



BALANCING CHINA IN THE INDO-PACIFIC:

FRANCE JOINS HANDS WITH - INDIA AND AUSTRALIA

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Balancing China's unilateral authoritarian outreach is increasingly becoming a priority for democratic powers. Among European powers, France has taken the lead in shoring up defenses against China. France is also an Indo-Pacific power, and Paris has now joined hands with India and Australia to advance a trilateral that appears to be balancing out China.

Introduction

On September 09, 2020, India, France, and Australia launched a trilateral dialogue with the aim of boosting cooperation to ensure a “peaceful, secure, prosperous and rules-based Indo-Pacific.”¹ The meeting marked the formal entrance of a leading European power, France, into an Indo-Pacific orbit and represents the first step of a major, cross-continent effort to question and check China’s autocracy in the region. As such, it may potentially have considerable ramifications, especially if other European powers are encouraged to engage in similar efforts.

Described as “outcome-oriented”, the summit included an exchange of views on priorities and mutual challenges and exploration of possible avenues for practical cooperation, particularly in

the maritime domain and in promoting global commons. The foreign ministers of India, France, and Australia also reportedly devised strategies to enhance their future collaboration on regional and multilateral platforms.² The dialogue is launched at a time when China’s conduct of its foreign policy is becoming a key source of concern for the states in the Indo-Pacific region, and when distrust of China internationally has reached new levels following its handling of the outbreak of the pandemic. Moreover, Beijing’s military assertiveness on the India-China border and in the East China Sea has dented its image as a responsible power in the Indo-Pacific region. Although there are no reports that the discussion centered on, or even included, China, the potential, geopolitical implications of the trilateral dialogue are hardly lost on Beijing.

What Does Beijing Think of India-France-Australia Trilateral?

As of yet, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has made no exclusive official comments on the trilateral.³ With the grouping still being in its infant stages, Beijing will likely wait to see how the trilateral engages in the region, before issuing any statement. Yet, the tone of the comments in Chinese state-sponsored media outlets gives an indication of Beijing's concern.

China-India relations have been complicated by India's rise as an Indo-Pacific power in its own right, which has resulted in a much more active foreign policy.

The Global Times, for example, has been openly critical of France's stance towards the Indo-Pacific – or what it deems Paris's attempts “to be part of an Indo-Pacific strategy”.⁴ This since French President Emmanuel Macron first presented the outline of a New Delhi-Paris-Canberra axis in a much-debated speech in Sydney in 2018.⁵ The speech articulated France's Indo-Pacific strategy as a “holistic response” to challenges in the region and foreshadowed Paris' intentions to play a growing role as a stabilizing and balancing power in the region.⁶ In a scathing article entitled “Macron's opportunistic show in Indo-Pacific”, the Global Times called Macron's remarks “baffling,” his strategy “overestimated,” and a last grab of a declining power to wield influence.⁷ It further dismissed France's ability to play a crucial political or military role, especially at a time when Beijing was steadily improving ties with India and Japan, and already shared a strong trade link with Australia. Today though, the regional context is radically different.

The Deterioration of China-India Relations

What was once a developing relationship between China and India has been dramatically impaired by Beijing's recent incursions at the Line of Actual Control (LAC). The space for diplomatic talks is quickly dwindling, and an armed conflict can no longer be ruled out. The recent Foreign Ministers' meeting on the margins of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Moscow on September 10, 2020⁸ yielded no tangible results and made clear that the normalization of ties will be decidedly delicate.

Fundamentally, China-India relations have been complicated by India's rise as an Indo-Pacific power in its own right, which has resulted in a much more active foreign policy. Since Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ascent to power in 2014, there has been a significant shift in India's external outlook, its global ambitions and its adherence to the non-alignment principle.⁹ In 2015, Prime Minister Modi emphasized India's intention to position itself as a global leader, rather than merely acting as a balancing power.¹⁰ Later that year, S. Jaishankar (who was then, India's Foreign Minister) declared India's ambition to become a “leading power” at a lecture in Singapore.¹¹ Accordingly, India has pursued diplomatic and defense initiatives that seek to project it as a “purposeful, pragmatic, and proactive” power which is increasingly seeking deeper engagements in the Indo-Pacific.¹² India's participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) alongside the U.S., Australia and Japan, its increased unilateral engagement in the region (that is, participation in groupings – like trilaterals – of strategically aligned states), its diplomacy towards East and Southeast Asia and toward the littoral states of the Indian Ocean is part of this new transformation.

At the same time, New Delhi is also developing bilateral, formal defense relations. In June 2020, India and Australia signed a landmark defense arrangement deal allowing mutual access to each other's military bases.¹³ On September 09, 2020,

India and Japan finalized the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) which enables reciprocal access to supplies and services, thus simplifying military logistics;¹⁴ India and U.S. already share a similar defense logistics agreement as part of an expansive security partnership, and have recently (as of September 2020) agreed to strengthen their bilateral dialogue on defense technology cooperation.¹⁵ In light of India's increased agency in the Indo-Pacific, China is naturally inclined to perceive of India as an emerging threat or concern to its regional and global primacy ambitions. Chinese national security experts and scholars view India's unexpectedly swift – and historically uncharacteristic -- adoption of an Indo-Pacific strategy and its act of balancing between the United States and China as a challenge to Beijing's rising power.¹⁶

The Deterioration of China-Australia Relations

China's ties with Australia too are precariously on the edge. Since Canberra pushed for an impartial, independent investigation into the origins and spread of Covid-19,¹⁷ tensions have flared up and ties have plummeted to an all-time low. Beijing retaliated by targeting Australian exports (China is Australia's biggest export market and trade partner), essentially leveraging Canberra's immense trade dependence at a time when the Covid-19-induced recession makes their trade relationship critical. Issues like China's anti-dumping probe¹⁸ and 80 percent tariffs¹⁹ on Australian barley; the detainment of an Australian news anchor on national security grounds;²⁰ the questioning and forced evacuation²¹ of two journalists, from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and the Financial Review, has frozen diplomatic ties.

In Australia, there is a growing political consensus that the economic dependence on China must be reduced as the relation is expected to degrade. It is now recognized that the differences are too deep, and that cyber security, coercive foreign influence, human rights, and flashpoints like the South and East China Seas, Hong Kong, and Taiwan inevitably

drive Canberra and Beijing apart.²²

The dramatic shift in Australia's China policy has drawn the ire of China.

Australia's economic dependence on China has made it vulnerable to Chinese retaliation. Indeed, Canberra has become a showcase of the influence that the Chinese government can wield - reports of Chinese diplomats and businesses attempting to influence Australia's domestic politics abound.²³ In recognition of the security threat that China poses to Australia and to the region at large, Prime Minister Scott Morrison has begun to push for deeper defense and economic partnerships with key powers in Asia. These include India, Japan, Indonesia, and Vietnam.²⁴ A "Pacific Step-up" is also part of the new foreign policy that Australia has devised in response to the Chinese threat.²⁵

The dramatic shift in Australia's China policy has drawn the ire of China. Chinese media and state authorities express their "displeasure" and convey that it would be in Australia's own best interest to remain economically and politically aligned with Beijing. Furthermore, China has threatened Australia with dire economic consequences if it were to join "America's China-bashing bandwagon".²⁶ The threats include a boycott on Australian products and of Australia as a destination for Chinese students and tourists.²⁷

France's Stake in the Indo-Pacific

In this new political context, France's presence in the Pacific acquires an acute importance for both Canberra and Beijing, albeit for different reasons. Since President Emmanuel Macron assumed power in 2017, France has become the most vocal, European critic of China. The fact that France is also a Pacific power makes this especially troubling from the point of view of China.

The Indo-Pacific is home to over 1.5 million French citizens and Paris maintains a significant military presence in the region. Over the past two decades, France has also made an effort to reassert itself in the (Indo)-Pacific and has sought to improve its standing in the region, which had been impaired by its nuclear tests and by its refusal to acquiesce to independence demands. Apart from the India-France-Australia trilateral, France has also sought deeper security ties with Asian partners like Japan,²⁸ and deployed an aircraft carrier to the South China Sea for freedom of navigation operations.²⁹ In this sense, Paris has attempted to revive a policy of grandeur and exert its great power ambitions by taking up a leadership mantle in the Indo-Pacific. The area is also essential to the country's trade, with a massive 93 percent of its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) lying within the Indo-Pacific's maritime territory. France has thus both economic and military-strategic reasons to be an active player in regional politics. The determination of France to be a "stabilizing" and "balancing" power in the Indo-Pacific inevitably raises the specter of a geostrategic rivalry with China.

The desire to balance or offset Beijing's power is spurring multiple international and regional platforms.

While France under President Macron has increasingly taken a strong stance towards China, the French public has become wary of China's growing economic power and technological dominance.³⁰ In March 2019, Emmanuel Macron declared that the "time of European naïveté" towards China had come to an end and that Beijing would no longer be allowed to take advantage of Europe's divisions and of what so far had been the European Union's uncoordinated stance toward China.³¹ The French president's comments followed on a meeting of 27 European heads of state and government at which China was officially singled out as the EU's

"systemic rival".³² The EU meeting signaled that there is a growing European consensus that China poses a security threat, and that its protectionist regulations that restrict European investments need to be countered.

Under the stress caused by the pandemic and with an intensifying trade war between the United States and China, Macron has scaled up his rhetoric against China. In April 2020, Macron questioned China's handling and transparency over the pandemic;³³ in July 2020, Paris renewed its calls for an independent, international investigation into China's treatment of the Uyghur minority.³⁴ In August 2020, France "curbed" (effectively imposing a de facto ban) Huawei from supplying 5G equipment, with the pronounced aim of ensuring that French telecom networks are free of Huawei tech by 2028.³⁵ Clearly, Paris is determined to lead a concerted European charge against China. In light of this, the emerging axis of Paris-Canberra and New Delhi is bound to be of concern for Beijing.

Balancing China: A European Priority

Although the idea of the trilateral was first conceived in 2018, the fact that the inaugural meeting took place at a time when China is facing wide international criticism and is enveloped in disputes with India and Australia clearly suggests that the axis aspires to counter Chinese "hegemony". Indeed, President Macron made a veiled reference to the Chinese power as a hegemonic power. The Chinese government was quick to dismiss the accusations as "groundless".³⁶

Nonetheless, the desire to balance or offset Beijing's power is spurring multiple international and regional platforms of which the Australia-Japan-India trilateral is one of the most recent. France's inclusion into the fold opens possibilities for an expansion of such dialogues, and (perhaps) in due time, the creation of a much more expansive and inclusive platform that can viably act as a balance to China's rising power. As tensions in the Indo-Pacific escalate, and the prospects of "normalizing" ties between the

U.S. and China continue to diminish at present no matter who comes to power in White House after the November election in the United States, Beijing will look towards expanding and cementing its own sphere of influence. Towards this end, China will seek to create a coalition including Russia, Pakistan, Iran and other Eurasian and African countries. It will thus become increasingly important for democratic states to strengthen their own multilateral partnerships and build a consortium of democratic powers in the region and beyond to withstand Beijing's ever-growing influence.

One key area of cooperation will likely be the Indian Ocean region. As China seeks to realize its global power ambitions, it has significantly enhanced its engagements in the Indian Ocean through not only its “debt-trap diplomacy”, predominately associated with projects connected to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),³⁷ but also a growing and constant naval presence.³⁸ This will likely be a matter of critical concern for the trilateral states, all of whom have economic and security interests to protect, such as ensuring the safety of maritime lanes in the Indian Ocean. As China becomes more aggressive in claiming its interests in the region, cooperation in the maritime domain which has been announced as a matter of joint interest for the three countries will undoubtedly become a priority.³⁹

For China, France's engagement with India and Australia is inevitably an expression of its deteriorating relationship with Europe.⁴⁰ China has recently engaged in an effort to salvage ties, with the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi embarking on a “damage control” trip to Europe, during which he met with President Emmanuel Macron.⁴¹ However, so far, the Chinese effort has not paid off.⁴² While Paris is engaging with Canberra and New Delhi to balance Beijing, Berlin is also pivoting to the Indo-Pacific, with the German government releasing its own Indo-Pacific strategy only a few days after Yi's visit.⁴³ The document not only presents a promise of greater engagement in Asia, but also a strong (yet implicit) censure of China's military and economic ambitions in the region. For instance, Germany's Indo-Pacific strategy made 46 thinly veiled references

to China's proliferating aggressiveness that challenges the internationally embedded rules-based order and attempts to unilaterally change the status-quo in the region causing insecurity and instability.

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In response, the Global Times of China defended that there was very little Germany could do to influence the Indo-Pacific affairs; it was said to lack both “hard power and a will” to intervene and was allegedly merely seeking to gain economic advantages from the materially motivated move.⁴⁴ Indeed, in practice, there is very little, if anything, that Germany can do to make a difference: unlike France, Germany has no physical presence in the Indo-Pacific. Yet, the Indo-Pacific “ambitions” of Berlin are nonetheless politically and symbolically important insofar as they are an expression of the growing European determination to oppose Chinese hegemony.

Germany's policy echoes that of France as it refrains from explicitly backing U.S. strategy that essentially seeks to boldly advance Washington's own interests in containing China,⁴⁵ and instead aspires to promote a diverse set of alliances in the region.⁴⁶ In its 68-page document, Berlin presents a holistic approach to the region underpinned by policies related to developmental aid, defense diplomacy, multilateralism, and military cooperation. The promise of a greater engagement with Asia is accompanied by a realization of persisting global sensitivities regarding a rising German power. As a result, Germany's strategy focuses on increased engagement with Indo-Pacific based multilateral forums, especially those led by ASEAN. Rather than getting embroiled in the great power contestation between China and the U.S. – which continues to intensify under the U.S.' increasingly forceful Indo-

Pacific approach and China's mounting adventurism – Germany advocates for a diversifying partnerships and moving towards a multilateral framework in the image of the European Union. This aligns with the strategic approaches of India, Australia, Japan, and that of the ASEAN countries as well. This strategy would enhance security in the Indo-Pacific, as it reinforces that the Indo-Pacific is not exclusively a theater of the U.S.-China great power rivalry, and shows that Beijing's insistent claim that China is being shut out by regional powers because these are under the undue influence of the United States is mistaken.

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Will the India-France-Australia Trilateral Make a Difference?

In terms of practical cooperation, there remain multiple avenues in which a stronger bilateral collaboration as well as a tripartite cooperation between India, France, and Australia can contribute to independent development and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. Firstly, there will be economic benefits of the cooperation. The trilateral presents ample opportunities for collaboration in economic and trade strategies that aim to reduce dependence on China. China's recent hostilities toward Australia have prompted Canberra to seriously consider a “China + One” strategy in which it explores new, emerging and growing markets for its exports in order to reduce its reliance on Beijing. To this end, it has already launched a Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) alongside India and Japan with the aim of establishing an alternate value chain network.⁴⁷ Here, the trilateral can prove to be an additional route towards realizing Canberra's goals.

India's focus on manufacturing, its young and skilled

population, its rapidly growing and modernizing market make the state a theatre of opportunity for both countries economically. With France too, India shares a complementary economy and an eagerness to harness the full potential of their bilateral trade ties, particularly in the defense manufacturing sector. President Macron has previously expressed his desire to replace the United Kingdom as India's “gateway” to Europe and foster an expansion of Franco-Indian economic links;⁴⁸ the trilateral will allow for a sharper focus in this respect, creating a three-way economic synergy between the partners.

Also, defense will be a key area for a hands-on association particularly with the trilateral's central focus on the security architecture in the Indo-Pacific and its commitment to a rules-based regional order. For New Delhi, Paris is one of its “most trusted defense partners”.⁴⁹ India and Australia too share well-instituted defense cooperation links through regular military exercises, evolving defense technology cooperation and broader professional and operational coordination. Yet, a lack of coordination of their priorities as well as capabilities has hindered a full realization of their full potential.⁵⁰

Moving forward, the trilateral framework can allow for a more acute emphasis in this area. Paris, New Delhi and Canberra can not only initiate trilateral naval exercises in the Indian Ocean (and perhaps even in the South China Seas in concert with states like Vietnam), but also accelerate their connections in areas like defense manufacturing, defense technologies and intelligence-sharing. Under the India-France-Australia umbrella, all three states stand to explore opportunities in technology-sharing as well as a tripartite agreement on joint production and development of radar systems and armored vehicles. Despite its complex defense procurement system, India is the world's second-largest market for international arms exports.⁵¹ Its gradual opening up of its defense industry for limited participation by new private sector vendors (as under the Defense Acquisitions Procedures 2020),⁵² add further impetus to collaboration in this area under the trilateral.

At the same time, all three partners must look

towards expanding the scope of their security ties by improving interoperability under the trilateral. This could potentially emerge from coordinated maritime and humanitarian operations as well as regular joint army and naval trainings in the region. This will not only facilitate an understanding of their mutual individual capabilities, but also foster conditions that nurture further cooperation in the region. Over time, the partners can also explore establishing a trilateral access to their key bases in the region with the aim of strengthening their military network in the Indo-Pacific. The trilateral also offers a platform for three countries to institutionalize their consultations at a high governmental level and devise coordination strategies in regional institutions and platforms.

One such realm of cooperation could be the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC). All three countries are already actively involved in the IORA (India and Australia as full members while France as a dialogue partner), an inter-governmental organization that aims to “strengthen regional cooperation and sustainable development”. It further focuses on areas like maritime security, facilitating trade and investment, disaster risk response, fisheries management, nurturing a blue economy, advancing tourism and cultural exchanges, women’s economic empowerment and technology development.⁵³

Moving forward, strategic cooperation under the aegis of the trilateral can help further individual national interests of Paris, Canberra and New Delhi. Such a strategic understanding has, to some extent, already proved advantageous. For instance, on a bilateral level, France extended India support for its entry into the IOC – a goal that was realized when India joined the IOC in March 2020 as an observer.⁵⁴ In turn, India agreed to support France’s candidature as a full-fledged IORA member; with IORA comprising former colonial French-speaking territories, France had faced opposition to India’s full inclusion. India’s own close ties to Seychelles and Madagascar can help France in this regard.

As Australia’s own definition of the Indo-Pacific expands to include the western maritime region

of the Indian Ocean – as it is bound to amidst changing perceptions of its partners and China’s rising geopolitical contestation in the realm – it is a candidate to becoming another key observer state/dialogue partner in the IOC forum.⁵⁵

“The trilateral can form a tool for engaging more deeply and comprehensively with key bodies like the ASEAN Regional Forum as well as the slowly shaping ‘Quad Plus’ mechanism.”

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has quickly gained traction as a theatre of geopolitical competition and strategically vital to China (especially under its Belt and Road Initiative), the U.S., France and India.⁵⁶ As the Indo-Pacific concept becomes ubiquitous and a priority, engagement in the IOR will only increase; the Paris-Canberra-New Delhi axis can thus act as a pan-IOR security mechanism with a broad scope of cooperation.

At the same time, the India-France-Australia trilateral can also look towards aligning their visions for the IOR and the Indo-Pacific at large. This could be through a joint statement outlining their guiding principles, which could then underpin their strategic cooperation and planned ventures in the region. In particular, the trilateral can form a tool for engaging more deeply and comprehensively with key bodies like the ASEAN Regional Forum as well as the slowly shaping “Quad Plus” mechanism - an extension of the Quad involving Indo-Pacific powers like South Korea, Vietnam, and New Zealand. The trilateral could thus become a vehicle for the three states to maximize their regional engagement through a broadly oriented focus on infrastructure building, connectivity initiatives, economic gambits, military exercises, and politico-diplomatic enterprises.

Conclusion

The inclusion of France provides the Indo-Pacific political grouping with more credibility, and could make it more attractive for smaller Asian states that have been hesitant to enter any Indo-Pacific alliance that does not involve China, as they fear being caught in the U.S.-China rivalry. At a time when Washington and Beijing are increasingly at loggerheads, the Canberra-Paris-New Delhi axis offers a setting that is free of American and Chinese interference, where issues that are of joint concern not only for India, Australia, and France, but also for the other countries in the Indo-Pacific can be addressed. It will be especially useful for the countries of the Indo-Pacific that France brings with it a staunch commitment to a rules-based international order.

In terms of practical cooperation, there are multiple avenues in which a stronger bilateral collaboration as well as a tripartite cooperation between India, France, and Australia will contribute to independent development and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

Ultimately, the trilateral of France, India, and Australia is an expression of the three countries' determination to balance China and is a powerful reminder to China that its ambitions to establish dominance in the Indo-Pacific will henceforth be met with cross-continental counter-measures. ■

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India remains a key part of the territory, Australia has a reduced focus on the waters encircling the Persian Gulf and those bordering the coast of Africa – which forms the IOC’s primary domain. See *Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper: Opportunity Security Strength* (Canberra: Australian Government, 2017), <https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/minisite/2017-foreign-policy-white-paper/fpwhitepaper/pdf/2017-foreign-policy-white-paper.pdf> For an argument on why Australia must expand its horizons and treat the region as one instead of dividing it, see David Brewster, “Australia can’t continue to divide the Indian Ocean in two,” *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, February 19, 2020, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/australia-can-t-continue-divide-indian-ocean-two>.

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