

## France wants to work with India in Indo-Pacific

Jean-Yves Le Drian

France will like to deepen cooperation with India in the Indo-Pacific bilaterally and not as a part of a multilateral arrangement like the recently convened “quadrilateral” between India, U.S., Japan and Australia, officials said here on Wednesday.

“We have a growing cooperation in the Indian Ocean, where both India and France have focal positions, and we are in the process of forming a defence and security partnership in the Indo-Pacific,” announced France’s Ambassador Alexandre Ziegler, adding that this new cooperation would be discussed as part of the strategic partnership along with cooperation in counter-terrorism, defence hardware, nuclear energy, and space cooperation during the upcoming visit of Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian to India.

However, senior diplomats clarified that France and India have a “special and specific” interest in the Indian Ocean, and would prefer to conduct their exchanges across the Indo-Pacific bilaterally. “There is a very strong interest on both sides to keep this bilateral,” a French Embassy official told reporters. “We should not forget that India and France have both a geographical presence as well as a traditional connection of trust in the Indian Ocean,” the official added.

### Large territory

France is the only western country with large territory in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) including the Reunion Islands, that spans about two million square kilometres of an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), and it has a population of one million French Citizens in the region, including about 30% of Indian origin. The French navy maintains bases in the UAE, Djibouti as well as in Reunion, with a total of 20,000 forces permanently based in the IOR. In addition, said the official, France is India’s oldest strategic partner, and has conducted India’s first international ‘Varuna’ joint naval exercises since 1983.

“Therefore, the idea would not be for France to join some other formation, but for others to join what India and France are already doing,” the official said in reply to a question about whether France would consider joining the quadrilateral that met in Manila on November 12. Both the official and Ambassador Ziegler declined comments on the nature of the projects being considered for bilateral cooperation.

Mr. Drian, who will meet with External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and other Ministers on Friday, will be in India as part of a series of trips by senior French officials, including the Defence Minister and the National Security Adviser who are preparing for a visit by France’s President Emmanuel Macron in “early 2018.”

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