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By Emanuele Ballestracci

SYNOPSIS

In recent years, France has emerged as the European Union's leading actor in the Indo-Pacific, leveraging its territorial presence in the region. However, rising pro-independence movements in its overseas territories may pose long-term challenges to both Paris' and Brussels' strategic ambitions.

COMMENTARY

Europe's strategic awareness of the Indo-Pacific has steadily grown, particularly following the US pivot to Asia. This interest has since translated into formal strategies at both the EU and national levels. Countries like France, the [Netherlands](#), [Germany](#), the [Czech Republic](#), and [Lithuania](#) have adopted dedicated Indo-Pacific strategies, while [Italy](#) is currently debating the issue in Parliament. Among them, France stands out for both its political will and exceptional capacity to project itself in the region, most recently demonstrated by French President Emmanuel Macron's tour of Southeast Asia.

[France's Indo-Pacific Strategy](#), launched in 2018, outlines Paris' core interests and instruments for regional engagement. It rests on four pillars: defence and security, particularly maritime security and freedom of navigation; economic cooperation and enhanced connectivity; a commitment to multilateralism and the rule of law; and environmental governance.

France considers itself a resident power in the region, being the only EU member state with [sovereign territories](#) in the Indo-Pacific: Mayotte, La Réunion, the Scattered Islands, and the French Southern and Antarctic Territories in the Indian Ocean; and New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, French Polynesia, and Clipperton Island in the Pacific. These territories are home to more than 1.6 million French citizens and enable

a [substantial military presence](#) of 7,000 troops: 4,100 in the Indian Ocean and 2,900 in the Pacific.

Furthermore, Paris currently aims to expand its regional military footprint through multilateral and bilateral efforts, as outlined in its Strategy. It participates in major joint exercises such as [RIMPAC](#), [Talisman Sabre](#), and [Balikatan](#), while also leading its own, including [La Pérouse](#) and [Croix du Sud](#). Additionally, it conducts operational missions in the South China Sea, notably deploying the [Charles de Gaulle](#) aircraft carrier. In recent years, France has also deepened defence ties with key regional players, including [India](#), [Japan](#), and the [Philippines](#).

Projecting France, Advancing Europe

President Macron's most recent tour to Vietnam, Indonesia, and Singapore reaffirmed France's regional commitment and its role as a strategic partner. The visit put into practice all four pillars of France's Indo-Pacific Strategy, underscoring its consistency in regional engagement. This diplomatic effort is not one-off: since 2018, Macron has visited Australia, India, Japan, Thailand (for the 2022 APEC Summit), and, most recently, Madagascar in April 2025, demonstrating sustained strategic interest.

His [speeches](#) during the recent Southeast Asian tour carried added weight amid the current erosion of the rules-based international order and the rising assertiveness of both China and the United States. Macron called for restoring multilateralism and international law as the foundation of global affairs. This framing – centred on respect for sovereignty, rejection of power politics, equality among states, and the sanctity of borders – stood in contrast to the narratives of the two superpowers. In doing so, Paris seeks to position itself as a “balancing power,” promoting both itself and the European Union as reliable and significant regional partners.

As often in EU external relations, France has advanced not only its national agenda but also the European one, in line with its long-standing tradition of acting as the “motor” of EU foreign policy. This dual commitment is reflected in France's support for the [Common Foreign and Security Policy \(CFSP\)](#) and its influence over key policy areas, most notably the EU's approach to [Africa](#) and the [Balkans](#).

French engagement in the Indo-Pacific must thus be seen within the broader framework of EU regional efforts, in which Paris plays a pivotal role. Brussels has increased its diplomatic and economic outreach in recent years, formalised through the [EU's 2021 Indo-Pacific Strategy](#). Yet, despite the EU's normative and economic influence, its instruments remain limited, particularly in traditional security, and many regional countries continue to struggle to perceive the EU as a meaningful geopolitical actor.

In this context, the active involvement of member states is critical to achieving the EU's strategic goals. In the Indo-Pacific, France is the de facto operational and political leader of the European effort to expand its presence and influence.

The Independence Question: A Long-term Strategic Risk

Despite its current momentum, France's Indo-Pacific presence is not without

vulnerabilities. In New Caledonia and French Polynesia, long-standing pro-independence movements increasingly challenge the legitimacy and continuity of French sovereignty.

This pressure is especially acute in New Caledonia. Following [major protests in May 2024](#), the island entered a phase of constitutional reform negotiations. The [latest proposal](#) by French Minister for Overseas Territories Manuel Valls envisions a delegation of sovereignty framed as “shared sovereignty with France” and an internationally agreed-upon status, all within the bounds of the French Constitution.

Under this arrangement, sovereign powers would be formally transferred to New Caledonia, only to be immediately and mandatorily delegated back to France. The proposal also includes provisions for dual Caledonian and French citizenship, alongside other substantial legal concessions. Further negotiations are scheduled to resume at the end of June 2025.

Meanwhile, in May 2023, the pro-independence Tavini Huiraatira party, led by Moetai Brotherson, [won an absolute majority](#) in the Assembly of French Polynesia, securing 38 of 57 seats. This gives the party a clear mandate to govern and, over time, to press for greater autonomy or independence. While not an imminent objective, it remains a long-term goal. Should independence be pursued, the quality of future relations with France will depend heavily on Paris’ openness to dialogue and flexibility in negotiations.

A peculiar case is that of Mayotte, where French sovereignty is not contested by the local population but rather by the neighbouring [Union of Comoros](#). Most of the people of Mayotte, the Mahorais, have consistently expressed a strong desire to remain part of France, as evidenced by the 2009 referendum in which 95.2 per cent of voters supported the island’s transformation into a French overseas department. Paris’ commitment to addressing Mayotte’s development challenges is also reaching new heights, exemplified by a [€3.2 billion investment plan](#) currently under discussion. Nonetheless, the broader trend suggests mounting pressure on Paris to reconsider the extent of its control over its *Collectivités d’Outre-Mer* (overseas territories).

These dynamics may undermine France’s long-term diplomatic, military, and economic engagement in the Indo-Pacific. The eventual loss of these territories would directly reduce France’s exclusive economic zone – currently the second largest in the world, thanks to its overseas holdings – and weaken its position as a regional security provider. Ultimately, Paris’ capability to act as a credible long-term Indo-Pacific power could be diminished, with broader consequences for the EU’s regional presence and reliability.

Conclusion

France remains the EU’s most capable and engaged actor in the Indo-Pacific, thanks to its territorial footprint, strategic assets, and consistent diplomacy. However, the rise of pro-independence sentiment in its overseas territories introduces a long-term vulnerability that must not be overlooked. This dynamic may also undermine the EU’s broader engagement in the region, given France’s pivotal role as the only resident

power and the limited capacity of other member states – and of Brussels itself – to project influence on a comparable scale.

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