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France, the United Kingdom, and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP): Issues for Congress

Successive U.S. Administrations have sought to bring European allies into a range of strategic initiatives in the Indo-Pacific region. In recent years, some European nations, particularly France and the United Kingdom (UK), have deepened their strategic posture in Asia. An increased European presence in the region unfolds against a backdrop of concerns held by many in Asia about China and the sustainability of the U.S. commitment to the region. Congress may consider the evolving role of France and the UK in the Indo-Pacific as it exercises oversight of the Trump Administration's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP) strategy.

Although both countries remain relatively modest powers in the region, a growing French and British presence in the Indo-Pacific can act to support U.S. interests. Through their strategic relations, arms sales, and military-to-military relationships France and the UK have the ability to strengthen the defense capabilities of regional states and help shape the regional balance of power. Thus far, no European state, including the UK or France, has formally endorsed the Trump Administration's FOIP strategy.

The Trump Administration's National Defense Strategy emphasizes the need to "Strengthen Alliances and Attract New Partners." In addressing the need to "expand Indo-Pacific alliances and partnerships" the document states, "We will strengthen our alliances and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific to a networked security architecture capable of deterring aggression, maintaining stability, and ensuring free access to common domains ... to preserve the free and open international system." In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Assistant Secretary of Defense Randall Schriver observed that, "We are stepping up our engagement with European and NATO allies, such as the United Kingdom, France and Canada, with whom we share enduring interests in the Indo-Pacific region."

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 construction and militarization of several artificial islands in the South China Sea, its increasingly aggressive behavior in asserting its maritime claims, and the extension of PLA Navy patrols into the Indian Ocean Region.

Congress, in exercising its oversight role, may examine the Trump Administration's efforts to implement the United

States' Defense Strategy in the Indo-Pacific and determine if the United States is working effectively with like-minded nations, such as France and the United Kingdom, to advance shared values and interests in the region.

France

France has long been engaged in the Indo-Pacific region, but its defense relations appear to be deepening, possibly due to concerns about China's growing influence. It 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, Japan, and Vietnam. In July 2018, the French government adopted plans under which annual defense spending would increase until France reaches NATO's defense-spending target of 2% of GDP in 2025. France's defense budget in 2018 increased by 5% to €34.2 billion (approximately \$39 billion), equivalent to about 1.8% of GDP. By comparison, UK defense spending in 2017/18 grew by 1.7% to reach £36 (approximately \$45.4 billion), which represents 2.1% of GDP. French President Emmanuel 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.... It is the one which will allow us to build on a geopolitical level the neutrality of the Indo-Pacific space. From the Horn of Africa to the Americas it will allow us and our allies to take part in this great equilibrium and ensure the freedom of navigation across the seas

France has extensive interests in the Indo-Pacific region. These include 1.5 million French citizens living in French Indo-Pacific territories and an extensive exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of 9 million square kilometers, derived from those territories. France has regional military installations in its territories as well as in Djibouti and the UAE and reportedly sends its warships into the South China Sea three to five times a year. France is part of the FRANZ Arrangement with Australia and New Zealand and is a member of the 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.” It is also reported that Macron is planning on organizing a meeting of Pacific island nations in 2019.

France and India expanded their strategic partnership during Macron’s March 2018 visit to India. India and France 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. Delivery of the aircraft is expected to begin in 2019. 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 UK also appears to be shifting its external focus to place relatively more emphasis on the Indo-Pacific. The UK’s pending withdrawal from the European Union (“Brexit”) may drive it to seek expanded trade relations in the Indo-Pacific region. Speaking to the Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore in 2018, UK Secretary of State for Defence Gavin Williamson stated:

Standing united with allies is the most effective way to counter the intensifying threats we face from countries that don’t respect international rules. Together with our friends and partners we will work on a more strategic and multinational approach to the Indian Ocean region—focusing on security, stability and environmental sustainability to protect our shared prosperity.

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*. In April 2018, the UK opened a new naval support facility in Bahrain that will be capable of supporting the new aircraft carriers HMS

Queen Elizabeth and HMS *Prince of Wales*. It is reported that HMS *Queen Elizabeth* could be deployed to the Pacific soon after entering active service in 2020, where it may operate alongside Australian naval ships. In August 2018, 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 August 2017, UK Prime Minister Theresa May and Japanese Prime Minister Abe agreed on a Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation pledging to enhance the two countries’ global security partnership. The two nations also hold regular Foreign and Defense Ministerial Meetings. British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt met with Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono in Tokyo in September 2018 and Kono welcomed the further presence of the UK in the Indo-Pacific region. In September 2018, the HMS *Argyll* and Japan’s largest warship, the *Kaga* helicopter carrier, held exercises in the Indian Ocean. In October 2018, the UK and Japan held a joint army exercise in central Japan.

The UK has Commonwealth ties to numerous states across the Indo-Pacific littoral. 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 is reportedly opening new High Commissions in Vanuatu, Tonga, and Samoa in 2019, and Defence Secretary Williamson and Singapore Minister for Defence Ng Eng Hen signed a new Defence Cooperation Memorandum of Understanding on the sideline of the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue. 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 has signed an agreement with UK defense contractor BAE Systems to purchase nine new Type 26 frigates in a deal worth an estimated \$25 billion.

Observations

Alongside indications of the UK’s increasing focus on the region, observers also note that resource constraints and competing priorities could limit the degree to which the UK reengages with the Indo-Pacific. Bilateral cooperation, such as the participation of UK forces in France’s 2018 *Jeanne d’Arc* naval operation, could potentially develop into a platform whereby other European countries might become more engaged in the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, regional states may view a more engaged Europe as a potential alternative to the U.S. as they hedge against a rising China and uncertain U.S. leadership in the region.

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