

SHORING UP INDO-PACIFIC

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India's Foreign Policy evolution and changes

At a time when the focus of the international community is on public health and the economic response to the [coronavirus pandemic](#) — and rightly so — one should also continue reflecting on the concept of the Indo-Pacific and see how it can best serve regional stability at a time of heightened tensions. It appears that our national security depends not only on traditional security policies but also on our ability to foster multilateralism as well as the blue economy and environmental protection. These convictions will continue to guide France's policy in the Indo-Pacific, in close coordination with India.

Traditional security policies, including the exchange of information and military cooperation against traditional and non-traditional threats, have in no way lost their relevance in a [COVID-19](#) world. The current crisis has, in fact, revealed the assertion of power politics. This is likely to have a negative impact on territorial disputes and international law, as the recent tensions in the South [China](#) Sea have shown. Moreover, the tensions between the [United States](#) and China have been revived, accentuating regional faultlines and urging countries to take sides. This would go against the objective of a multipolar Asia in a multipolar world. In this tumultuous context, France and India, as two nations that cherish their strategic autonomy, are committed to deepening their partnership. And they have actually upgraded their naval interoperability through the organisation, earlier this year, of the first-ever joint patrol off Reunion Island and the Mozambique Channel.

That being said, our policies in the Indo-Pacific must be enriched by a multilateral dimension and an emphasis on the blue economy and environmental protection.

Multilateralism, including in its regional dimension, regionalism, is all the more necessary since the Indo-Pacific is characterised by limited political integration, and more intensely competing ideological narratives in the wake of the public health crisis. In these circumstances, multilateralism is a tool that can help countries defuse tensions and build common understandings of shared challenges. It is, moreover, an unequaled mechanism to promote international norms and principles and to facilitate their implementation by increasing the cost of unilateral policies. It represents a multiplying — not undermining — factor of national policies.

That is why joining and supporting regional organisations and mechanisms is a pillar of France's Indo-Pacific strategy. France is a candidate for full-fledged membership of the IORA, it supports the centrality of the [ASEAN](#), and is committed to seizing the opportunities offered by other multilateral frameworks, such as the Asia-Europe Meeting, or the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, which France is chairing for a two-year term. Besides this, France welcomes the admission of India as an observer in the Indian Ocean Commission, decided in March 2020 by the five-member sub-regional grouping, and sees it as an opportunity to increase regional cooperation.

The blue economy and environmental protection should also be at the centre of our Indo-Pacific strategies. This was one of the key messages of President Emmanuel Macron at the "Choose La Réunion Summit" on October 23, 2019, which was attended by India's Minister of State for External Affairs V Muraleedharan, and Indian business representatives. This conviction is derived from our diagnosis that inequalities within societies, marginalisation of some coastal populations, and vulnerability to climate change may well be aggravated in the Indo-Pacific by short- and long-term factors, ranging from the COVID-19 crisis, uncooperative appropriation of natural resources, as well as climate change, which creates environmental insecurity. These

factors have the potential to damage the social fabric of the people.

Against this risk, protecting biodiversity and promoting a sustainable marine economy involves developing new economic sectors, facilitating local job creation, preventing the predation of certain projects when necessary, and upgrading their resilience to climate change. This would, for example, involve developing sustainable fishing industries that benefit the local people and abide by the law. These are true components of a long-term agenda for the Indo-Pacific and, to quote Minister of External Affairs S Jaishankar, they demonstrate that we act “for something and not against somebody”. France is committed to working in this field in synergy with India’s Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative, including through further cooperation in the blue economy, building on its economic, scientific and academic assets in Reunion Island.

As an illustration of this approach, the French Development Agency (AFD) signed a Memorandum of Understanding, in March with the Indian Ocean Rim Association for “Strengthening the Capacities of IORA in Promoting the Blue Economy and Fisheries Management”. The partnership will support the implementation of the IORA Action Plan with an allocation of one million euros over three years, offer expertise and training to decision-makers, as well as capacity building for the IORA Secretariat.

In conclusion, far from questioning the relevance of the Indo-Pacific concept, the current crisis urges us rather to develop its multilateral dimension and focus on blue economy and environmental protection. Only on this condition can we ensure both national security and shared stability in our region.

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