

The U.S. and France Should Double Down on Security Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

Walter Lohman

KEY TAKEAWAYS

France is Europe's most significant military presence in the Indo-Pacific, and the magnitude of China's strategic challenge requires an all-hands-on-deck effort.

The AUKUS controversy has added a new dimension to U.S.-France cooperation, but there are deeper preexisting differences that also need to be addressed.

As the U.S. expands its cooperation with Australia and the U.K. in the Indo-Pacific, it should find parallel ways to do the same with France.

The inauguration of the Australia–United Kingdom–United States security partnership (AUKUS) on September 15, 2021, was greeted by a furious reaction from Paris. Once tempers cool, the U.S. and France should take new stock of their cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and reinvigorate it. Even as the U.S. expands its cooperation with Australia and the U.K., it should find parallel ways to do the same with France.

Two things in the AUKUS upset the French: the scrapping of the submarine deal once called the “deal of the century” by France's current Minister of Europe and Foreign Affairs Jean-Yves Le Drian, who had presided over the conclusion of the deal as Defense Minister, and the slight to France's strategic position in the region and existing partnership with the U.S.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib5232>

The Heritage Foundation | 214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE | Washington, DC 20002 | (202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

The former issue—the submarine requirement that is now proposed to be filled by the new AUKUS partnership—should be chalked up to a failure by the Naval Group, a majority-state-owned French company, to manage Australian expectations. For whatever reason (and blame is disputed), the project was over budget, off schedule, and a lightning rod for criticism in Australia. The most politically sensitive aspects of the disagreements were over promises of local employment opportunities—a key to Australian interest from the beginning. It was not that there were no signals that the project was in trouble; the Australian government had long been thinking of cancelling the project and proceeding with what it called “plan B.”

France is a top-rated arms manufacturing and defense marketing powerhouse. It does not like to lose, and politicians do not like to deliver bad news to their constituents, especially on the eve of national elections. In part, the outrage of French political leaders is designed to divert responsibility for the real problems with the deal and their own responsibility for the lost business.

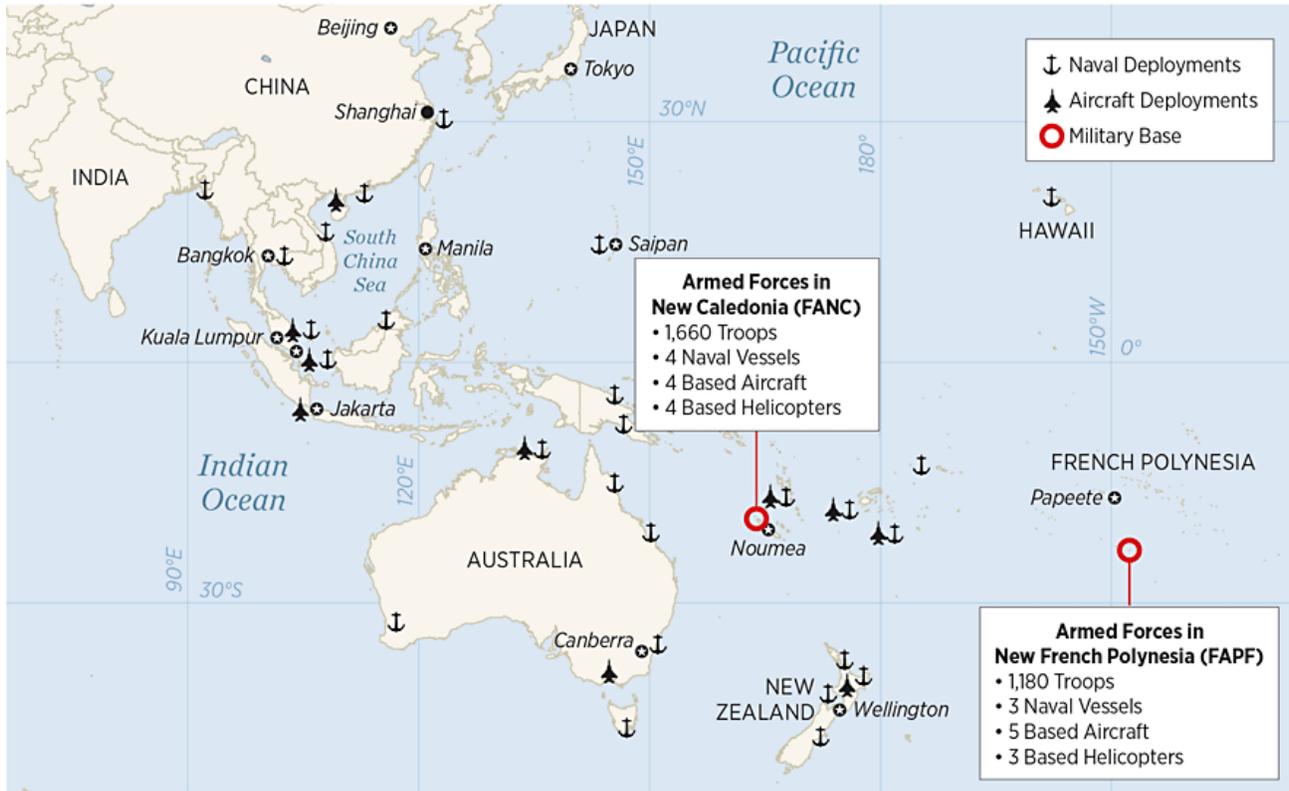
With respect to the second issue—disregard for France’s strategic position in the region and its contribution there to peace and security—Paris has reason to feel slighted. The rollout of the AUKUS was handled miserably by the U.S., perhaps because it was held so close until the actual announcement. French officials were given only a few hours advance notice, and in the event, France received perfunctory treatment in President Joe Biden’s statement announcing the initiative.

Beyond the central role in AUKUS played by the submarine deal, the broader intention to “foster deeper integration of *security and defense-related* science, technology, industrial bases, and supply chains”¹ would have made French membership in AUKUS problematic. The U.S. and French defense industries are too fiercely competitive with one another to “integrate” much more deeply. What could have been managed by the Administration, however, would have been a parallel initiative in similar areas (dual use export controls, for instance), as well as fuller recognition of the convergence in strategic visions in the Pacific and operational cooperation that has been growing for the past decade.

It is not too late. The U.S. should double down on security cooperation with France in the Indo-Pacific. The two countries share interests there, have recognized them across Administrations, and have already embarked on attempts to meet them together. The strategic imperative vis-à-vis the rise of China is too important for the two countries not to do so.

MAP 1

French Military Presence in the Indo-Pacific



SOURCE: French Ministry for the Armed Forces, *France's Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific*, 2019, https://apcss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/France-Defence_Strategy_in_the_Indo-Pacific_2019.pdf (accessed October 19, 2021).

Shared U.S.–France Security Interests

The 2021 updated *Indo-Pacific Strategy*² released by France's Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs is very explicit about the way France sees its interest in the region. The French Ministry of the Armed Forces most recent *Defence Strategy* document is similarly explicit.³ In both cases, France's vision aligns with America's own. Highlights include:

- **Interest in sovereignty.** Like the U.S., France is a Pacific country. In addition to of seven overseas territories encompassing 1.6 million French citizens, it exercises sovereign rights in the second-largest economic exclusive zone (EEZ) in the world. It has multiple naval vessels, military aircraft, and thousands of troops all permanently stationed

in the region to safeguard these interests and deploys regularly from mainland France to service them.

- **Priority focus on maritime spaces and shipping lanes.** France’s interest in the region is overwhelmingly focused on the sea. Its Indo-Pacific strategy calls this area an “absolute priority.”⁴ The U.S. shares this perspective.
- **Importance of security partners.** The U.S. has its multiple treaty allies and partners in the region, including Japan, Australia, and India. The French single out India, Australia, and Japan as its critical partners as well. France’s defense strategy also emphasizes cooperation with the U.S. and references Singapore, a critical U.S. defense partner.⁵ The submarine contract was the cornerstone of France’s partnership with Australia, a relationship that will clearly be under intense review in weeks to months to come, but France has other options.
- **A concern with agreed upon international rules and, in particular, the laws of the sea.** Whereas the U.S. for many years has summarized its commitment as exercising the right to “fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows,”⁶ the French defense strategy says that France “will continue to exercise its freedom of movement wherever law allows it.”⁷ France has deployed ships from continental France to the South China Sea at least twice a year since 2014 and to the Taiwan Strait to make this point.
- **A tactical requirement to deal effectively with grey-zone coercion: the use of military or paramilitary force in coercive ways short of outright conflict.** Although not specified in the French documents, a good example is China’s use of coast guard vessels with the size and capability of naval vessels for support of fishing vessels.

Challenges to Expanded Cooperation

The submarine controversy has added a new dimension to U.S.–France cooperation, but there are deeper preexisting differences that also need to be addressed.

- **Differences in geographical priorities.** Even in drawing the region more narrowly to the Western Pacific, the weight of French interests lies south of the equator, mostly in Polynesia; U.S. interests lie primarily north of the equator in Micronesia.⁸ This difference also includes an inter-island political dynamic with the potential to strain U.S.–French cooperation.⁹
- **Operational constraints.** Not all of the protocols and procedures that apply to cooperation in other theaters (for example, the Gulf of Aden, where joint anti-piracy operations have been ongoing for many years) apply to operations in the Indo-Pacific. French ships operating independently in the Pacific but in need of U.S. assistance can find themselves confused by technical details like charge-back requirements that may differ from allied procedures in other theaters.
- **Barriers to communication.** There is very little allied organizational infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific. It was only three years ago that the French stationed their first liaison officer (LNO) with U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) in Hawaii. This is on par with the number of LNOs present from the U.K. and Australia, but the overall involvement of these two countries in USINDOPACOM is much deeper. At any given time, the U.K. and Australia have dozens of exchange officers serving in the U.S. command structure going about U.S. military assigned tasks.
- **Suboptimal sharing of intelligence.** The U.S., U.K., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand comprise the exclusive Five Eyes intelligence-sharing network. U.S.–U.K. relations are particularly close in this regard. For reasons attributable to both sides of the U.S.–France relationship, France will remain outside this network for the foreseeable future. However, there is active sharing of operational intelligence between the two militaries—for instance, in the course of monitoring international compliance with sanctions in the waters near North Korea. Beyond this and other useful information that may be gathered by French naval assets permanently based in the South Pacific, opportunities present themselves when ships from mainland France like the spy ship *Dupuy de Lôme* deploy to the region.¹⁰

- **Competition around arms sales.** As underscored dramatically by the fallout over the Australian submarine sale, the U.S. and France are competitors in the effort to help regional countries meet their armament needs.

What the United States Should Do

Sharing as they do common strategic visions and interests in the Indo-Pacific, the U.S. and France should maximize the habits of security cooperation and interoperability that they have developed elsewhere in the world in the North Atlantic, in the Fifth Fleet area of operations, but also in the African Sahel. In order to scope the task appropriately, they should focus on where their priorities overlap most within the vast Indo-Pacific region. This means, first, the Western Pacific and Eastern Indian Ocean. Secondly, it means an increased French presence in the Northwestern Pacific, a greater U.S. presence in the South Pacific, and closer coordination of activity in each area.

To these ends, the United States should:

- **Regularize and increase the number of joint U.S.–France military exercises** and selectively include France in the current schedule of multilateral exercises, including exercises with American Quad partners and with other militaries like the U.K.’s. Recent examples to build on, in addition to France’s involvement in very large multinational exercises like RIMPAC and Cobra Gold, are France–U.S.–Japan drills on Japan’s Kyushu Peninsula¹¹ and the April 2021 Quad-Plus¹² La Perouse exercise in the Bay of Bengal. One indispensable way to develop the necessary procedures, protocols, and precedents for cooperating in the Indo-Pacific is by actually exercising and operating together and making them more reflective of combat contingencies. There is a spectrum of military operations that involve more than communications—for example the sharing of targeting data. After all, they are exercising in order to offer mutual support in wartime.
- **Expand France’s current LNO presence at U.S. facilities.** Appropriate levels of security clearance should be found to include French officers assigned to USINDOPACOM regularly in a broader range of command activities. In turn, this will increase the value that the French derive from this presence and encourage

greater levels of engagement. Similar French liaison functions at U.S. Seventh Fleet Headquarters in Yokosuka, Japan, should also be considered.

- **Explore an appropriately tailored French officer embed** at USIN-DOPACOM. Beyond the LNO presence, which is critical to sharing information, coordinating U.S. and French naval movements, port calls, deployments, and the like, this would help enable more effective and robust military operations in the region. It is not necessary to establish five-eyes-level clearance to accomplish this.
- **Complete a Department of Defense database and planning tool** that can enable the U.S., France, and other non-Five Eyes members to access releasable information on matters like humanitarian military missions, donations of assets like patrol boats and minor pieces of infrastructure development, and non-governmental organization activity throughout the Pacific Islands. Eventually, this could be expanded to the broader INDOPACOM area of operations, beginning in Southeast Asia. The aim would be to deconflict among regional partners and allies, including the U.S. and France, and ultimately permit joint planning. An effort has been underway at INDOPACOM to do this for a number of years. It should be prioritized and expedited.
- **Dedicate more resources to the Pacific Quad.** The Pacific Quad is an operational arrangement among the U.S., France, Australia, and New Zealand, the American component of which is run out of Hawaii, Coast Guard District 14. It is focused on softer security issues like fisheries administration, search and rescue, and illegal trafficking. Three dedicated American vessels are not enough for a region as vast as the South Pacific.
- **Expand and intensify the sharing of military intelligence** along the lines of efforts begun after the 2015 terrorist attacks in the Paris area. At that time, the U.S. and France established the interagency Lafayette Committee, and in 2016, they tasked the committee with overseeing a broader sharing of military intelligence. The countries' defense ministers committed to make "access to each other's operational intelligence the default mode of exchange in the theaters where we are engaged together" including, among other specific areas, the Pacific.¹³ Today, as regards the Pacific, this consists largely of the periodic sharing of intelligence assessments, not raw intelligence.

Conclusion

The bottom line is that France, as a resident power in the Indo-Pacific, is the most significant European military presence in the region. For the past decade, it and the U.S. have gradually been building military cooperation there. The magnitude of the strategic challenge presented by China requires an all-hands-on-deck effort, and France must be part of it.

Walter Lohman is Director of the Asian Studies Center, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation.

Endnotes

1. “Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS,” The White House, September 15, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/15/joint-leaders-statement-on-aucus/> (accessed October 9, 2021). Emphasis added.
2. French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, *France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy*, July 2021, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/en_a4_indopacifique_v2_rvb_cle432726.pdf (accessed October 8, 2021).
3. French Ministry for the Armed Forces, *France’s Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific*, 2019, https://apcss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/France-Defence_Strategy_in_the_Indo-Pacific_2019.pdf (accessed October 8, 2021).
4. French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, *France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy*, p. 9.
5. French Ministry for the Armed Forces, *France’s Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific*, pp. 7, 13, 17, 18, and 19.
6. Reuters, “Carter Says U.S. Will Sail, Fly and Operate Wherever International Law Allows,” October 13, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-australia-southchinasea-carter/carter-says-u-s-will-sail-fly-and-operate-wherever-international-law-allows-idUSKCN0S72MG20151013> (accessed October 9, 2021).
7. French Ministry for the Armed Forces, *France’s Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific*, p. 16.
8. The U.S. territories of Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands, as well as the former trust territories now related to the U.S. by Compacts of Free Associations (the Federated States of Micronesia, Palau, and Marshall Islands) are all north of the equator in the subregion of Micronesia. French Polynesia is in the southern subregion of Polynesia. The exceptions are the territory of American Samoa, which lies in the subregion of Polynesia, for the United States and New Caledonia, which lies in the third subregion of Melanesia, for France.
9. Cleo Paskal, “How the Pacific Islands Forum Fell Apart,” *The Diplomat*, February 10, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/how-the-pacific-islands-forum-fell-apart/> (accessed October 9, 2021).
10. BERNAMA [Malaysian National News Agency], “French Naval Ship Dupuy De Lome (A759) Docks in Port Klang,” *The Sun Daily*, May 7, 2017, <https://www.thesundaily.my/archive/french-naval-ship-dupuy-de-lome-a759-docks-port-klang-YTARCH444045> (accessed October 9, 2021).
11. France 24, “Japan Launches First Joint Military Drill with US, France,” May 11, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210511-japan-launches-first-joint-military-drill-with-us-france> (accessed October 8, 2021).
12. France plus the U.S., Japan, Australia, and India.
13. “Joint Statement of Intent by Mr. Jean-Yves Le Drian, Minister of Defence of the French Republic, and the Honorable Ashton Carter, Secretary of Defense of the United States of America,” linked to news release, “U.S., France Sign Bilateral Cooperation Agreements,” U.S. Department of Defense, November 28, 2016, <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/1014192/us-france-sign-bilateral-cooperation-agreements/> (accessed October 10, 2021).