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What Place for the Asia-Pacific in French Global Strategy?

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Arnaud Leveau, Research Fellow at the ASEAN Studies Center (ASC) at Chulalongkorn University in Thailand, explains that “it is in the French interest to support and encourage the stabilizing role of the United States in the Asia Pacific, especially to guarantee freedom of navigation at sea and of overflight.”

France’s renewed interest in the Asia-Pacific is illustrated by a number of recent events, reports, and visits. The French White Book on defense released in 2013 had a significant portion devoted to Asia, and was followed by a report by the Ministry of Defense on “France and Security in the Asia-Pacific”, and the publication in July 2014 of a Senate report, “France facing the emergence of Southeast Asia.” Minister of Defense Jean-Yves Le Drian has been an active participant in the debates at the last three meetings of the Shangri-la dialogue in Singapore, and there have been increasing numbers of high level visits to the region since 2012. With \$75 billion of investment stock in the region, France’s trade interests across Asia are substantial as well.

In an article entitled “France, Europe and the Asia Pacific,” published in April 2013 by the Institute for Strategic Research of the Military School (IRSEM), Christian Lechervy, then Advisor the President of the Republic for Strategic Affairs and the Asia-Pacific summarized the French vision of the Asia-Pacific and role the country could play in the region. Up through the 1990s, France had several initiatives which had a real impact in the region: the Paris Peace Agreement on Cambodia in 1991, President François Mitterrand’s visits to Vietnam in 1993 – the first visit of a Western leader to the country since 1975 – which paved the way to the integration of the country into ASEAN and the normalization of its relations with the United States, and the co-initiative between President Jacques Chirac and Singaporean Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong for the creation of ASEM in 1996. As Lechervy noted, while France’s engagement with the region was strong throughout this period and before, it diminished from the mid-1990s until François Hollande became president in 2012.

As the White Book on defense emphasized, due to the Asia Pacific region’s weight in terms of population, economy, politics, and military issues, the region is the main source of economic growth in the world but also a source of rising tensions. A major crisis in the region would have serious consequences for Europe in terms of economy, trade, and finance.

Redefining a comprehensive approach

A new comprehensive approach requires that France, as well as the European Union, develops relationships with all regional institutions and takes into account the Asia Pacific as a whole. France can rely on a dense diplomatic network (the 2nd after the United-States) which is justified by its permanent seat on the Security Council of the United Nations. However, this network is still underused due to a lack of a holistic vision regarding the Asia Pacific. The main risk for French diplomacy is to mainly focus its attention and efforts toward the “Big Three” (China, Japan and India) and not enough to the Asian “middle powers” (South Korea, Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Australia, etc.) which are often more open to cooperation. Japan and France are already holding 2+2 meetings between their Foreign and Defense

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ministers to discuss security and defense cooperation, with bilateral talks on the joint development, and potential export, of defense equipment.

A lack of visibility

Despite its permanent seat at the Security Council and its global responsibility, French action still suffers a lack of visibility in Asia. French military and political engagement in Afghanistan was not fully recognized, although it contributes to the security of South Asia and beyond. Likewise the French military and civil assistance after the tsunami of 2004 was not widely noticed. One of the consequences of this lack of visibility is the absence of France, or even Europe, in most regional security institutions such as the ADMM+, Six Party Talks, or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). European participation in security dialogues is still limited to a partnership with the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which is far from being enough. France subscribed in 2006 to the so-called Bali Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, six years before the European Union and five years before the United States. France is also a member of the United Nations Command Military Armistice Commission in Korea and participates in the Pacific Chief of Defense Seminar (CHODS), the Western Pacific Naval Symposium, the North Pacific Coast Guard Forum, the Indian Ocean Rim Association, the South Pacific Defense Minister's Meeting and the Quadrilateral Coordination Group.

From Australia to Japan, several Asian countries are in favor of greater engagement from Europe, including France. This engagement is not seen as a substitute to the American presence but as a complement. For these countries, European engagement is a way to reassure themselves that the United States will maintain its presence and support in the region.

Ensuring a French presence and expertise

Although the Asia Pacific is far from the main "arc of crisis" described in the White Book on defense and the current main fields of operation of the French army (Mali, Central African Republic, and now in Iraq), France still has valid reasons to be present in the region. France is the only European country with territories both in the Indian Ocean (Reunion/Mayotte) and in the Pacific (New Caledonia, French Polynesia), with pre-positioned troops, battleships, and air force. France was also one of the leading countries of the Atalante operation in the Indian Ocean against sea piracy. Its navy closely cooperates with China, India, and Australia showing that the pooling of resources on some security operations can be useful both for Europe and Asia. The country is meeting its responsibilities in the global struggle against terrorism and is active in combating the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. It is also active in the control of great pandemics, fighting against transnational crime, protection of the environment, food security, and even cyber war. Moreover, France is one of the main exporters of military equipment (+43% in 2013) and is currently under negotiation to sell 126 Rafales to India. Contributing in these ways to the regional balance of power could justify France's deeper involvement in regional security mechanism and dialogues, as well as in the recent Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative launched by the South Korean administration.

Strengthening multilateral cooperation

Despite a "maritimization of the world," neither France nor any European country has the equivalent in the Pacific to the Seventh Fleet of the United States Navy. Therefore, it is in the French interest to support and encourage the stabilizing role of the United States in the Asia Pacific, especially to guarantee freedom of navigation at sea and of overflight. France is also a fervent proponent of the rule of law and expects a fast finalization of the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea. The country firmly supports ASEAN's leading role in terms of crisis and conflicts prevention. However, to gain regional credibility and to strengthen cooperation with its main partners, France and Europe will need to be more involved in the regional security architecture such as the ADMM+ and ARF.

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