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Paco Milhiet



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SYNOPSIS

President Emmanuel Macron's May 2025 six-day tour of Vietnam and Indonesia as well as Singapore, where he also delivered the first keynote address by a European head of state at the Shangri-La Dialogue, marks a strategic recalibration, placing Southeast Asia at the centre of France's Indo-Pacific strategy. Amid growing Sino-American rivalry and regional uncertainty, Macron's tour was intended to reinforce France's credibility, legitimacy and inclusive role as a key strategic actor.

COMMENTARY

Since the implementation of an [Indo-Pacific strategy](#) in 2018, France has primarily relied on two pillars to support its ambitions in the region: (1) the exercise of sovereignty in its overseas territories in the Indian Ocean ([Réunion](#), [Mayotte](#), the [French Southern and Antarctic Lands](#)) and the Pacific ([New Caledonia](#), [Wallis and Futuna](#), [French Polynesia](#), [Clipperton](#)) and (2) the country's key bilateral partnerships, notably with [India](#), the [United States](#) and [Japan](#). However, ongoing geopolitical reconfigurations in the region have prompted Paris to elevate the strategic role of Southeast Asia within its broader regional framework.

President Emmanuel Macron's visits to Hanoi (26–27 May), Jakarta (May 28) and Singapore (29–30 May) signal a deliberate intensification of French engagement in the region. Rather than treating Southeast Asia as a [secondary arena](#), France is reframing the region as a strategic focal point of its Indo-Pacific strategy. This dual approach, both bilateral and multilateral, allows France to advance economic and political interests while reinforcing its broader regional engagement as a middle power committed to multilateralism, respect for sovereignty and strategic autonomy.

Vietnam, Indonesia, Singapore: Complementary Partnerships

The three-nation itinerary reflected France's intent to diversify its partnerships and leverage complementarities across the region: shared history and economic partnership with Vietnam; strategic depth and international ambitions with Indonesia; digital connectivity and technological excellence with Singapore.

In **Vietnam**, [longstanding](#) historical ties and economic synergy were reinforced through substantial deals including a headline-grabbing €7 billion agreement for the sale of 20 Airbus A330-900s to [VietJet](#). Plans for a new deep-water terminal by [CMA-CGM](#) and a [Sanofi](#) vaccine facility were also unveiled. In total, contracts worth €9 billion were announced, positioning France as a reliable partner in Vietnam's modernisation even as the country faces significant impacts from American tariffs and navigates the predominant economic influence of China.

In **Indonesia**, the relationship is maturing from a defence-centric focus – illustrated by the €8 billion sale of [42 Rafale](#) jets in 2022 – to a broader political dialogue. During President Macron's visit, [a joint declaration](#) between the two countries was issued, covering multiple domains such as the environment, energy transition and cultural collaboration. On the Palestinian issue, both the French and Indonesian presidents [called](#) for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and reaffirmed their support for a two-state solution.

Singapore was probably the most significant stop of the trip. Celebrating 60 years of diplomatic relations, France and Singapore [upgraded](#) their ties to a *Comprehensive Strategic Partnership* (CSP) – the first such agreement between the city-state and a European power. The CSP covers cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, green finance, and digital transition. [The Joint Year of Sustainability](#), co-launched during Macron's visit, further exemplifies a shared agenda centred on ecological transition, maritime sustainability and smart urbanism.

Beyond bilateral relations, Macron's visit to Southeast Asia was also aimed at renewing France's regional ambitions, as highlighted by his keynote address at the 22nd Shangri-La Dialogue, Asia's premier defence summit.

A French “Third Way” in the Indo-Pacific?

Delivered in English, [President Macron's address](#) reaffirmed the [core principles](#) of France's Indo-Pacific strategy: upholding an international order that respects the rule of law, rejecting bloc-based rivalries, promoting strategic autonomy for both Europe and Asian countries, and respecting all national sovereignties without double standards. Presenting France as a “force for peace and equilibrium”, Macron advocated for a distinctive and inclusive French “third way” in the region through the formation of “coalitions of independents” founded on sovereignty, transparency and open exchange.

Invoking the French leader [De Gaulle's 1966 Phnom Penh](#) speech – a tribute to French sovereignty and independence that offered an alternative to both the Soviet Union and the United States – Macron's vision of a “third way” and “strategic autonomy” resonates with the non-alignment, or even [multi-alignment](#), approaches adopted by

some ASEAN states. In this context, France does not seek to impose a specific agenda but rather aims to foster a shared space of stability, aligned with regional governance principles.

While President Macron's presence and address were generally well received, the contrast with other major powers was striking. The United States is increasingly perceived as an unpredictable actor, while China's unilateral actions in the South China Sea continue to generate significant concern among regional stakeholders. Nevertheless, it is important to avoid overstating France's geopolitical role in the Indo-Pacific. Despite being regarded as a constructive and credible partner, France remains a secondary power, with limited agency over the structural forces and entrenched rivalries that shape the regional security architecture.

Pathways to Broader Engagement: From Bilateral to Multilateral Cooperation

To establish a meaningful foothold in Southeast Asia, Paris could soon expand the scope of its strategic partnerships to other countries in the region with which it already maintains good relations. Malaysia, for example – whose prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim, delivered a [speech](#) at the Shangri-La Dialogue referencing famous French philosophers – or the Philippines, where the aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* made a [port call](#) earlier this year.



President Emmanuel Macron visited the ASEAN headquarters as part of his regional tour in May 2025, which included stops in Vietnam, Indonesia and Singapore. France can consolidate its bilateral achievements to unlock broader cooperation between Southeast Asia and Europe.

Image source: ASEAN Secretariat.

Most importantly, France must translate its bilateral successes into a more coherent and visible regional strategy, unlocking the potential for wider cooperation between the 700 million inhabitants of Southeast Asia and the 450 million Europeans. The scale and diversity of both regions offer immense opportunities for deepening economic ties, fostering innovation and addressing shared challenges such as climate change and digital transformation. By leveraging their complementary strengths, the European Union and ASEAN can build a resilient partnership that promotes stability, prosperity and sustainable development across both continents. Such strengthened cooperation would also make the region less susceptible to unilateral pressures and influence from the two major powers, China and the United States, by providing a balanced multilateral framework.

In that scenario, the “coalitions of independents” envisioned by President Macron at the Shangri-La Dialogue would blossom into an enduring “Euro-ASEAN way”.

Paco Milhiet is a Visiting Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS).

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798

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