

# Chapter 1

## France's Maritime Security Strategy in the Indo–Pacific: Middle Power's Approach to Regional Order

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter examines France's maritime security strategy in the Indo-Pacific, analyzing how a middle power leverages territorial presence and strategic partnerships to shape regional order. France maintains sovereign interests through seven overseas territories, contributing to its 11 million km<sup>2</sup> exclusive economic zone, and deploys approximately 7,000 military personnel across the region. Through documentary analysis, the study reveals France's dual approach: protecting national interests while promoting a rules-based international order grounded in UNCLOS. France employs naval power projection, strategic partnerships with India, Japan, and ASEAN*

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*nations, and active participation in multilateral forums to counter unilateral actions and maintain freedom of navigation. Despite resource constraints and geopolitical challenges including AUKUS, France's inclusive, multilateral strategy positions it as a balancing force, demonstrating how middle powers can meaningfully contribute to Indo-Pacific stability through legal frameworks and coalition-building.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In the past decade, the concept of the Indo-Pacific has emerged as a crucial geo-strategic space of the 21st century. This vast region, spanning from the eastern coast of Africa across the Indian Ocean to the Western Pacific, encompasses dynamic economies and critical sea lanes for global trade. The Indo-Pacific is now widely regarded as the “new global center of gravity,” accounting for approximately 60% of the world’s GDP and home to nearly 4.5 billion people (Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires étrangères, 2023a).

This area handles up to 90% of global goods traffic and is a theater for escalating tensions, including great-power competition, territorial claims such as China’s assertions over Taiwan and the South China Sea, and a range of traditional and non-traditional security challenges, including arms smuggling, illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, and climate change (Institut de Recherche Stratégique de l’École Militaire, 2022). The prosperity and stability of the region are decisive for the rules-based international order, as transnational challenges from climate change to global health security are particularly pronounced here (Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires étrangères, 2023b). For many nations, especially those in Europe, their interests are deeply intertwined with the region. For instance, approximately 40% of the European Union’s foreign trade passes through the South China Sea (Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires étrangères, 2023a).

France is one of the few European nations with a historical presence and direct interests in the Indo-Pacific. Seven of its thirteen overseas territories are located in this region, stretching from the Indian Ocean (Réunion, Mayotte, the Éparses Islands) to the Pacific Ocean (New Caledonia, French Polynesia, Wallis-et-Futuna). These territories are home to approximately 1.6 million French citizens and contribute to France’s 11 million km<sup>2</sup> exclusive economic zone (EEZ) (Perrin et al., 2023). This makes France the only EU nation with sovereign territory in the Indo-Pacific. This presence concerns not only French influence but also the maintenance of military and geopolitical balance in a strategically vital area. Thanks to these overseas entities, France considers itself a genuine “Indo-Pacific nation” with sovereign interests and a direct responsibility for regional security and stability. France maintains a permanent military presence of approximately 7,000 personnel at bases and fleets

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