

France's strategic relations with India under Macron

Continuity, pragmatism, and deepening relations

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France is a medium-sized power with a global presence, high political ambitions, but limited military resources. In order to secure maritime routes and maintain links with its overseas territories — and in light of a deteriorated security situation in the Indian Ocean — France needs to cooperate with other states. The French approach builds on multiple strategies, including bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral cooperation. This memo analyses the “strategic partnership” between France and India during the Macron years, focusing on bilateral naval interaction in the Indian Ocean and defence industrial cooperation. It finds that continuity, pragmatism, and deepening relations characterise France’s defence and security relations with India.

THE FRENCH DEFINITION of the Indo-Pacific region is broad and stretches from the French islands of Mayotte and Réunion Island on the east African shores to Clipperton Island in the eastern Pacific Ocean.¹ France’s exclusive economic zone is the second largest in the world, after the United States (US): nine of France’s 11 million square metres of EEZ are in the Indo-Pacific region.² About 1.6 million French citizens live here, and 7000 French soldiers have a permanent presence in French overseas territories and on French military bases in Djibouti and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

France considers India one of its most important strategic partners in the Indo-Pacific region, along with the United States, Australia, and Japan. Defence and security cooperation between the two states is “a principal pillar” of the India-France partnership.³

France’s strategic cooperation with India extends beyond the scope of this discussion. It encompasses not only traditional areas of cooperation, such as civil nuclear affairs, space research, and arms trade, but also maritime security, cyber, space, digitalisation, counterterrorism, transnational organised crime, scientific cooperation, trade, and the environment. Protection of “the blue economy” and the global commons are also included, as are its ambitions regarding increased mobility of students, researchers, professionals, and skilled workers.⁴

This memo addresses two questions: How has France’s strategic cooperation with India evolved during

President Macron’s tenure? Why is India one of France’s important strategic partners?

The memo analyses changes in policy and practices during the Macron years with a focus on policy agreements, naval interaction, and defence industrial cooperation.⁵ It presents an overview of the major changes and novelties under Macron’s presidency.⁶ It mainly considers the strategic partnership from France’s perspective by analysing relevant strategic documents, official reports, speeches, parliamentary reports, and joint press statements. In addition to primary and secondary sources, the memo also builds on interviews with researchers, diplomats, experts, and policy officials in Paris.⁷

The next section analyses why India — and the Indian Ocean — are central to France’s security interests. The discussion continues with an analysis of France’s and India’s security and defence cooperation during the Macron years. Thereafter, the memo concludes with a summary of the results and a discussion of some challenges ahead.

WHY INDIA IS A STRATEGIC PARTNER TO FRANCE

Several reasons account for why India and the Indian Ocean are of strategic interest to France.

First, France needs to maintain links with its overseas territories. French national security interests are to protect nationals and sovereign spaces, to secure strategic supplies, and to ensure its freedom of action in the global commons.⁸ In addition, the Indian Ocean is

vital for Europe's maritime routes to Asia, for the supply of strategic energy resources from the Gulf States, and for global trade. The region has several key maritime choke points central to global trade: the Straits of Bab-el Mandeb, Hormuz, and Malacca.⁹

Second, traditional and non-traditional threats increasingly challenge maritime routes through the Indian Ocean. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has increased the need for European states to protect energy routes from the Gulf States and the Indo-Pacific region.¹⁰ The increased presence of China in the Indian Ocean is a cause of concern for both France and India, as indicated by growing naval activities, major investments in port infrastructure, and the opening of a Chinese military base in Djibouti in 2017.¹¹ Moreover, non-traditional threats have flared up in the Red Sea and, again, off the coast of Somalia.¹²

However, France's military capabilities, particularly in the naval domain, remain limited. Hence, in order to maintain links with its overseas territories and to secure maritime routes, France is increasingly dependent on cooperation with other states. In total, France has 4450 military and civilian personnel stationed in the Indian Ocean, distributed across its territories of Réunion Island and Mayotte in the South Western Indian Ocean, as well as its military bases in Djibouti and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).¹³ Even if a modernisation of the French Navy and the arrival of six new offshore patrol vessels (POM) will improve France's naval capabilities in the coming years, its capabilities are undersized in relation to the current security situation. Moreover, its naval deployments in the Indian and Pacific Oceans compete with engagements in other maritime areas, such as the North Atlantic and the Mediterranean, limiting the potential for more frequent and significant deployments.¹⁴

Moreover, French strategic documents and France's international ambitions to present an alternative to superpowers also correlate with India's perception of the international system. Accordingly, France and India share a vision of an international system not dominated by superpowers, i.e., China and the United States. France's ambition in the Indo-Pacific region is to be a stabilising power that protects and promotes a rules-based multilateral order and rejects unilateral ambitions that restrict freedom of navigation.¹⁵

Against that background, France's strategy in the Indo-Pacific region builds on four main foreign policy instruments: support to multilateral institutions, enhanced cooperation with four major states, namely the United States, India, Australia, and Japan; participation

in military missions in the region; and increased engagement with European partners.¹⁶

FROM COOPERATION TO STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

The cooperation between France and India goes back to the years following India's independence in 1947. French exports of defence equipment and civil nuclear cooperation started in the 1950s, and space collaboration followed in the 1960s. Even if cooperation started early, French political interest in India remained limited.¹⁷ For example, it was only after 33 years of India's independence that a French president, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, made an official visit to India, in 1980, followed by exports of 51 Mirage 2000-5 jet fighters from the French firm Dassault during the 1980s.¹⁸

Most sources identify the establishment of the so-called strategic partnership in 1998 as the most significant point for Franco-Indian defence and security relations.¹⁹ Then President Jacques Chirac launched the idea during an official visit to India in 1998, where he proposed the creation of "a strategic group" with India that would "enable a better understanding of our defence doctrines and increased military cooperation."²⁰

Since the conclusion of the strategic partnership in 1998, bilateral relations have been structured around yearly high-level meetings within the India-France strategic dialogue.²¹ During the elaboration of a French Indo-Pacific policy, which began during François Hollande's presidency (2012–2017), policymakers perceived India as a crucial partner.²² Moreover, between 2013 and 2022, India became France's most important buyer of French defence equipment in the Indo-Pacific region.²³

CONTINUITY AND PRAGMATISM

During the Macron years, political contacts between France and India have intensified with frequent high-level visits in both directions. Prime Minister Modi has visited France on four occasions, in 2017, 2019, 2022, and 2023, while President Macron has visited India on two occasions, in 2018 and 2024.²⁴

In 2023, France and India celebrated 25 years of strategic partnership, highlighted with mutual state visits — Modi in France in 2023 and Macron in India in 2024. Just prior to Modi's visit, the Indian Defence Acquisitions Council (DAC) formalised India's decision to proceed with the purchase of 26 Rafale Marine aircraft, designed for operations from aircraft carriers and 3 Scorpène-class submarines. This is in addition to earlier contracts and deliveries of 36 Rafale aircraft and 6 submarines, and the upgrading of 51 Mirage 2005-5 delivered in the 1980s.²⁵

The 25th anniversary was also used to present a joint roadmap, Horizon 2047, for their partnership during the coming 25 years.²⁶ The roadmap expresses the intention to increase operational cooperation, for example, through sharing of intelligence and information, joint surveillance missions, exchange of exercises and equipment across all domains, and a commitment to deepening the integration of the defence industrial sectors.²⁷

While media reports focus on the personal chemistry between Macron and Modi, interviewees emphasise the significance of structural cooperation at different levels across broad domains.²⁸ A common perception is that France's relations with India are deepening under Macron, but, rather than representing a rupture or change from past practices, continuity characterises the countries' strategic cooperation, according to interviewees. While the personal connection between Macron and Modi changed the style of political relations, the content of the relations remained unchanged. Interviewees suggested that bilateral relations would continue even after the two leaders had left the political scene, citing the extensive structural cooperation between France and India.²⁹

Statements, other official material, and the interviews underscore that defence and security cooperation is driving France's bilateral relations with India. In a context where the geopolitical security situation is deteriorating and where India is described "a crucial partner" and "the central pivot" for France's strategy in the Indian Ocean, France's approach is pragmatic.³⁰ Despite official joint statements that continue to express both parties' commitment to democratic values, there is reluctance in Paris to voice criticism to India's domestic development, which is characterised by a gradual and significant deterioration of freedom of expression and continued suppression of religious rights.³¹ Yet, India's importance as a strategic partner weighs more than issues of human rights. As formulated in a French parliamentary report, "our long-term strategic partnership with India cannot be called into question on human rights grounds."³²

NEW POLICY AGREEMENTS

France and India have made several agreements during the Macron years that underscore the importance of maritime security and naval interaction in the Indian Ocean. In 2018, France and India agreed on a joint strategic vision for bilateral cooperation in the region. Their vision acknowledged that the two states had "vital interests" in the Indian Ocean and shared concerns related to maritime security, freedom of navigation and overflight and a range of other areas.³³

In 2018, France and India concluded an agreement on reciprocal logistics support, which aims to strengthen the cooperation between the two navies and provide mutual access to military bases.³⁴ Described as a "golden step" by Prime Minister Modi, the agreement will facilitate logistical support, supplies and services during authorised port visits, joint exercises and training, humanitarian assistance, and disaster-relief missions.³⁵ Details in the agreement are unknown, but according to Niguet and Péron-Doise, it will give the Indian navy access to the French naval bases in Réunion, the UAE, and Djibouti.³⁶ A first implementation step was the visit by a French destroyer to the military port in Mumbai in January 2019.³⁷ Thus far, the number of Indian visits to French naval bases in the Indian Ocean appears rather limited: in total, there were three visits to Réunion Island by one Indian maritime patrol aircraft, in 2020 and in 2022. Conversely, the number of French naval visits to Indian ports increased significantly in 2023 with totally 12 port calls that year.³⁸

Moreover, the 2017 White Shipping agreement will enable the monitoring of vessels across the region and the exchange of information on maritime traffic, which will increase their maritime domain awareness, particularly in the Indian Ocean.³⁹ Since 2019, there has been a French liaison officer at the regional maritime security centre (IFC-IOR) hosted by the Indian Navy.⁴⁰

MORE COMPLEX NAVAL EXERCISES

Bilateral naval exercises between the French and Indian navies have been organised annually since the mid-1980s. They became a regular feature after 1993 and were formally baptised "Varuna" in 2001. The official aim of the Varuna exercises is to enhance the interoperability of the French and Indian navies, underscoring their commitment to freedom of the seas and a rules-based international order.⁴¹ The exercises also serve defence industrial purposes, i.e., to test equipment and promote exports. Geopolitically, the exercises provide substance to strategic partnerships and, arguably, contribute to deterrence against China.⁴²

Most of the exercises take place in different maritime areas across the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea, but some have been organised on the French Atlantic coast and in the Mediterranean, as Table 1 shows.

The Varuna exercises have developed in complexity over time, according to interviews with defence policy officials. While earlier editions focused on anti-piracy patrols, anti-terrorism, and disaster management, the naval exercises today are more complex and regular.⁴³ There is a lack of systematic

information about the exercises and their evolution over time, but officials describe them as high-level exercises that include anti-submarine warfare, aerial exercises, surface warfare, air defence, and replenishment training.⁴⁴ One of the factors enabling the higher complexity of the exercises is, according to interviews, the Indian Navy's increased capabilities.⁴⁵

Several exercises have involved aircraft carriers from both countries, as in 2019, 2021, and 2023.⁴⁶ Submarines from both navies participated in all exercises with the exception of 2023. Although not mentioned in official documents, the UAE participated in Varuna for the first time in 2021.⁴⁷ See Table 1 for more details.

In addition to the Varuna exercises, a novelty in the navy-to-navy interaction is the organisation of joint surveillance missions from Réunion Island with

the objective to increase maritime domain awareness, and to identify menaces against maritime security, such as pirates and terrorism, in the Mozambique Channel and in the South-Western Indian Ocean. A first mission was organised in 2020, and two missions took place in 2022.⁴⁸ Often hailed in joint statements as promising examples for future cooperation, this type of exercise appears limited in scope: one Indian Navy P-8 aircraft participated in the five-day exercise in 2022, together with French surveillance frigates from the naval base on Réunion Island. Nevertheless, ambitions are to intensify cooperation, based on these examples, in the South West Indian Ocean, and, eventually, to extend missions to India's maritime neighbourhood.⁴⁹

In addition to bilateral naval exercises, France and India also participate in naval exercises in other formats.

Table 1. Varuna 2017–2019, 2021–2024

Year/location	Activities	Participating units France	Participating units India
2024 ^(a) Mediterranean	Tactical manoeuvres, advanced anti-submarine warfare exercises, aerial exercises, air-defence exercise, weapon firings.	1 frigate; 1 submarine, fighter jet, maritime patrol and anti-submarine warfare aircraft, light attack aircraft, multi-role helicopters	Frigate, long-range multi-mission maritime patrol aircraft, shipborne helicopters
2023 ^(b) Arabian Sea Goa	Surface warfare, anti-submarine warfare, anti-aircraft warfare; replenishment training at sea, visitation exercises, helicopter cross-decking	Aircraft carrier, command and replenishment ship; naval jet fighters, tactical aircraft	Jet fighters, maritime patrol aircraft
2022 ^(c) Arabian Sea	Anti-submarine warfare tactics, gunnery shoots, seamanship evolution, tactical manoeuvres, air operations, helicopter cross-deck landings, gun firing, replenishment procedures between ships	Surface ships, submarines, maritime patrol aircraft, fighter aircraft, helicopters, 1 frigate, 1 support vessel, other units for anti-submarine warfare operations	1 destroyer, multi-purpose helicopter, maritime patrol aircraft, other units exercised on full spectrum of ASW operations.
2021 ^(d) West Arabian Sea	High-tempo naval operations, air defence, anti-submarine exercises, rotary-wing flying operations, cross-deck helicopter landings, tactical manoeuvres, surface and anti-air weapon firings, underway replenishment; anti-submarine warfare exercises; cross-visits of personnel.	Aircraft carrier and its carrier wing, jet fighters, tactical aircraft, helicopters, 1 air defence destroyer, 1 multi-mission frigate, 1 command and supply ship	1 destroyer, 2 frigates, 1 support ship, multi-purpose helicopter, light helicopters, fleet support tanker, 1 submarine, long-range patrol aircraft
2019 ^(e) Goa	Not specified	1 aircraft carrier, 2 destroyers, 1 frigate, 1 tanker, 1 nuclear submarine	1 aircraft carrier, 1 destroyer, 1 frigate, 1 submarine, 1 fleet tanker
2018 ^(f) Goa Chennai Réunion Island	Joint anti-submarine combat training, amphibious operations, air defence, firing, manoeuvres, asymmetric warfare, embarkation	Nuclear submarine, multi-purpose amphibious assault ship, vessels from the naval base on Réunion Island, including 1 frigate	1 submarine, 1 destroyer, 1 frigate, 1 multi-mission maritime aircraft
2017 ^(g) Mediterranean Atlantic coast	Not specified	4 vessels: 2 multi-mission frigates, 1 anti-aircraft frigate; 1 frigate	4 vessels: 1 destroyer; 2 frigates; 1 replenishment and repair ship

Source: (a) Ambassade de France en Inde, "Exercice Varuna 2024," <https://in.ambafance.org>. (b) Ministère des armées, "ANTARES – Bilan de l'exercice naval franco-indien VARUNA 23.1", www.defense.gouv.fr. (c) Ambassade de France en Inde, "Exercice Varuna 2022," <https://in.ambafance.org>. (d) Ministry of Defence, India, "Exercice Varuna – 2021," <https://pib.gov.in>. (e) Ambassade de France en Inde, "Indian and French navies conduct Varuna 19.1 bilateral exercise," <https://in.ambafance.org>. (f) Ambassade de France en Inde, "Third phase of Varuna bilateral exercise," <https://in.ambafance.org>. (g) Ambassade de France en Inde, "Indo-French joint naval exercise Varuna 2017 conducted off French coasts," <https://in.ambafance.org>.

For example, the French and Indian Navies participate in the Pèrouse exercise and the multilateral MILAN exercise hosted by the Indian Navy.⁵⁰

DEEPENED DEFENCE INDUSTRIAL COOPERATION

India is the largest recipient of French arms exports, representing 29 percent of total French arms exports in the period 2017–2021. France’s arms exports to India have also increased over time and were almost 11 times higher in 2017–2021, compared to 2012–2016.⁵¹

France’s share of India’s total arms imports has also increased. Between 2016 and 2021, Russia was India’s main supplier of arms, with a 46 percent share of India’s total imports, followed by France as the second most important supplier at 27 percent, and the US in third position at 12 percent.⁵² Russia’s position as main supplier to India dropped to 36 percent between 2019 and 2023, while France’s share increased, to 33 percent, and imports from the United States remained at the previous period’s level.⁵³

French exports of arms to India entail major arms contracts, mainly aircraft and submarines, which involve long-term engagement for logistics support, maintenance, exchange of intelligence, and joint training. Interviewees described these exports as having a structuring effect on French-Indian relations.⁵⁴

Major contracts for aircraft and submarines delivered during the Macron presidency were signed before 2017. The contract for six French Scorpène-class conventional-powered submarines, signed in 2005 was completed in 2022 with the delivery of the final submarine.⁵⁵ A contract for 36 French Rafale jet fighters signed in 2016 was finalised with the delivery of the last aircraft in 2022.⁵⁶ Currently, France and India are negotiating an order for 26 Rafale Marine aircraft and three more Scorpène-class submarines.⁵⁷

Increasingly, French arms exports include production in India. In 2024, France and India agreed on a Defence Industrial Roadmap that expresses increased cooperation between their respective defence industries, including co-design, co-development, and co-production of advanced defence technologies. Joint statements and documents underscore the importance of using India as a manufacturer and exporter of defence equipment, which resonates with India’s “Make in India” policy.⁵⁸ This latter aspect is emphasised in the negotiations for India’s acquisition of 26 Rafale Marine aircraft and 3 Scorpène-class submarines, which includes sharing of knowledge and, as the documents state, where “Indian companies play a leading role in arms production.”⁵⁹ An

expression of the defence industrial cooperation “Make in India” is the presence of about 700 French-affiliated companies in India with 400,000 employees.⁶⁰

Future industrial defence cooperation may include the joint development of a combat-aircraft engine and industrial cooperation for motorisation of heavy-lift helicopters.⁶¹ Another example of defence industrial cooperation is in the field of surface ships.⁶²

CONCLUSIONS

Why is India such an important partner to France? France, a medium-sized power with a global presence and limited military resources, faces a deteriorating security situation in the Indian Ocean and in the broader Pacific region, increasing its dependence on cooperation with others. To secure links with overseas territories and to promote freedom of navigation on major maritime routes, France’s strategy in the Indo-Pacific region rests on multiple instruments: providing support to multilateral institutions, cooperation with major states, participation in military missions, and promotion of an increased engagement by European partners.⁶³

How has France’s strategic cooperation with India evolved during the Macron years? The analysis finds that France’s strategic partnership with India is long-term and includes structural cooperation across broad domains. Continuity, deepening relations, and pragmatism characterise the strategic partnership under the Macron years. Naval interaction has grown during that time, with increasingly complex exercises. For example, the agreement on reciprocal logistics support from 2018 will facilitate the two navies’ access to each other’s military facilities. Arms exports and defence industrial cooperation continue and involve technology transfer and more emphasis on the production of defence equipment according to the “Make in India” concept.

Looking ahead, are there any challenges for France’s strategic cooperation with India?

India’s long-term relations with Russia is a special cause of concern. The two states have close relations and India depends on Russian defence materiel, which is likely to continue in the future.⁶⁴ Yet, Russia’s share of India’s arms imports has continuously decreased since 2009–2013, and India is increasingly turning to Western arms suppliers, such as France and the US, as well as its own arms industry, to cover its needs.⁶⁵ Still, India has abstained from voting on several UN General Assembly resolutions condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.⁶⁶ Prime Minister Modi’s two-day visit to the Kremlin in July 2024 was described by the press as “a balancing

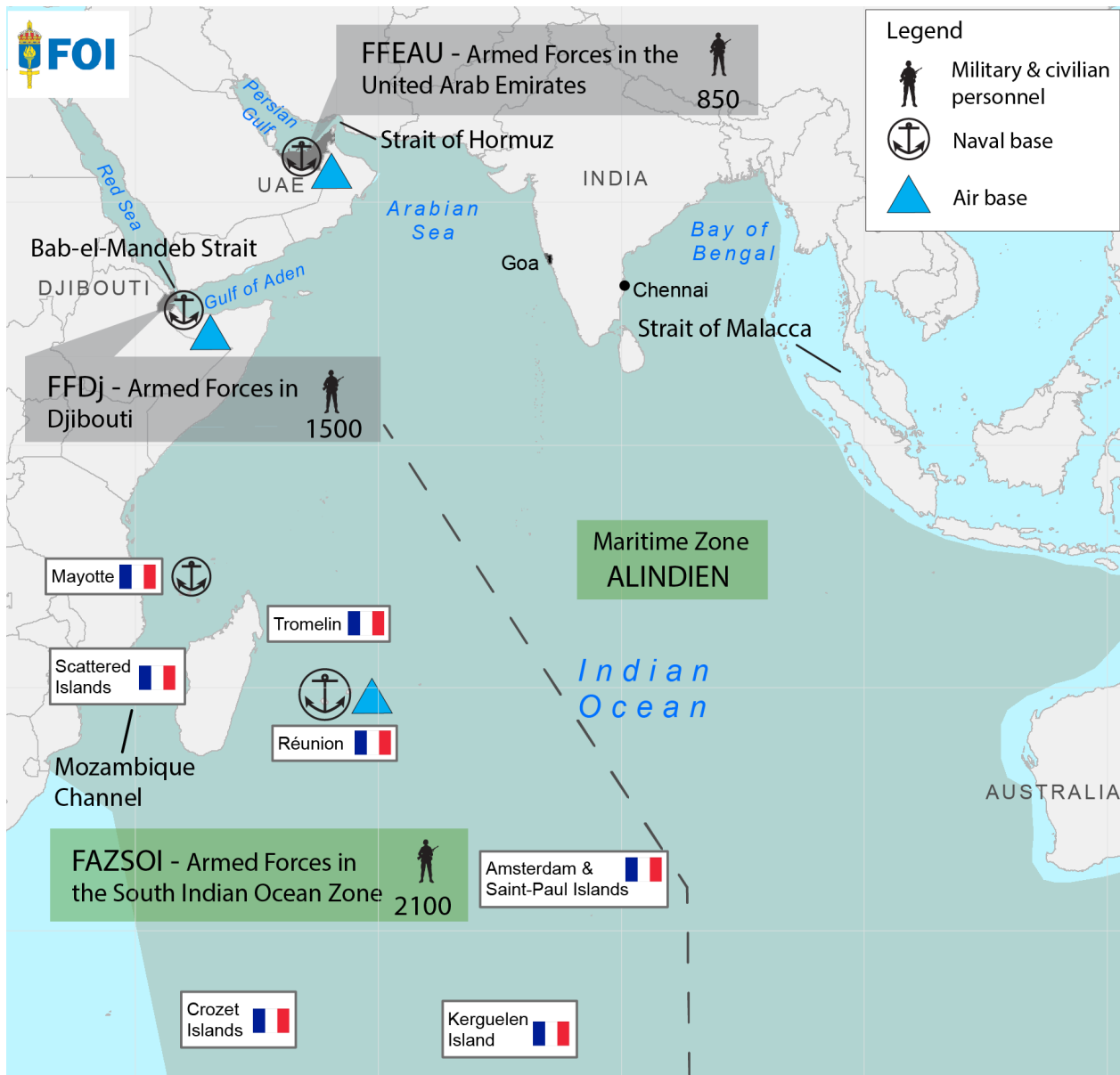
act” between maintaining its longstanding relations with Moscow and building closer ties with the West.⁶⁷

India’s multi-alignment policy presents a challenge that, over time, could potentially alter the country’s political and security preferences. For example, if India decides to increase cooperation with illiberal regimes, those choices may have significant long-term effects. However, as long as India perceives China as a threat, it will probably have an interest in maintaining close relations with France and other Western states as a way of

deterring China, protecting its maritime interests, and securing maritime routes in the Indian Ocean.

In sum, despite these challenges, this memo’s findings suggest that the France-India relationship will continue to deepen. The strategic cooperation between France and India builds on long-term, structural, and institutionalised contacts across broad domains. Hence, it is likely that the strategic partnership between France and India will last even when Macron and Modi have left the political scene. ■

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Map 1. France's presence in the Indian Ocean.

Notes: Map made by Per Wikström, FOI

Djibouti. Djibouti is host to France's largest military presence in Africa, including forces from the Army, the Navy, and the Air and Space Forces. It is a key logistics node for counterterrorism and anti-piracy missions, evacuations, and other missions in Africa, and a transit point for stocking up on supplies and maintenance.⁶⁸ France has no permanent naval presence there.⁶⁹

UAE. France's military forces in the UAE are divided between three different locations: a naval base, an air base and an army base. The military presence supports operational deployments, bilateral cooperation with the UAE, regional cooperation, hosting troops from mainland France, and foreign contingents. The naval base has capacity to receive all types of French Navy vessels, with the exception of aircraft carriers. French vessels rotate in.⁷⁰

Réunion/Mayotte (French territory). The French forces are divided between a naval base on Réunion, a smaller naval base on Mayotte, an airbase on Réunion and Army detachments on both islands. The naval presence consists of nine naval vessels, including two frigates.⁷¹ Missions include maritime surveillance, protection of maritime routes, other French interests, and the EEZ. The French forces have a key role in regional security cooperation, evacuation of nationals, humanitarian aid, and disaster relief operations.⁷²

Endnotes

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