



France's Delicate Balancing Act in the Indo-Pacific

By Paola Fusaro

Speaking at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore on Saturday, U.S. Acting Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan revealed the details of the United States' long-awaited "Free and Indo-Pacific" strategy. The document promotes greater military preparedness for conflicts through military exercises and investments in technologies as well as a stronger network of regional partners through bilateral and multilateral arrangements to enhance U.S. interoperability and coordination with its Indo-Pacific allies. While Shanahan stated the United States' opposition to regional hegemonic policies and its intention to cooperate with China when there is "an alignment of interests," its Indo-Pacific strategy report is unambiguous. China is ranked as the greatest regional threat, before Russia, North Korea, and various transnational challenges, and it is depicted as a revisionist power advocating a "repressive world order vision."

In her speech that followed shortly after Shanahan's, France's Defense Minister Florence Parly reaffirmed her country's willingness to protect its sovereign interests in the region and to ensure regional stability against great-power competition by using its military assets, regional cooperation, and multilateralism. But she also showed a noteworthy firmness toward China's military maneuvers in the region, saying that France's navy would continue to navigate more than twice a year in the South China Sea. However, if France wishes to secure its national assets in the region while supporting its global ambitions, it should not fall into the trap of a bipolar and over-militarized Indo-Pacific approach.

The 2017 National Security Strategy declared the Indo-Pacific to be the United States' top regional priority, using a strong anti-China tone. Since then, the Trump administration has adopted a heavily militarized approach toward China based on regular freedom-of-navigation operations in the region's disputed waters, large-scale military exercises, and renewed investments in ballistic missiles. The new Indo-Pacific strategy clearly follows this zero-sum approach by disregarding potential diplomatic or

economic initiatives with China or the United States' regional partners.

In response, China's Defense Minister General Wei Fenghe delivered an anti-United States speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue. He indirectly branded the Trump administration's regional doctrine as confrontational, exclusive, unbending, and arrogant toward other civilizations. He said China does not intend to or have the capacity to compete with the



United States, but he did not discard the potential use of force to reintegrate Taiwan. He also justified China's militarization of islands in the South China Sea by criticizing foreign military maneuvers in the region.

Thus, the Cold War-like mutual mistrust between the United States and China seems insurmountable. On the one hand, the United States' fears are legitimate as China's anti-access/area denial strategy based on militarized islands and its reinterpretation of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea jeopardize U.S. economic interests and primacy in the "global commons." For its part, China sees the United States' withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the expansion of ballistic missile defense systems, and the military maneuvers in the South China Sea as a strategy aimed at undermining its territorial integrity it views as sacrosanct and its rising hegemony in Asia.

France's Approach

Faced with this geopolitical chessboard, France must cautiously adjust its position. Protecting its 1.5 million citizens and 200,000 expatriates living across Asia and Oceania from subnational, transnational, and inter-state threats is an absolute priority. Besides, Asia is France's largest trading partner after the European Union. French consumption and trade are therefore heavily reliant on the region's maritime communication lines. To safeguard its national interests in the region, France has therefore detailed its own Indo-Pacific strategy. By contrast with the unilateralist U.S strategy and China's attempt to modify the rule of law in the maritime space, it champions a multilateral approach based on international law through closer economic, diplomatic, and military cooperation with Australia, India, Japan, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus.

Instead of an inflexible posture on China, France suggests a "balanced approach" based on a wise "comprehensive strategic partnership" with Beijing.

Cooperation on security with the United States remains obviously key, within the Quad and during joint regional military exercises. Overall, France seeks to be a "mediating power" in growing inter-state rivalries in the region by using diplomacy and strength. It can rely on 7,000 stationed French personnel, several military bases in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and on lucrative military sales that strengthen its political influence and military interoperability with its allies. However, France's choices of terminology risks undermining its moderate posture in the region.

Like the United States, France now extensively uses the Indo-Pacific concept. Although this effectively captures India's strategic importance in the wider region, it has arguably a specific ideological and strategic significance that cannot be ignored by France's leadership. Its quadrilateral shape linking the United States to Australia, India, and Japan covers two oceans with the South China Sea at its center. This geographical reality indirectly supports China's rhetoric about a U.S. strategy of containment and can be used retrospectively to justify its infringement of international law as a way to protect itself. The Indo-Pacific concept therefore inadvertently locks France in a binary competition.

When President Emmanuel Macron mentioned last year in Sydney a Paris-Delhi-Canberra "Indo-Pacific Axis" aimed at preventing hegemonic tendencies, Chinese officials and journalists reacted vehemently. The decision to moor the Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier in Singapore during the 2019 Shangri-La

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Dialogue also contributes to over-emphasizing the military component of France's strategy. By contrast, India is more cautious, avoiding military exercises with its fellow Quad allies so as not to antagonize China. Therefore, France must be extremely careful

not to turn its official strategy into a militaristic, pro-United States anti-China posture.

France must remember that the threat from China is arguably overestimated by the Trump administration. China's rapid military modernization is certainly impressive but it does not say anything about the quality of its weapons, the training of its military personnel, and its actual willingness to confront the United States or one of its allies. The United States does not build up its capacities based on the likeliness of China becoming the top military power in the region but rather on the possibility, however minor, that this threat may arise one day. China has also benefited from the U.S-led international order and has traditionally followed a restrained, if evolving, military interventionism based on Zhou Enlai's principles, notably respect for other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, and noninterference in the domestic affairs of foreign partners. France must also be careful to not encourage its Southeast Asian partners to ask for costlier military assistance.

Finally, France should remain realistic about the limited, although economically valuable, Delhi-Canberra-Tokyo alignment. Australia is an interesting market for French weapons and its navy can assist French territories impacted by natural disasters, but it will not confront China militarily given its economic dependence on the latter. India has always valued its strategic independence and Japan needs China to negotiate North Korea's denuclearization. As for the ASEAN countries, none of them is ready to choose between the United States and China.

A Delicate Balancing Act

France must therefore play a delicate balancing act. On China, it has the same overall objective as the United States. France wants China to respect its neighbors' sovereignty and to play a fair economic game—in the Indo-Pacific by guaranteeing the passage of European and U.S. merchant vessels, and globally by halting its unfair trade practices. But, France must offer a diplomatic alternative to U.S. militarism and economic aggressiveness. If it increases the pace of

its freedom-of-navigation operations, especially near Taiwan, China will see this as a U.S-backed intimidation, which will inevitably undercut France's ability to negotiate with China in the region and in Europe. It is thus necessary for France to show that it respects regional sensitivities, especially in light of China's history of foreign incursions in its territory.

France should also mostly rely on the EU. All member states wish to protect the maritime routes on which they depend economically and to put an end to Chinese dumping in Europe. Furthermore, the EU is not, yet, a military power. Instead, it is a neutral diplomatic power that has shown in recent months its ability to oppose U.S. unilateralism. The EU could therefore more easily win the confidence of the Chinese by convincing them it does not seek to undermine China's sovereignty, and by turning Beijing's "win-win" slogan to its advantage. This is precisely what the European Commission advocates in a document published on March 12 that refers to "a fair, balanced and mutual beneficial course" with China. It also wisely avoids using the "Indo-Pacific" concept.

France should limit as much as possible its military maneuvers in the South China Sea, especially near Taiwan, unless China threatens its territories or impedes European maritime supply traffic. This alternative to U.S. militarism would also be the opportunity to prove to the current administration in Washington the value of negotiation and multilateralism in conflict resolution.

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