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FRANCE'S MILITARY AND POLITICAL STRATEGY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC AFTER CREATION OF AUKUS

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Abstract. This article explores the key developments of the French Indo-Pacific strategy in the aftermath of the "submarine deal" and the creation of AUKUS in September 2021. For many observers, the misunderstanding with Australia and the United States seemed to be a real turning point in regional policy, due to which the previous partnerships should be inevitably recalibrated. Yet, as numerous examples show, Paris' response is quite limited after all. Firstly, the article summarizes French efforts to turn the page on the "submarine deal" by restoring the dialogue with Anglo-Saxon powers. In this respect, the emphasis is made on Emmanuel Macron's meetings with new prime ministers of the United Kingdom and Australia as well as on his steps towards transatlantic solidarity with Washington (not without new disagreements on the Taiwan issue, however). Secondly, several multi- and minilateral activities of French diplomacy are analyzed, such as the EU-Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum held for the first time in Paris, 2022, or the president's participation in the APEC summit in Thailand. It is noteworthy that France tries to find the second chance for its "Indo-Pacific axis" involving the UAE instead of Canberra and keeping in touch with India. Thirdly, the article defines that key weaknesses of the French regional strategy are the same as before September 2021. In particular, it still implies a certain ambiguity because the discourse on the "third way" and unwillingness to be a part of U.S. – China confrontation is followed by an indisputable affiliation of France to the collective West. French diplomatic activity is poorly supported by military capabilities given small contingents at overseas territories with mostly outdated weapons. The conclusion is that the AUKUS factor did not change France's policy in the Indo-Pacific dramatically anyway; moreover, the continuity is likely to prevail for a few more years.

Keywords: France, Indo-Pacific, AUKUS, multilateralism, minilateralism, overseas territories, military presence, U.S. – China rivalry.

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ВОЕННО-ПОЛИТИЧЕСКАЯ СТРАТЕГИЯ ФРАНЦИИ В ИТР ПОСЛЕ СОЗДАНИЯ AUKUS

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Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются основные тенденции внешней политики Франции в Индо-Тихоокеанском регионе (ИТР) после "кризиса подлодок" и образования блока AUKUS в сентябре 2021 г. Обобщаются основные шаги по восстановлению диалога с англосаксонскими державами, предпринятые Парижем за прошедший период. Анализируются попытки французской дипломатии параллельно выстроить сотрудничество с другими странами ИТР на площадках различного формата. Выделяются основные проблемы реализуемой стратегии, со временем становящиеся все более заметными, включая размытость долгосрочных ориентиров, ограниченность военно-политических ресурсов. Автор приходит к выводу, что создание AUKUS в конечном итоге не привело к радикальному пересмотру политики Франции в ИТР, которая с высокой долей вероятности сохранит силу преемственности в ближайшем будущем.

Ключевые слова: Франция, Индо-Тихоокеанский регион, *AUKUS*, мультилатерализм, мини-латерализм, заморские территории, военное присутствие, американско-китайское соперничество.

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INTRODUCTION

During Emmanuel Macron's first term as President of France (2017–2022), one of the most dynamically developing areas of the Fifth Republic's foreign policy was the Indo-Pacific vector. Since 2018, Paris has positioned itself as a full-fledged regional player, substantiated by the presence of overseas possessions in this part of the world, and has been consistently shaping its own strategic line. This strategy involves establishing privileged military-technical and other connections with the key powers of the Indo-Pacific Region (IPR) [1]. Céline Pajon, an expert at the French Institute of International Relations (*Institut français des relations internationales*, IFRI), asserts that this strategy is motivated by the desire “to increase France's contribution to building up a stable Indo-Pacific governed by the rule of law and to mitigate the risks of great-power competition in a key area for French interests” [2, p. 175]. This approach was reflected in efforts to create a new coalition – termed an “axis”—which would include states not willing to unequivocally choose a side in the US-China rivalry, but instead, ready to move along a certain “third way.” Initially, the French project was supported by India and Australia, which were considered by France as key pillars of this proposed structure, with partial support from Japan. The potential for involving European Union countries in this evolving framework was also considered. A significant step on this path was the European Commission's adoption of a common conceptual document on the Indo-Pacific in September 2021, which resonated with similar texts approved earlier by the Fifth Republic [3].

It is particularly significant that in the same month, Paris faced an unforeseen challenge: the establishment of the *AUKUS* coalition with the participation of the US, UK, and Australia. This development was perceived at the Élysée Palace as a “stab in the back,” since Canberra unilaterally terminated the contract with the French

company Naval Group for the construction of 12 *Barracuda* submarines, valued at 56 billion euros, a move that was expected to support France's active presence in the region. Rubinskiy and Fedorov believe that the creation of *AUKUS*, without due regard for the interests of the Fifth Republic, was on the one hand, a sign of the growing schism within the collective West. On the other hand, this situation sparked speculation about the “contrast between geopolitical ambitions and the real military, industrial, and financial capabilities” of French diplomacy in the IPR [4, p. 10]. The first problem was soon mitigated due to the external consolidation of the Western world against the “Russian threat”, while the second, on the contrary, remained pressing even after the main attention shifted to the Ukrainian conflict. In fact, with the emergence of the new Anglo-Saxon bloc, the Élysée Palace found itself at a crossroads, having to choose between making any serious adjustments to the “axis” project or completely abandoning its stance by joining pro-American formats (the same *AUKUS* and *Quad+*). It was logical to expect specific steps in one direction or another after the presidential election, which took place in May 2022 and ended with the re-election of Macron for a second term.

The issue of France's further positioning in the Indo-Pacific in the context of the “submarine crisis” attracted much attention from both foreign and Russian researchers. In particular, Duchâtel emphasized that the fundamental interests that urged the country's leadership to pay attention to the IPR, primarily the protection of overseas territories and the exclusive economic zone, have by no means disappeared. Thus, Paris needs to maintain an assertive regional strategy [5]. Tertrais and Duclos also suggested various strategies to compensate for Australia's withdrawal from the French “axis,” including closer coordination with Great Britain, Germany, and some Southeast Asian states [6]. Among Russian authors who commented on the situation around

the “submarine crisis,” one can mention not only Rubinskiy and Fedorov [4] but also, for example, Kramnik and Kupriyanov [7], who highlighted the most significant contradictions between the countries participating in the new bloc and the Fifth Republic. However, the overwhelming majority of publications are expert statements made immediately following the crisis and referring to the period of fall 2021 – winter 2022; therefore, they do not cover some shifts that took place in the French regional strategy later. Meanwhile, the timespan that has passed – two years after the establishment of *AUKUS* and more than one year since Macron’s re-election – makes it possible to summarize the intermediate results of the restructuring of France’s foreign policy in the IPR in light of the changed circumstances.

This paper aims to identify the elements of continuity and changes inherent in the French strategy in the IPR after September 2021. For this purpose, it seems necessary to summarize the changes that have occurred over the past period in Paris’s relationships with particular *AUKUS* members, to identify its approaches to building contacts with other regional players, and to define the specifics of France’s military presence in the IPR. Since during this period the Macron administration did not adopt new foundational documents concerning the Indo-Pacific (the current concept was approved in the summer of 2021, with separate additions in February 2022) [source 1], it seems appropriate to focus on a review of the main practical manifestations of the pursued course (significant visits, statements, and decisions), predominantly in the military-political area. Achieving such research objectives requires the use of comparative analysis, enabling the comparison of the Fifth Republic’s recent initiatives in the IPR with its previous priorities.

RENEWING CONTACTS WITH *AUKUS* MEMBERS

According to Tertrais and Duclos, the fractured submarine contract indicates a need for France to revise its regional strategy, particularly in terms of its approach to “penetrating the Anglosphere” and the perceived reliability of Australia as an ally [6]. The revised Indo-Pacif-

ic Strategy of the Fifth Republic reflects a consensus among French leadership on reevaluating the partnership with Canberra that had been established previously [source 1, p. 42]. However, this document also expressed hope for the continuation of bilateral cooperation in the future, at least on an *ad hoc* basis. At the same time, the priority of maintaining “close ties” and, moreover, “strengthening coordination” with the US, including all aspects of the further functioning of *AUKUS*, was set out. As Macron emphasized back in September 2021, it would be erroneous not to draw any conclusions from the crisis that had broken out, but France should not significantly distance itself from the Anglo-Saxon powers of the region [source 2].

Subsequent developments demonstrated Paris’s preference not to sever but to rejuvenate ties with *AUKUS* members, particularly when opportunities arose. This first concerned Australia, where the parliamentary elections held in the spring of 2022 brought the Labor Party, led by Anthony Albanese, to power. Albanese criticized the previous center-right prime minister Scott Morrison for creating a trilateral bloc. Almost a month after the change of power, the new head of the Australian cabinet paid a “reconciliation visit” to Paris, where the parties spoke in favor of starting a new phase of relations [source 3]. A significant outcome of this visit was the agreement for Australia to compensate France with a penalty payment of 555 million euros for the dissolved submarine deal [8]. The French government later clarified that this payment did not mark the end of the submarine discussions, and the prospect of negotiating a new deal, under which Canberra could purchase several submarines out of the originally planned 12, remained open. Moreover, in September 2022, the new Australian Defense Minister Richard Marles visited the naval base in Brest, where his French counterpart Sébastien Lecornu raised the issue of finding additional areas of cooperation beyond the naval sphere as soon as possible [8]. One such area was found in January 2023, when, summarizing the results of a 2+2 bilateral meeting, the parties announced, among other things, the intent to organize joint production of 155-millimeter artillery shells for their subsequent transfer to Ukraine [source 4].

Bachelier and Pajon note that the intensified frequency of meetings was successfully complemented by a number of smaller initiatives that survived the “submarine crisis”: joint maritime patrols in the Pacific, preparation and conduct of naval exercises (“Southern Cross”), and the provision of humanitarian aid to small countries in the region (FRANZ format), etc. [8].

Secondly, there was some warming in the Franco-British dialogue. Paris’s relationships with London were less affected by the establishment of *AUKUS* than those with Canberra. Nevertheless, according to Wright, they were influenced by other negative factors: Brexit, the *COVID-19* pandemic, and the energy crisis [9]. There was a long pause in traditional bilateral summits (the last meeting at British Sandhurst took place in 2018). Nevertheless, as in the Australian case, a change of officials again played a favorable role. The French Foreign Ministry, after the 2022 elections, was led by Catherine Colonna, formerly ambassador to London, while in the UK, the post of Prime Minister was taken by Rishi Sunak, who was more inclined to rapprochement with continental Europe than Boris Johnson and Liz Truss [9]. The window of opportunity was seized in March 2023, when, following negotiations between government delegations in Paris, a declaration on cooperation on a wide range of subjects was signed. With regard to the IPR, the parties declared their intention to provide a coordinated naval presence, meaning regular trips to the region by a mixed aircraft carrier group from their navies [source 5]. It is remarkable that this summit, held after a five-year break, was to be followed by the first foreign visit of a sitting monarch, Charles III, to France, which, however, was prevented by the protests against the pension reform initiated by Macron in March 2023.

Third, during the period in question, the Élysée Palace did not, on the whole, abandon its intention to maintain close relations with the US, though, in fact, they navigated in a more contradictory manner compared to the French-Australian and French-British relations. On the one hand, in October 2021, the leaders of the two countries issued a joint statement in which Washington welcomed France’s growing involvement

in the IPR and promised to provide material and logistical support to the missions of European countries and to more flexibly apply its legislation concerning control over international arms trade (*International Traffic in Arms Regulations*, ITAR) to French arms exports [source 6]. Throughout 2022, Paris made a number of gestures indicating compliance with transatlantic solidarity: it approved without reservations the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO; it increased the supply of arms to Ukraine; and it supported the adoption of a new Strategic Concept of the Alliance, characterizing Russia as a direct threat and China as a systemic challenge to the collective West. During Macron’s state visit to the US at the end of the same year, reminders were heard from both sides that during all moments of crisis in history, Paris and Washington have always been on the same side of the fence, and the current period would not be an exception [source 7].

On the other hand, the relationships between France and the United States were still affected by economic contradictions – in particular, the discontent of the French government with the *Inflation Reduction Act* (IRA) adopted in the United States, which provided unilateral benefits to American companies to the detriment of the European policy of “green transition.” The Indo-Pacific direction itself also caused friction since soon after his visit to China in 2023, Macron made a series of statements that Europe should not be automatically involved in a possible conflict over Taiwan only for reasons of bloc discipline [10]. The wording used by the President – “to be an ally, but not a vassal” – echoed almost word for word the famous Gaullist-Mitterrand maxim of relations between the Fifth Republic and the United States: “Friend, ally, but not subordinate.” The response of the American establishment and media was predictably cold. The opinion of Hadar, who emphasized in the pages of *The National Interest* that Gaullism was “nothing more than wishful thinking” and that Macron himself had more than once overestimated his own strength [11], can be considered quite indicative.

Nevertheless, despite misunderstandings in some areas, French diplomacy over the past has generally managed to bring its relations with par-

particular members of *AUKUS* out of the depths of the “submarine crisis.” According to some analysts, Paris at least demonstrates a reluctance to oppose the bloc in any way and, at most, is testing the ground for joining it in the medium term [9, 12]. For the time being, France, having not received an official invitation, places itself in the “inner circle” of *AUKUS* without formal obligations [12]. This role is not without advantages since it allows the Fifth Republic, while retaining the benefits of cooperation with the Anglo-Saxon powers in the IPR (navy complementarity, joint exercises, sharing intelligence, etc.), to develop partnerships with other players, trying to preserve the original element of diversity in its regional strategy.

ATTEMPTS TO DIVERSIFY PARTNERSHIPS

As noted by Mathieu Duchâtel, an expert at the Montaigne Institute, Paris in its relations with the Indo-Pacific states outside the *AUKUS* currently attempts to combine two approaches: the intention to build a broad dialogue between the EU and the IPR countries (multilateralism) and independent participation in more compact formats with some selected partners (mini-lateralism) [13, pp. 13-14]. The researcher states that the first option is supported by the presidential administration, which still has not given up the dream of Europe’s independent role in the US-China rivalry, while the second alternative, able to bring more tangible results, is no less popular at the departmental level. A series of steps taken by the French side since September 2021 have confirmed the use of both methods while showing some apparent inconsistencies.

One of the main manifestations of the multilateral approach was the so-called Ministerial Forum for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific held in Paris on February 22, 2022. The event took place at the beginning of the scheduled French Presidency of the Council of the EU and brought together, along with European countries, representatives of more than 20 IPR states. Among the main topics of discussion was the logistical connectivity of the IPR, which the EU intends to ensure by developing its “Global Gateway” initiative for investing in the infrastructure of

Asian countries [source 8]. Besides, it was decided to geographically expand the EU Coordinated Maritime Presences program from the Gulf of Aden area to the entire northwestern part of the Indian Ocean, to strengthen multilateral cooperation projects in the field of maritime security (*ESIWA*¹, *CRIMARIO*²), with a special emphasis on maintaining the uninterrupted functioning of trade routes and underwater communications. It is noteworthy that French diplomacy managed to make the abovementioned forum an annual event, and in May 2023, it was held for the second time, already under the Swedish chairmanship. As predicted earlier by the author of the present paper [3], the prospect of European naval exercises in the region continued to be explored: this idea (with possible implementation in 2024) was once again voiced in the context of the Franco-German meeting on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Elysée Treaty.

Another significant episode that confirmed France’s desire to engage in multilateral formats was Macron’s visit to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Bangkok in November 2022. This marked the first time a French president participated in this forum since its inception. Speaking at the plenary session, he emphasized that France considers itself not only a European but also an Indo-Pacific power, boasting the world’s second-largest exclusive economic zone. He expressed France’s interest in maintaining regional and global stability and in intensifying trade and investment exchanges [source 9]. The goal of France’s strategy in the Indo-Pacific region, according to the President, is to achieve a “dynamic equilibrium” among all players’ inter-

¹ *Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia* – an initiative of the European Union for the period of 2020–2024 aimed at deepening political and military contacts with India, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Singapore. It envisages regular inter-ministerial consultations, convergence of military-technical standards and requirements, synchronization of opinions regarding cybersecurity, etc.

² *Critical Maritime Routes Indo-Pacific* – an EU project (launched in 2015, expanded to version II in 2020) to improve the system for exchanging information on incidents along trade routes. It aims to establish communication channels between the crisis centers of the EU countries and the Indian Ocean basin states with the involvement of some external participants (the United States, Japan, and a number of states of Southeast Asia).

ests, arguing that other world order models carry additional universal risks. “We do not believe in hegemony; we do not believe in confrontation,” the French leader declared, advocating against the division into pro-American and pro-Chinese blocs and calling for the re-creation of a “unified world order” [source 9]. From his perspective, the urgency of addressing this challenge is amplified by numerous global issues, including the erosion of the established financial, trade, and economic order, the energy crisis, climate challenges, and Russia’s policies, on which Europe and Asian countries should jointly “exert pressure” [source 9]. The European Union, in Macron’s view, is poised to act as a proactive player, open to multidimensional economic cooperation and the joint provision of regional security, with a strong emphasis on respecting the sovereignty of Indo-Pacific states. It is noteworthy, however, that no specific action plan was outlined to implement this vision, rendering the President’s proposals somewhat speculative and without leading to any noticeable shifts.

Alongside these efforts, French diplomacy continued to engage on a mini-lateral track, aiming to form a coalition with a select group of partners based on closer relationships. The primary focus was on developing a new configuration for the Indo-Pacific “axis,” a concept previously proposed by Macron. While strategic dialogue with India remained a cornerstone of this initiative, the Australian link – despite the resolution of the “submarine crisis” – required replacement following Canberra’s shift to AUKUS. An alternative emerged with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which France also considers part of the Indo-Pacific region. At the end of 2021, an agreement was signed with the UAE for the sale of 80 Rafale fighter jets. Given that New Delhi had previously purchased these aircraft, the emerging triangle has been informally dubbed the “Rafale Forum” in diplomatic circles, according to the Indian press [14]. Moreover, the foundation of this trilateral rapprochement was bolstered by the presence of a French military base in the UAE (since 2009) and the agreement on joint deployment with India (2018). Since 2021, the UAE began participating in the annual Varuna exercises, previously held exclusively on a Franco-Indian

basis, and the meetings of the foreign ministers of the three countries have become more frequent at major international platforms (G20, Shangri-La, the Raisina Dialogue, etc.), which testifies to the viability of the formula found and the underlying convergence of interests. In bringing the Arab side into cooperation, Paris also did not fail to highlight the special status of the dialogue with New Delhi, inviting Prime Minister Narendra Modi as a guest of honor to the national holiday on July 14, 2023. It was simultaneously announced that the purchase of *Rafale* fighters and *Scorpene* submarines would be expanded.

Paris’ list of privileged partners in the IPR was not limited to the two aforementioned countries. In particular, during the period in question, rapprochement with Indonesia also took shape; this country placed an order for the same type of fighters, positioning it as a potential fourth participant in the “Rafale Forum.” Relations between France and Japan continued without disruption. Although Tokyo’s definitive integration into the geopolitical constructs of the Fifth Republic seems less likely due to US influence, on the sidelines of the Group of Seven summit in Hiroshima in 2023, the parties agreed to elevate their military-political contacts to a regular basis.

However, such a pronounced emphasis on military-technical ties in diplomatic rapprochement efforts has its drawbacks. Sporadic contracts for the supply of military equipment alone are insufficient for fostering a robust format of cooperation among the three states, absent a substantial portfolio of projects in other, including non-military, spheres, as well as a stable institutional basis for partnership. Paris maintains close individual contacts with each party: with India, in areas like nuclear and alternative energy (construction of the Jaitapur nuclear power plant, launch of the International Solar Alliance); with the UAE, in fields of direct investment and culture (the Louvre branch in Abu Dhabi). Yet, each area of cooperation is developing independently, without forming a coherent strategy shared by all three states. Furthermore, the disproportionate importance of the trilateral cooperation for the involved countries is clear: while France is keenly interested in the IPR, for its partners, it represents merely one

facet of a broader, multi-vector policy [15]. Consequently, despite the restructuring, the “axis” constructed by Paris turned out to be unstable, one-sided, and thus vulnerable to setbacks.

The use of both multi- and mini-lateral approaches, compounded by the intent to maintain ties with AUKUS members, leaves the true motives behind France’s strategy in the IPR ambiguous. According to Duchâtel, who conducted a survey of the business community, the French line in the IPR lacks clarity: the array of heterogeneous actions and statements does not conclusively indicate whether France aligns its policy with the general Western approach in the region or seeks to assert its autonomy [13, p. 22]. The notion of a “third way” for France and Europe in the region is contentious. Paris’ NATO and EU allies view this as a potential breach of collective solidarity and an attempt to disguise national interests as European ones. These internal European divisions were highlighted during the controversy over Macron’s visit to China. Although the French leader was accompanied by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, symbolizing a united front, Macron’s stance on maintaining a balance between the US and China in a potential conflict was contradicted by other EU representatives, eliciting particularly strong criticism in Germany. Both members of Germany’s ruling coalition and the opposition criticized the French President’s actions as naive, irresponsible, and verging on collusion with the Chinese leadership, especially considering that shortly after Macron’s visit, the Chinese military conducted another exercise in the Taiwan Strait [16]. The visit itself concluded without tangible outcomes, apart from the signing of several business deals, and was eventually deemed a “PR catastrophe” for the Elysée Palace by Godman [17]. This instance illustrates that France’s aspiration for a dialogical approach and leadership in the EU’s Indo-Pacific policy could paradoxically lead to isolation and the perception of France as a “lone rider” (*cavalier seul*).

LIMITED MILITARY CAPABILITY

The French strategy is further weakened by its military capabilities in the region, which are only

partially adequate when compared to the major powers present there. The Fifth Republic maintains a permanent contingent of approximately 7–8 thousand military personnel, 12 ships of various types (including four small *Floréal* frigates and several patrol vessels), 10 fighter aircraft, and a comparable number of helicopters and cargo aircraft [source 1, pp. 26–27]. In recent decades, this contingent has been shaped primarily for minor security functions and to assert France’s presence on its territories amid unresolved territorial disputes³. These forces are hardly equipped to address larger-scale problems; metaphorically, French analysts liken them to “two gendarme cars trying to patrol the territory of the entire country” [13, p. 10]. For various exercises, the aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle*, *Mistral* amphibious assault ships, multi-purpose frigates, and submarines periodically sail across the Indian and Pacific Oceans. However, their departure from the Mediterranean home port of Toulon inevitably takes time; thus, in the face of any external threat, the island bases would initially have to operate without assistance from the mainland.

This lack of preparedness was highlighted in a special report by the French Senate on the interim results of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, issued in January 2023. The report examines the vulnerabilities of the overseas contingent both quantitatively and qualitatively [source 10]. It also points out the aging infrastructure in almost all areas, including ship and aircraft repair, ammunition storage, communication systems reliability, and living conditions of military personnel. Administrative delays and budget cuts further postpone the introduction of new equipment: the replacement of the *Puma* multirole helicopters with the newer *H225M* version is not scheduled until 2026, the outdated *Fennec* helicopters are to be replaced by the more advanced *Guépard* only by 2032, and no suitable replacement has been found for the Spanish-Indonesian CASA CN-235 light military transport aircraft, which have been in operational service with the French Army for about 40

³ With Comoros over the ownership of Mayotte; with Madagascar and Mozambique over the Scattered Islands in the Indian Ocean; with Vanuatu over part of the New Caledonia archipelago; with local independence advocates over the status of New Caledonia itself

years. The report stresses that a temporary gap in the maritime component of the military presence was inevitable since the *Auguste Bénébig* patrol boats began service only after their predecessors, the P400 series, had been completely retired. The new *d'Entrecasteaux*-type support ships also have a number of disadvantages compared to the older *Champlain (BATRAL)*, notably the absence of amphibious functionality. Moreover, the overseas territories have been almost overlooked in the current land equipment development plan, *Scorpion*, even though there is a pressing need for renewing the fleet of trucks and the near-total lack of combat systems (*VBCI 2*, *Griffon*, etc.) on the islands. Bearing these issues in mind, the senators have called for increased attention to the Indo-Pacific forces in the next military planning law, aiming at least to avoid further cuts and delays. Great hopes are invested in inter-European cooperation – specifically, the *EPC* corvette, designed under the auspices of *PESCO*, is anticipated to eventually replace the aging *Floréal* frigates.

The final version of the law, adopted by both chambers of the French parliament in July 2023, reflects that many of the Senate report's observations were taken into account. It is slated to allocate 13 billion euros for the defense of overseas departments up to 2030 – double the investment earmarked for military space technologies or the development of unmanned vehicles [source 11]. The plan includes a thorough overhaul of the fleet with all the necessary equipment, enhancement of intelligence capabilities, and refinement of the troop management system. However, it is not foreseen to significantly increase the military contingent in the IPR, as modernization is aimed at improving quality rather than quantity, and the counts of patrol boats and small frigates, etc., are to remain constant. This decision, influenced by a reluctance to commit to higher spending, was not swayed even by the establishment of *AUKUS* or increased Chinese naval activities. The only increase will be in landing ships, as parliamentary amendments backed by the Ministry of Defense recommend adding four more ships to the improved *BATRAL* series. Additionally, the amendment from the official parliamentary rapporteur, Jean-Michel Jacques, includes a provision to assess the financial feasibility of replacing the air-

craft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* with not one but two ships of a similar class.

Nevertheless, all of the proposed measures are aimed at medium to long-term implementation, while in the near future, the defense of island possessions will need to be reinforced through the established approach of forming partnerships with neighbors. As Chief of the General Staff Thierry Burkhard clarified during the Senate hearings in May 2023, amidst the tensions in the IPR, the French military leadership deems an invasion of its overseas territories unlikely [source 12]. Consequently, with countries that could theoretically offer effective support in defending French possessions (the USA, Japan, Australia, and India), discussions tend to focus on other issues: safeguarding transport communications, curbing illegal activities within the exclusive economic zone, and mitigating the impacts of natural disasters. Typically, these dialogues occur without the issuance of any public or explicit promises of more significant guarantees. The exception is the biennial multilateral exercise “Southern Cross,” where the cooperation of the fleet, army, and aviation is meticulously orchestrated through various landing methods to address a hypothetical complex security crisis in the South Pacific [source 13].

CONCLUSION

The foregoing analysis suggests that following the establishment of *AUKUS*, the Fifth Republic's Indo-Pacific strategy largely maintains its previous course, with no fundamental shifts. Firstly, the advent of the new bloc and the temporary rift with Australia has not deterred French leadership from maintaining an active stance and seeking involvement in regional developments. This engagement, beyond mere statements, has manifested in the swift re-establishment of relations with Anglo-Saxon nations, President Macron's frequent visits to the IPR (including the APEC summit in November 2022 and trips to New Caledonia, Vanuatu, and Papua New Guinea in July 2023), and the advancement of military-political and military-technical cooperation with a variety of states. During the period in question, France also successfully averted any territorial losses, as evidenced by the outcome of the New Caledo-

nian referendum in December 2021⁴ – which was favorable for the metropolis despite a boycott by independence advocates – and the stagnated talks concerning the status of the Scattered Islands in the Indian Ocean. Secondly, the mini-lateral format previously envisioned by France – the “axis” – has not been abandoned or fundamentally rethought, even though Canberra has been replaced by Abu Dhabi alongside Paris and New Delhi, all significant purchasers of French arms. However, in practice, this arrangement can hardly be deemed stable due to the absence of any substantive foundation. Thirdly, the issues plaguing France’s IPR policy prior to September 2021, including inadequate force projection capabilities

and a lack of coherent strategy, persist on the agenda. From the Elysée Palace’s perspective, there remains a commitment to Westerly solidarity (as demonstrated by the rapid restoration of dialogue with each *AUKUS* member) while concurrently proposing a “third way” between the United States and China, which potentially risks undermining such unity. This ambivalence reflects the core internal tension in France’s foreign policy: the challenge of reconciling its traditional great-power mindset with its current middle-power status, wary of over-distancing from the EU and NATO. In assessing the future of Paris’ Indo-Pacific strategy, the primary expectation up to the end of Macron’s presidency is for its continuation in the current vein. Nonetheless, in the face of escalating US-China tensions, a strategic pivot towards Washington, in contrast to the former rhetoric, may well prove to be a possible shift.

⁴ The final of three referendums on New Caledonia’s self-determination promised by the central authorities under the 1998 Nouméa Accord. The two previous votes were held in 2018 and 2020, also ending in defeat for supporters of independence.

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