

PART 1 — WHY AN INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY?

France is a resident nation of the Indo-Pacific

Overseas territories across Indian and Pacific Ocean:

- Indian Ocean: La Réunion, Mayotte, French Southern and Antarctic Territories
- Pacific Ocean: New Caledonia, French Polynesia, Wallis & Futuna, Clipperton

~1.6 million French citizens in the Indo-Pacific overseas territories + 200,000 French nationals living elsewhere in the region

2nd largest Exclusive Economic Zone in the world: ~9 million km² in the Indo-Pacific

Pre-positioned forces: ~7,000 troops across three joint regional commands (ALINDIEN, FANC, ALPACI) — about 12 vessels and 40 aircraft permanently deployed

→ **France has a broad geographic definition of the Indo-Pacific**

FRANCE'S PRESENCE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC



Military presence



Source: Ministry for Armed Forces

PART 1 — WHY AN INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY?

A New Centre of the World

The Indo-Pacific combines strong economic interdependence with significant strategic risks.

The Indo-Pacific is the engine of global growth:

- 60% of global GDP and home to the world's fastest-growing middle classes
- Key maritime corridors: 50% of world container traffic and 70% of energy raw materials transit through the Indian Ocean

Interdependence is growing:

- 40% of European Union trade goes through the South China Sea
- Between 15 and 20% of France's global imports/exports
- A key provider of semi-conductors for Europe and France: approx. 60% European dependence on Taiwan semi-conductor production ; Critical dependency for advanced chips
- Interconnexion of Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security theaters

PART 1 — WHY AN INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY?

Deteriorating security environment driven by states competition and rivalry

- **China's growing assertiveness** in the East and South China Sea, Djibouti base (2017)
- **Taiwan Strait:** window of risk 2027–35; increasing tensions, hybrid warfare already underway
- **Korean Peninsula:** North Korean nuclear and ballistic programs; DPRK-Russia alliance raising nuclear transfer fears
- **South Asia:** India-Pakistan frictions, Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict underway
- **Northwestern Indian Ocean:** Iran nuclear programme, Houthi attacks in the Red Sea disrupting global shipping, Iran war and disruption of the strait of Hormuz

SECURITY ISSUES IN THE INDO-PACIFIC



PART 1 — WHY AN INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY?

‘Non-Traditional’ Security Challenges

Maritime security:

- Pressure on fishery resources, IUU fishing, biodiversity
- Crimes at sea: piracy, narcotraffic

Environmental security:

- Climate change is the #1 security threat for Pacific Island Countries and many others; growing demand for HADR operations

Hybrid & commons threats:

- Cyber attacks, space competition, undersea cables, grey-zone tactics — all increasingly weaponised

Key takeaways:

- Crisis in the Indo-Pacific would severely impact maritime transport, energy supply and digital infrastructure — posing a huge challenge to France and Europe
- Indo-Pacific also a key locus of China-US strategic rivalry

PART 2 — STRATEGY

France's Power Interests & Strategic Objectives

As a permanent UNSC member and mid-sized global power, France pursues:

- Active contribution to strategic stability in hotspot zones
- Counter-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction
- Upholding international law, especially UNCLOS

Three objectives of France's strategy:

1. Protect sovereign interests (territories, nationals, EEZs)
2. Reduce instability risks from interstate tensions and transnational threats
3. Influence the regional strategic balance as an additional option between the US and China

PART 2 — STRATEGY

France's Strategy: Three broad principles

1 — Independent & Inclusive

France distinguishes its approach from the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy: no explicit containment of China; an open, multilateral, rule-based approach that can include Beijing where possible

2 — Principles-Based

France defends the Rules Based Order - freedom of navigation, air, and international law.
Since 2014 France sends vessels through the South China Sea annually to assert UNCLOS rights;
deployment of aircraft carrier group to the Pacific in 2025,

3 — Partnership-Based

Given limited resources, France relies on strategic partners. Priority partners: India, Japan, Australia, US, and increasingly Southeast Asian nations (Singapore, Indonesia, Philippines)
Supported by defence equipment sales and capacity-building cooperation focused on maritime security
European nations are also partners in the Indo-Pacific

PART 2 —STRATEGY

Four domains of France's Indo-Pacific Strategy

Pillar 1 — Security & Defence

Maritime security, freedom of navigation, counter-proliferation, joint exercises with partners, European deployments

Pillar 2 — Economy, Connectivity & Innovation

Trade promotion, undersea cable projects, research partnerships, sustainable development, connectivity infrastructure via Global Gateway

Pillar 3 — Multilateralism & Rule of Law

Support for ASEAN centrality, Pacific Islands Forum, UN institutions; engagement on maritime governance and nuclear non-proliferation

Pillar 4 — Climate, Biodiversity & Ocean Governance

Climate finance for PICs, HADR capacity-building, ocean protection, sustainable fisheries, environmental security

PART 3 — ASSETS AND CHALLENGES

Three assets

1. Regional presence and prepositioned forces
2. Multiple military deployments
3. A flurry of strategic partnerships

Three challenges

1. An ambiguous diplomatic posture
2. Insufficient military means
3. Crisis of credibility

PART 3 — ASSETS

Asset 2 – Multiple military deployments

France regularly deploys strategic assets far from metropolitan France:

- Mission Jeanne d'Arc: amphibious task group (LHD Dixmude) — capacity-building with Pacific partners
- Charles de Gaulle carrier group deployed up to Singapore (2019); deployment to the Pacific in 2025
- Nuclear attack submarine Émeraude + support ship Seine deployed to the SCS (2021)
- SIGINT vessel Dupuy-de-Lôme transited the Taiwan Strait
- FREMM First Class Frigates deployed to the Indo-Pacific in 2024-2025
- Air Force Pégase missions: 3–10 Rafale fighters deployed annually to Australia and beyond

European dimension:

UK, Germany, Netherlands and Italy have also deployed ships in the region— France has championed European IP coordination, including joint exercises

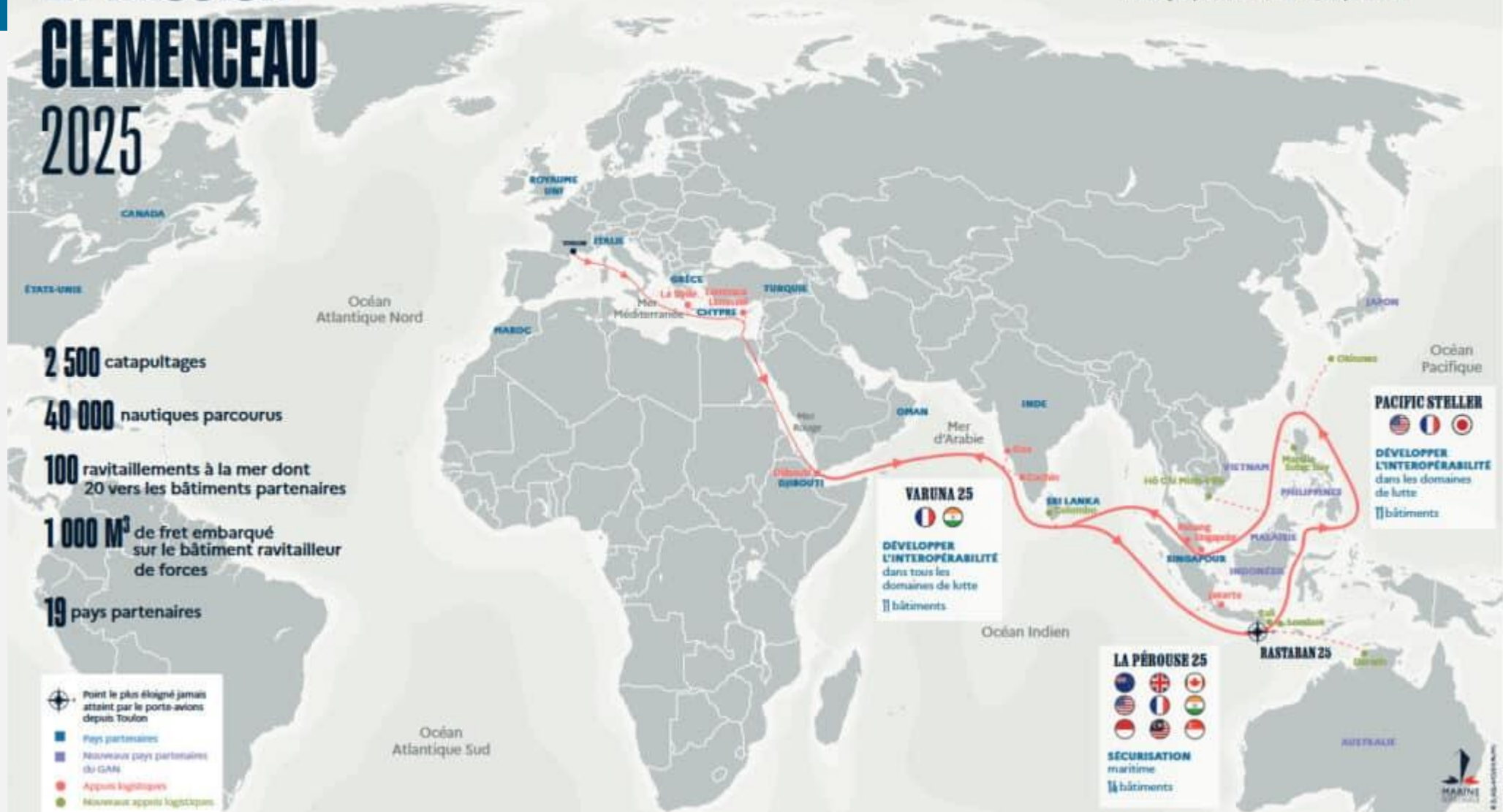
Asset 2 – Multiple military deployments

LA MISSION CLEMENCEAU 2025

- 2 500** catapultages
- 40 000** nautiques parcourus
- 100** ravitaillements à la mer dont 20 vers les bâtiments partenaires
- 1 000 M³** de fret embarqué sur le bâtiment ravitailleur de forces
- 19** pays partenaires

- Point le plus éloigné jamais atteint par le porte-avions depuis Toulon
- Pays partenaires
- Nouveaux pays partenaires du GAN
- Appuis logistiques
- Nouveaux appuis logistiques

« Opérer en mer, loin, longtemps et sur un panel de missions extrêmement large ». Le groupe aéronaval français s'est déployé cette année jusque dans l'Océan Pacifique nord.



PART 3 — ASSETS

Asset 3 - France's Strategic Partnerships in the Indo-Pacific

Key Partners

India — 'Strategic axis'; joint maritime patrols, Rafale sales, Horizon 2047 roadmap

Japan — Defence cooperation, anti-submarine exercises, trilateral France-India-Japan format

Australia — despite AUKUS, defence cooperation continues;

United States — bilateral cooperation despite 'balancing power' posture tensions

Other Partners

Singapore — key hub; logistical access, CDG deployment (2019-2025)

Indonesia — largest ASEAN economy; maritime security cooperation, patrol vessel sales

Philippines — growing security ties & maritime cooperation

European dimension: Germany, Netherlands, Italy — French-led coordination of EU IP deployments since 2021

PART 3 — CHALLENGES

Challenge 1: An Ambiguous Diplomatic Posture

France's 'balancing power' concept is frequently misunderstood:

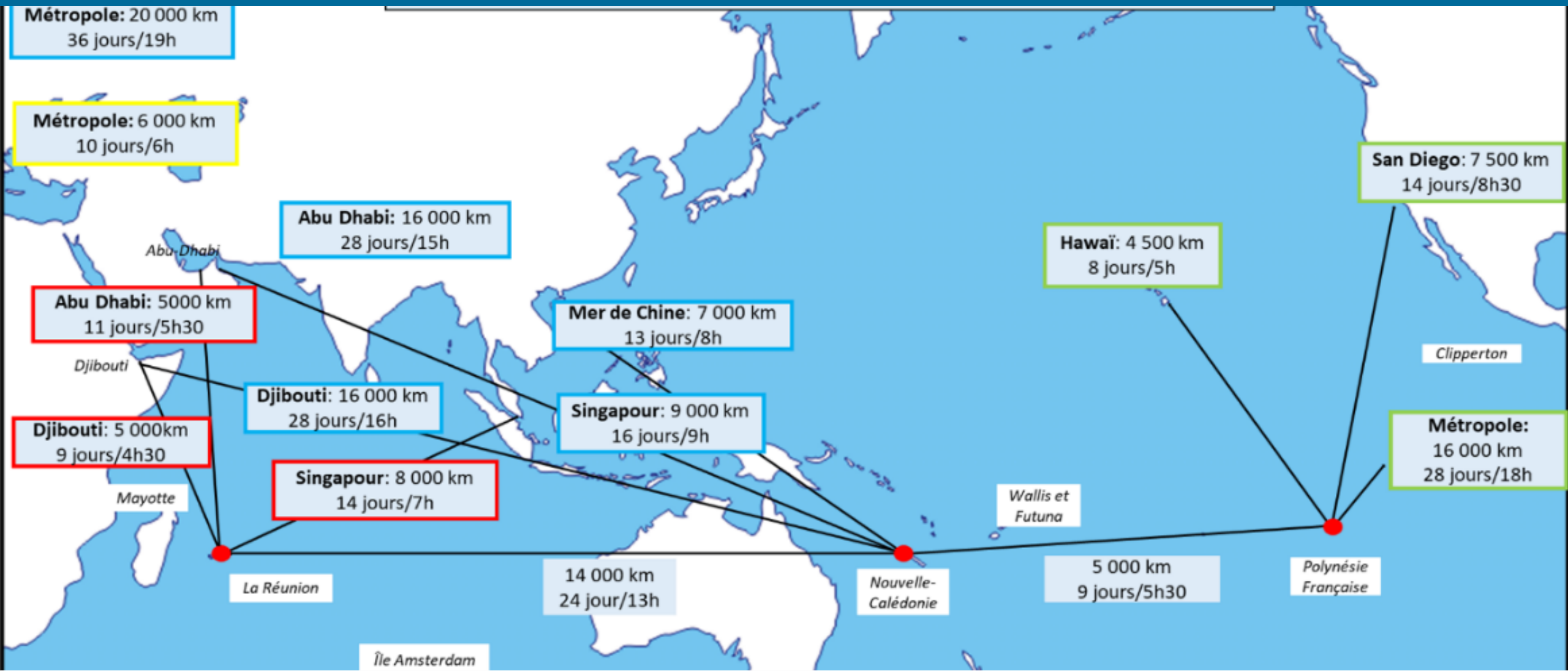
- It evokes a 'third way' while rejecting 'equidistance' from the great powers — an ambiguity that sometimes causes confusion about French posture, and can undermine France's influence,
- 'Allied but not aligned' with the US

Challenge 2: Insufficient Military Means

Sovereignty forces were cut 20% between 2008–2021 and are already near-saturated by routine missions. This said, recent efforts to modernize and upgrade the capacities (Maritime patrol: ageing OPVs replaced by POM class (6 in Indo-Pacific, from 2023 on, etc))

'The tyranny of distance': 3 weeks of navigation from Toulon to Singapore — **deployment requires enormous effort.**

Tyranny of distance



PART 3 — CHALLENGES

Challenge 3: Crisis of credibility?

Legitimacy - Tensions related to France's colonial past:

Independence movements gaining momentum in New Caledonia (+2024 violence) and French Polynesia

- External interference (Azerbaijan, China...) to undermine French presence and influence in the Pacific

The AUKUS shock (September 2021): A brutal loss of France's largest defence export and a crisis of confidence in the transatlantic relationship

- Exposed a gap between France's Indo-Pacific ambitions and the resources (diplomatic, economic, military) actually committed
- Raised questions about whether a 'third-way' or 'balancing power' posture is viable in a polarizing Sino-US rivalry
- Prompted calls for a more pragmatic recalibration of France's strategy

THE 2025 UPDATED STRATEGY

A more realistic and pragmatic strategy:

- **Sovereignty first:** Overseas territories are front and center. Emphasis is placed on consultation, cooperation and local ownership
- **A more multidimensional engagement:** The strategy expands beyond security to include more economic, climate, and technological cooperation.
- **A balancing stance maintained with a sharper tone on China :** France continues to promote strategic autonomy while staying allied with the United States. More explicit criticism of Beijing's actions and ambitions (mentions of Taiwan),
- **Partnerships at the core:** France relies on key regional partners to amplify its limited resources.+ **A stronger European dimension:** France aligns its approach with the EU to leverage collective economic and political weight.
 - Economic security and Global Value Chains
 - Global Gateway
 - ESIWA, Global Port Safety, CRIMARIO
 - Free and open trade: FTA with India, Australia, Mercosur

A FOCUS on FRANCE- JAPAN PARTNERSHIP

- **An “Exceptional Partnership” since 2013**
- A progressive institutionalization : “2+2” meeting at the ministerial level since 2014
- Indo-Pacific as a springboard for cooperation : Japan as democratic, stable pillar in Indo-Pacific
- France: 5th foreign investor (stock) in Japan ; Japan: 10th foreign investor in France

>Despite a relationship growing more strategic, some misunderstandings should be clarified to advance the partnership: Misperceptions: France seen by Japan as too distant/disruptive vis a vis US, and too lenient on China ; Japan seen by France as too aligned on US, too tough on China...

Actually: positions are closer than we assume:

-France’s Indo-Pacific strategy, while not targeting any specific country, is **largely driven by concerns over China’s rise and regional destabilization risks**

-A “balancing” posture does not mean equidistance - The Franco-American alliance is **older and operationally deeper** than the Japan-U.S. alliance (joint combat experience, especially in Africa)

-Finally, like France, Japan is a **pragmatic actor**, seeking to defend its interests while preserving a degree of autonomy in a U.S.-China context

External and internal crisis of Rules-based order provides a window of opportunity to rethink a more realist, sustainable engagement, based on :

- Efforts to build collectively our strategic autonomy:

- GVC, esp. in semi-conductors, critical minerals : joint project: Carester rare-earth refining plant in Southern France, jointly supported by France and Japan.
- Economic and energy security: civil nuclear energy
- Space : maintain capacity to monitor and act autonomously in space

+ rethink a Rules-based order (Japan : 3rd ODA donor, strong record in multilateral settings, UNSC...)

President Macron's upcoming visit:

Long overdue, new top-level dynamic:

- more cooperation on critical minerals, rare earth GVC
- more cooperation on new generation nuclear reactors
- AI : cooperation on defense-related, governance
- space cooperation: situation awareness, satellite info sharing

In addition to cultural cooperation...

Upcoming G7 Summit in Evian (15-17 June)

- Broad thematic of global imbalances and rethink a new world order/governance
- G7 Foreign ministers meeting in France on 26-27 March: Saudi Arabia, Brazil, South Korea, India and Ukraine invited.
- Specific focus : conflicts and reconstructions
- Creating a network of ports in G7 countries and other partner countries to step up the fight against drug trafficking.
- Economic security and critical mineral supply chains
- Engage Global South
- Keep US engaged
- The China factor

>>> **Priority issues for cooperation in France-Indo-Pacific and France/Japan partnership:**

-Economic Security : Diversification of GVC, especially on critical minerals, chips and semiconductors. Twin Transition (digital and green) : A key pillar of European policy.

-Maritime security, hybrid threats and new domains: Enforcement of the Law of the Sea, FON, securitization of key infrastructures at sea and on seabed (subsea cables) – initiative Global Port Safety, MDA, Space, AI for Defense, Cyberdefense, disinformation

-Defense industrial cooperation: massive investments in a European defense, with some funding schemes opened to partners having signed SPD. (SAFE) Dual-use tech,

-Providing public goods and cooperate on governance issues : climate, health, norms and standards in digital, AI, new domains.

→ **How should it work?** Multilayered approach: bilateral, Issue-based coalition, multilateral level would provide the more practical way to advance interests.

Thank you for your attention

Questions?

