



Updated August 5, 2021

## The United Kingdom, France and the Indo-Pacific

Successive U.S. Administrations have sought to bring European allies into a range of strategic initiatives in the Indo-Pacific region. Most recently, President Biden during his visit to Europe in June 2021 sought greater cohesion with European allies on how democratic nations respond to challenges posed by China.

While Europe's focus on the region has increased in recent years, France and the United Kingdom (UK) stand out for their recent actions that demonstrate their assessment of growing defense and security challenges in the Indo-Pacific. Through their strategic relations, regional deployments, arms sales, and military-to-military relationships, France and the UK have the ability to strengthen the defense capabilities of regional states, help shape the regional balance of power, and support U.S. interests.

In recent years, France and the UK have developed their strategic posture in the Indo-Pacific and are networking with like-minded Indo-Pacific nations to bolster regional stability and help preserve the norms of the international system. These efforts reinforce the United States' goal of maintaining regional stability by strengthening a collective deterrent to challenges to international security norms. Such challenges include China's actions in the South China Sea, its increasingly aggressive behavior in asserting maritime and territorial claims, and the extension of PLA Navy patrols into the Indian Ocean Region. Congress, in exercising its oversight role, may examine the Biden Administration's efforts to work effectively with like-minded nations, such as France and the United Kingdom, to advance shared values and interests in the region.

### Recent Developments

The United Kingdom and France are deepening their strategic posture in the Indo-Pacific. In May 2021, a carrier strike group led by the HMS *Queen Elizabeth* left the UK on a deployment to the Indo-Pacific region, with scheduled visits to India, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore, and an expected passage through the South China Sea. This deployment, which is to include a U.S. Arleigh Burke-Class Destroyer and 10 U.S. Marine Corps F-35 aircraft, would be Britain's largest overseas naval deployment in decades. The March 2021 policy document *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, outlines the framework of an "Indo-Pacific tilt" in UK foreign policy, stating "we will pursue deeper engagement in the Indo-Pacific in support of shared prosperity and regional stability...." The region also is increasingly important to the UK as it seeks to expand trading relationships following the country's January 2020 withdrawal from the European Union ("Brexit"). In June 2021, the UK began negotiations

to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans Pacific Partnership and reached a preliminary deal for a bilateral free trade agreement (FTA) with Australia, after signing FTAs with Japan, Singapore, and Vietnam in 2020. In May 2021, the UK and India announced a "Road Map 2030" guiding cooperation for a comprehensive strategic partnership, including an enhanced trade partnership and the intention to negotiate an FTA.

France is maintaining existing ties with its territories in the South Pacific and the Indian Ocean while developing strategic relations with key regional states including India, Australia, and Japan. The April 2021 document *France's Partnerships in the Indo-Pacific*, issued by the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, builds on President Macron's strategy for the Indo-Pacific, and identifies the Indo-Pacific as the "new global strategic centre of gravity" and highlights the importance of France's partnerships in the region. France reportedly sent its nuclear attack submarine *Emeraude* through the South China Sea in February 2021, after reaffirming its commitment to freedom of navigation with the passage of the frigate *Vendémiaire* through the Taiwan Strait in 2019. France also joined Australia, Japan, and the United States in a joint military exercise off Japan in May 2021. In October 2020, President Macron appointed Christophe Penot as Special Envoy to the Indo-Pacific, and in December 2020 Macron reportedly set up a hotline and discussed a range of strategic issues with India's Prime Minister Modi. Macron has stated, "I believe in this Indo-Pacific axis, I believe in this new strategy which we will have to have at the heart of our collective ambitions, and it is above all a geopolitical ambition."

### France

France, which seeks to act as an "inclusive and stabilizing mediating power," has extensive interests in the Indo-Pacific region. These include over 1.6 million French citizens living in French Indo-Pacific territories and an extensive exclusive economic zone, derived from those territories. France has approximately 7,000 military personnel in the region, has military installations in its territories as well as in Djibouti and the UAE, and reportedly has sent warships into the South China Sea. France is part of the FRANZ Arrangement with Australia and New Zealand, and is a member of a Quadrilateral Defense Coordination Group with Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. The French Territory of New Caledonia, which voted to remain part of France in a November 4, 2018, referendum, has a population of approximately 270,000 and 25% of the world's nickel reserves. In the lead-up to the referendum, President Macron stated "in this part of the globe China is building its hegemony ... we have to work with China ... But if don't organize ourselves, it will soon be a hegemony which will

reduce our liberties, our opportunities which we will suffer.”

France and India expanded their strategic partnership during Macron’s March 2018 visit to India. The two countries have agreed to hold biannual summits, signed an Agreement Regarding the Provision of Reciprocal Logistics Support, and “agreed to deepen and strengthen the bilateral ties based on shared principles and values of democracy, freedom, rule of law and respect for human rights.” Among other agreements, the two nations issued a Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region which states “France and India have shared concerns with regard to the emerging challenges in the Indian Ocean Region.” India signed a deal with France to purchase 36 Dassault Rafale multi-role fighter aircraft in 2016 for an estimated \$8.7 billion. India received the fifth batch of Rafale aircraft in April 2021, bringing the total delivered to 18. France and India also hold the annual Varuna naval exercise.

France is also developing its bilateral strategic and defense relationships with Australia, Japan, and Vietnam. While visiting Australia in May 2018, Macron stated that he wanted to create a “strong Indo-Pacific axis to build on our economic interests as well as our security interests.” Several agreements were signed during Macron’s visit to Australia, and Australia and France agreed to work together on cyberterrorism and defense. French company DCNS was previously awarded an estimated \$36.3 billion contract to build 12 submarines for Australia. Australia and France held their inaugural Defense Ministers meeting in September 2018. French President Macron and Japanese Prime Minister Abe agreed to increase their cooperation to promote stability in the Indo-Pacific during Abe’s visit to France in October 2018. France and its former colony Vietnam signed a Defense Cooperation Pact in 2009, and upgraded relations to a Strategic Partnership in 2013. A detachment of French aircraft visited Vietnam in August 2018 after taking part in exercise Pitch Black in Australia.

## The United Kingdom

The *Integrated Review* confirms the UK government’s view that the Indo-Pacific region “is critical to our economy, our security and our global ambition to support open societies” and that “[i]n the decades to come it will be the crucible for many of the most pressing global challenges.”

In 2018, the UK opened a new naval support facility in Bahrain that is to be capable of supporting the new aircraft carriers HMS *Queen Elizabeth* and HMS *Prince of Wales*. Also in 2018, three Royal Navy ships were deployed to the Indo-Pacific region: the HMS *Albion*, a 22,000 ton amphibious assault ship with a contingent of Royal Marines, and the frigates HMS *Sutherland* and HMS *Argyll*. The HMS *Albion* sailed near the disputed Paracel Islands—waters that China considers its territorial seas. A Royal Navy spokesman stated that “HMS *Albion* exercised her rights for freedom of navigation in full compliance with international law and norms.” China strongly protested the operation, describing it as a provocation. In 2017, the UK and Japan agreed on a Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation pledging to enhance the two countries’ global security partnership. In 2018, the HMS *Argyll* and Japan’s

largest warship, the *Kaga* helicopter carrier, held exercises in the Indian Ocean, and the UK and Japan held a joint exercise in central Japan.

Approximately 1.7 million British citizens live across the Indo-Pacific region, and the UK has Commonwealth ties to numerous states in the region. UK forces participate in annual exercises of the Five Power Defence Arrangement (FPDA), a regional security group of Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, and the UK that was established in 1971. The UK also has a battalion of Gurkha infantry based in Brunei. The UK opened new High Commissions in Vanuatu, Tonga, and Samoa in 2019, and signed a new Defence Cooperation Memorandum of Understanding with Singapore in 2018. In 2013, Australia and the UK signed a new Defence and Security Cooperation Treaty that provides an enhanced framework for bilateral defense cooperation. The treaty builds on longstanding defense cooperation through the FPDA and intelligence cooperation through the Five Eyes group that also includes Canada, New Zealand, and the United States. Australia signed an agreement with UK defense contractor BAE Systems to purchase nine new Type 26 frigates in a deal worth an estimated \$25 billion.

## The EU and NATO

In April 2021, the 27 foreign ministers of the European Union (EU) member states adopted a set of conclusions on an EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. The conclusions represent the consensus of EU member states in terms of broad diplomatic, economic, and security and defense policy approaches to the region. The member states also tasked the European Commission and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy to communicate a formal Indo-Pacific strategy by September 2021. The momentum to develop a common EU strategy comes as member states Germany and the Netherlands, in addition to France, also have adopted national strategies toward the Indo-Pacific region.

At the June 2021 NATO summit, the allies for the first time outlined “systemic challenges” posed by China’s “assertive behavior” and “coercive policies which stand in contrast to the fundamental values enshrined in [NATO’s founding treaty].” These include a rapidly expanding nuclear arsenal, an opaque military modernization program, military cooperation with Russia, and use of disinformation. NATO also called on China to “uphold its international commitments and to act responsibly in the international system, including in space, cyber and maritime domains, in keeping with its role as a major power.”

Increasing European attention to the Indo-Pacific region largely unfolds against a backdrop of policy debates about China. While Europe has been reassessing its approach to China, prospects for a common approach remain complicated by differing economic and national interests, and mixed views of China as a competitor versus a partner. Nevertheless, regional states may view a more engaged Europe as a welcome addition to the U.S. regional presence as they hedge against a rising China.

---

**Bruce Vaughn**, Specialist in Asian Affairs  
**Derek E. Mix**, Specialist in European Affairs

---

**Paul Belkin**, Analyst in European Affairs

---

## Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.