French Military Power Management in the 21st Century: Indo-Pacific Strategy, Strategic Autonomy, and Global Ambitions

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Abstract: *France's post-AUKUS Indo-Pacific posture seeks to translate 'strategic autonomy' into practice through diversified partnerships, EU instruments, and a limited forward presence. Using a capability–commitment framework, the article shows that while the 2024–30 LPM expands munitions depth, maritime lift, and C4ISR, France still relies on allied enablers for sustained Pacific operations. Case studies of India, Japan, South Korea, and Southeast Asia reveal where autonomy is substantive (industrial cooperation, MDA, legal frameworks) and where it remains declaratory. This article argues that France's pursuit of 'strategic autonomy' in the Indo-Pacific is a paradoxical endeavor, fundamentally constrained by its inescapable dependence on U.S. security guarantees and finite resources. This forces Paris into a distinctive form of 'privileged-partner hedging,' leveraging EU leadership and sovereign territories to exert influence it cannot sustain unilaterally. The 2024–30 LPM modernizes capabilities but cannot resolve this core dependency, limiting France to a role of selective contributor, not independent balancer.*

Keywords: France, Indo-Pacific, autonomy, power, strategic.

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Introduction[1]

The Indo-Pacific has become the principal testing ground for France's strategic autonomy. Since the 2021 AUKUS crisis – when Australia abruptly cancelled its submarine deal with Paris in favor of a U.S.–U.K. partnership – France has sought to reassert its geopolitical relevance and defend its credibility as a "resident power" in the region.[2] The diplomatic rupture revealed not only the fragility of France's defense-industrial relationships, but also the broader challenge facing Paris: how to remain an influential actor between two great powers whose rivalry increasingly defines global order.

This renewed Indo-Pacific activism has become the cornerstone of President Emmanuel Macron's foreign policy. Paris presents itself as a promoter of a

"third way," one that avoids binary alignments and emphasizes a rules-based, multilateral approach anchored in sovereignty and partnership.[3] Through updated defense strategies (*the Revue nationale stratégique* 2022) and the 2024–2030 Military Programming Law (*Loi de programmation militaire*, LPM), France has multiplied diplomatic missions, joint exercises, and arms exports in the region, from the Scorpène submarine program with India to naval drills with Japan and Indonesia. At the same time, it has sought to embed its strategy within a European framework through the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Strategic Compass. Yet, beneath this activism lies a critical question: do France's resources and instruments actually match the scope of its ambition?

Existing literature and commentary on France's Indo-Pacific policy often focus on the idea of France as a "balancing power" or "resident nation."[4] Less attention is given to evaluating whether this posture is sustainable, and to what extent it translates the concept of strategic autonomy into operational capacity. Scholars such as Jolyon Howorth and Sven Biscop have emphasized that autonomy is multidimensional: military, industrial, and political. For France, these dimensions intersect with the dilemmas of a middle power: limited means, overlapping alliances, and dispersed commitments across Africa, Europe, and the Pacific. Addressing these contradictions requires moving beyond declaratory policy toward a measurable assessment of capability and alignment.

This article argues that France's post-AUKUS Indo-Pacific strategy exposes a fundamental paradox: its pursuit of 'strategic autonomy' is fundamentally constrained by an inescapable dependence on U.S.-led security structures and its own finite resources. Rather than achieving true independence, France is executing a distinctive form of 'privileged-partner hedging.' This strategy leverages its EU leadership, sovereign territories, and defense-industrial partnerships to exert a level of influence that masks its inability to act as a unilateral regional power. The AUKUS crisis did not create this paradox, rather it revealed its stark reality. The paper adopts three analytical lenses to test this argument:

1. Strategic autonomy versus alliance dependence, examining how far France can act independently from the U.S. or EU enablers;

2. Middle-power hedging, assessing how France simultaneously engages with and distances itself from both Washington and Beijing;

3. The capability–commitment gap, measuring whether the new LPM and defense reforms provide adequate means for sustained Indo-Pacific operations.

Methodologically, the analysis combines official documents (*Revue nationale stratégique* 2022, LPM 2024–2030, *Assemblée nationale* reports) with secondary literature and policy commentary. It situates France's Indo-Pacific approach within broader debates on European strategic autonomy and middle-power behavior. Empirical evidence focuses on four case studies: India, Japan, South Korea, and selected ASEAN partners – chosen for their strategic relevance and contrasting forms of cooperation. These cases allow an evaluation of France's diplomatic, operational, and industrial instruments, and the degree to which they reduce or reproduce dependency.

The article proceeds as follows: the next section outlines the conceptual framework connecting autonomy, hedging, and capability. The subsequent sections trace France's adaptation after the AUKUS shock, analyze France's main bilateral partnerships, and examine domestic defense reforms under the LPM. The discussion then considers geographical, logistical, and alliance-based constraints that limit France's Indo-Pacific reach. The conclusion reflects on what a realistic "third way" leadership might entail for a European power with global ambitions but finite means.

France's Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Post-AUKUS Pivot

From Submarine Deal to Strategic Reassessment

France's Indo-Pacific strategy did not emerge from a vacuum but was conceived as a response to profound structural shifts in the global order: the accelerating U.S.-China strategic rivalry, the fragmentation of the international system into a competitive multipolarity, and the attendant risks to the rules-based order that underpins French prosperity. The Indo-Pacific region's economic gravity, accounting for 36% of global GDP and 35.4% of France's extra-EU trade, makes it an unavoidable strategic theater.[5] French President Emmanuel Macron's early advocacy for an Indo-Pacific 'axis' in 2017 and the publication of France's first strategy in 2019 were pre-emptive moves to secure French relevance and economic interests, positioning Paris as a 'third way' power offering an alternative to the binary U.S.-China alignment. This framing was a direct response to multipolarity, aiming to leverage France's unique attributes – sovereign territories, a global military footprint, and EU leadership – to avoid the fate of other European powers that perceived as secondary actors. The U.S.-China trade war and subsequent geoeconomic decoupling efforts further cemented the region's status as a contested zone, forcing France to navigate between its significant trade deficit with China (€49 billion in 2022)[6] and its need to 'de-risk' critical supply chains, a tension at the core of its strategic autonomy discourse.

The cancellation of the Franco-Australian submarine contract in September 2021 marked a pivotal rupture in France's Indo-Pacific policy. The decision by Canberra to join the AUKUS alliance with the United States and the United Kingdom instantly transformed a major industrial partnership into a diplomatic crisis. For Paris, the loss of a €56-billion deal was less damaging than the message it conveyed: that France – despite its resident territories and 7,000 personnel stationed from Réunion to New Caledonia – was perceived by its closest allies as a peripheral rather than indispensable Indo-Pacific actor.[7] Official reactions in Paris were immediate and severe. The French government recalled its ambassadors from Canberra and Washington, describing AUKUS as a "stab in the back."[8] Yet beyond rhetorical indignation, the episode prompted a deeper strategic reassessment. The crisis underscored the fragility of France's reliance on bilateral defense-industrial ties and its overconfidence in historical alliances. It also exposed a mismatch between France's global discourse on autonomy and the limited perception of its actual leverage in the region.

While the AUKUS crisis of September 2021 was a profound diplomatic shock, it was less a genesis than a brutal catalyst. The cancellation of the submarine contract exposed the fragility of France's bilateral defense-industrial ties and the stark gap between its rhetoric of autonomy and its perceived leverage. However, this acute shock merely accelerated a strategic adaptation already necessitated by the pre-existing structural drivers. The crisis forced a painful recognition that in an era of great power competition, even historical allies would act unilaterally, validating France's initial fears and intensifying its push for a diversified, network-based approach.

However, this recalibration underscored, rather than resolved, the central paradox of French strategy. The diversification of partnerships and the 'Europeanization' of its posture were not pathways to pure autonomy, but admissions of its impossibility. They were mechanisms to manage dependence, to avoid over-reliance on any single partner, especially the United States, while still relying on the broader Western alliance system for the strategic enablers, from intelligence to logistics, that France alone cannot provide at scale. First, diversification of partnerships beyond Australia became an explicit priority. Paris deepened cooperation with India and Japan – two countries sharing concerns about Chinese assertiveness and valuing France's role as a stable, non-aligned partner. Second, France intensified its coordination with the European Union to 'Europeanize' its Indo-Pacific presence.[9] The publication of the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific in 2021 provided political cover for French ambitions to act under a European flag, transforming what had been a national strategy into a shared framework. Third, the Ministry of the Armed Forces initiated an internal review of overseas deployments, logistical assets, and supply chains to assess what degree of operational autonomy France could realistically sustain without U.S. enablers.

The aforementioned adjustments illustrate a shift from declaratory ambition to managed interdependence. The war in Ukraine, erupting just months after AUKUS, acted as a second, competing shock, violently pulling French military resources and strategic attention back to the European continent. This created a critical resource trilemma, narrowing the material and political bandwidth available for Indo-Pacific ambitions and making the 'Europeanization' of its strategy not just an ambition but a necessity to share the burden. Consequently, the post-AUKUS recalibration, as outlined in the Revue nationale stratégique 2022, emphasized 'strategic solidarity' and 'selective engagement' a tacit admission that strategic autonomy would be pursued through partnerships, not in spite of them.

In this context, the AUKUS shock functioned as a strategic stress test, accelerating France's transition from a posture of symbolic balancing to one of pragmatic, network-based hedging. It forced the translation of the autonomy narrative into concrete, if limited, actions: deepening agreements with India, engaging in trilateral dialogues, and leveraging EU naval initiatives all aimed at preserving France's visibility and agency in a region where its capacity for unilateral action is structurally constrained by geography, resources, and now, a land war in Europe.

Strategic Partnerships Across the Indo-Pacific

France's Indo-Pacific strategy rests on the assumption that sustainable influence requires partnerships rather than presence alone. Following the AUKUS rupture, Paris shifted from a hub-and-spoke model centered on Australia to a diversified network of alignments designed to strengthen France's diplomatic credibility and operational reach. The logic underpinning these relationships follows what this paper terms selective hedging: building flexible cooperation with likeminded states without binding commitments that would undermine France's strategic autonomy.

The Franco-Indian partnership is consistently portrayed as a strategic cornerstone, built on shared values of multipolarity and defense-industrial synergy. However, this framing obscures a more transactional and mutually compensatory reality. While the Scorpène submarines and Rafale jets provide India with advanced, non-Russian capabilities, this relationship serves a deeper, reciprocal hedging function. This partnership seems to help France hedge against its own allies much more than it helps India get its independent stance from the U.S.. For India, France is a politically palatable Western supplier that does not demand alignment with U.S. grand strategy, thereby preserving New Delhi's autonomy from Washington and mitigating its dependency on Moscow. Conversely, for France, India is not merely an 'Asian anchor' but a geopolitical counterweight to China that is blessedly free of direct U.S. control, allowing

Paris to demonstrate influence without operating under an American shadow. Yet, this convenient arrangement has clear limits. The partnership thrives on symbolic gestures, such as joint exercises and blue economy roadmaps, but deliberately avoids binding operational planning or formal alliance structures that would compromise either party's cherished autonomy. It is a hedge built on shared aversions rather than shared ambitions, powerful as a diplomatic signal but structurally incapable of generating decisive autonomous power in a regional crisis.

In contrast to the industrially focused relationship with India, France's cooperation with Japan reveals a different, and perhaps more telling, facet of its strategic identity. The frequent joint exercises and participation in dialogues adjacent to the Quad suggest a partnership of principle, aligned on a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific.' Despite that this cooperation in opposite demonstrates the fundamental comfort for France to say within the U.S.-aligned framework, revealing the ultimate limits of French autonomy. France's engagement with Japan, a core American ally whose security is inextricably linked to Washington, is a far cry from its rhetoric of a 'third way.' Instead, it showcases a pragmatic admission: for high-end operational effectiveness in the Pacific, integration with the U.S.-led ecosystem is not just efficient but necessary. The reciprocal access agreements and observer status in Quad-related talks are not acts of defiance but of assimilation. This relationship demonstrates that France's proclaimed 'strategic autonomy' has a clearly defined boundary: it will not come at the cost of being excluded from the primary security architecture of the region. Cooperation with Japan is the acceptable face of alignment, allowing France to maintain the fiction of independent decision-making while functionally reinforcing the very U.S.-centric system its rhetoric often claims to challenge.

The nascent partnership with South Korea represents a logical, yet complex, extension of France's networked hedging strategy. For France, South Korea is an attractive partner as a leading democracy, a technological powerhouse, and a fellow middle power that also professes a desire for 'strategic autonomy' amid U.S.-China competition. This partnership, focusing on high-tech sectors like batteries, within the framework of ProLogium's investment in France, and potential defense technology collaboration, allows France to tap into South Korea's advanced industrial base and strengthen its economic footprint in Northeast Asia, a region where its influence is otherwise minimal.[10] However, this partnership is inherently double-edged in the context of U.S. dominance. While it diversifies France's regional ties, it simultaneously engages a country whose security is fundamentally anchored in a strict U.S. alliance. France gains access to South Korean technology and a like-minded voice on normative issues, but it does little to diminish the underlying U.S.-centric security architecture. In fact, by engaging a core U.S. ally, France risks having its

'autonomous' partnership indirectly co-opted into reinforcing the very alliance system it seeks to distance itself from. Therefore, the Franco-South Korean partnership is best understood as a complementary, niche collaboration that enhances France's economic and diplomatic weight but does little to resolve, and may even obscure, its fundamental strategic dependency on the U.S. security umbrella in the region. It is a partnership that covers economic and diplomatic drawbacks but leaves the core military-strategic constraints untouched.

France's re-engagement with Southeast Asia demonstrates an effort to translate rhetoric into inclusive diplomacy. Paris has strengthened relations with Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam, countries receptive to its non-aligned narrative. It became an ASEAN "Development Partner" in 2020, aligning with EU initiatives on connectivity, climate, and maritime governance.[11] Yet, this outreach remains largely symbolic compared with the Indo-French and Franco-Japanese axes. France's economic footprint in ASEAN states is limited, and its naval presence through Mission Jeanne d'Arc or Marianne serves primarily as demonstration of commitment. The lack of sustained logistics infrastructure in the region underscores the persistence of the capability–commitment gap identified earlier. Paris compensates through niche contributions, such as maritime domain awareness and coast-guard training, which provide visibility at low cost.

The four partnerships collectively reveal France's adaptation from bilateral diplomacy to networked autonomy. Each partner addresses a different dimension of the autonomy dilemma: industrial (India), operational (Japan), technological (South Korea) and normative (ASEAN). Together they diversify France's access, visibility, and influence, yet they stop short of delivering full strategic independence. The emerging pattern is not that of a "balancing power" in the traditional sense but of a middle power operating through cooperative density. This model allows France to maintain relevance in a region dominated by major powers, while accepting that leadership must be shared, situational, and contingent on collective frameworks. The sustainability of this approach will depend on whether France can match its diplomatic agility with material depth – munitions, logistics, and intelligence – under the 2024–2030 defense reforms.

Domestic Military Reforms and Modernization Efforts

France's credibility as an Indo-Pacific actor ultimately rests on its domestic defense modernization. The *Loi de programmation militaire* (LPM) 2024–2030, unveiled in April 2023, represents both a financial leap and a strategic recalibration. With a projected budget of €413 billion over seven years –a 40% increase from the previous cycle– the LPM aims to consolidate France's status as a "comprehensive military power" capable of responding to simultaneous

crises in Europe and beyond.[12] Yet the real question is whether this modernization can translate into sustained capabilities relevant to the Indo-Pacific theater.

President Emmanuel Macron described the new LPM as the blueprint for a "war economy," a term signaling the need to accelerate industrial output, replenish munitions, and ensure supply-chain resilience.[13] The law prioritizes readiness and sustainability over mere force expansion. Among its principal objectives are:

- Replenishment of munitions stockpiles and industrial acceleration through faster production cycles;

- Modernization of naval and air assets, including the future Porte-avions nouvelle génération (*PANG*), six new Barracuda-class submarines, and replenishment tankers;

- Investment in intelligence, cyber, and space capabilities to enhance strategic awareness;

- Improvement of overseas deployments, with special attention to interoperability and logistics in territories stretching from Djibouti to Polynesia.

While these measures appear comprehensive, they are distributed across global commitments from the Baltic to the Sahel, making the Indo-Pacific one among several priority theaters. The LPM acknowledges this dispersion indirectly by emphasizing selectivity of engagement and the principle of endurance through partnerships. In other words, autonomy is defined not by acting alone, but by ensuring that limited forces can be sustained longer through prepositioned assets and shared logistics.

For France, the Indo-Pacific challenge is not numerical but logistical. Maintaining even modest operations requires heavy reliance on enablers: refueling aircraft, intelligence-sharing, satellite coverage, and naval replenishment. The LPM partially addresses these vulnerabilities through investments in aerial refueling (A330 MRTT), multi-mission frigates, and modernization of amphibious ships (Mistral class). However, analysts note that while the new carrier and submarines enhance prestige, they do not necessarily increase regional endurance. The replacement pace for surface combatants and patrol aircraft means that overall volume remains constant. The French Navy will still struggle to maintain continuous presence across three maritime zones (Indian Ocean, South Pacific, and Caribbean) without allied support. In this sense, the LPM underscores the paradox of autonomy: modernization improves quality, but not necessarily availability.

The domestic "war economy" narrative also serves a political function: to align defense reform with economic recovery and industrial sovereignty. France's defense-industrial base, led by Naval Group, Dassault, Thales, and MBDA, is positioned as both national asset and export engine. Indo-Pacific clients, particularly India and Indonesia, feature prominently in government communications as examples of successful strategic partnerships through industry.[14] The LPM strengthens this logic by financing innovation clusters, securing rare materials, and supporting Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) critical to supply resilience. Yet the industrial model remains export-dependent. Approximately 40% of French defense production is destined for foreign clients, exposing the system to external demand fluctuations and political constraints.[15] From a strategic autonomy perspective, this export reliance blurs the line between industrial strength and strategic vulnerability: autonomy of production does not guarantee autonomy of employment.

A less visible but significant shift in the LPM is the allocation of over €6 billion to space, cyber, and intelligence capabilities. These domains underpin France's ambition to project influence across vast maritime spaces without proportional troop expansion. The creation of the *Commandement de l'Espace* (Space Command) and the strengthening of the *Direction du renseignement militaire* (DRM) are central to this transformation. For Indo-Pacific operations, these capabilities serve as force multipliers: real-time situational awareness, coordination with partners in maritime domain awareness (MDA) initiatives, and improved deterrence through non-kinetic means. In practice, they support what might be termed "autonomy through information superiority."[16] France thus seeks to compensate for quantitative limits through qualitative technological leverage, consistent with its identity as a high-end but medium-scale power.

Despite its record funding, the LPM's effectiveness will depend on execution. France faces inflationary pressures, industrial bottlenecks, and recruitment shortages that could erode real purchasing power. Moreover, simultaneous commitments in Europe and Africa continue to absorb operational bandwidth. The document's recurring emphasis on endurance and resilience implicitly acknowledges these constraints. From a policy-analysis perspective, the LPM 2024–2030 represents a move from declaratory autonomy to disciplined prioritization. Rather than claiming independence from allies, it defines sovereignty through sustained capability and credible contribution. The law aligns with the *Revue nationale stratégique 2022* in advocating "strategic solidarity" with partners while preserving freedom of decision. This pragmatic reading of autonomy – "autonomy in action, not isolation"– fits the middle-power hedging model discussed earlier.[18]

In the Indo-Pacific context, the modernization program provides France with the tools to remain visible and relevant, but not dominant. Enhanced ISR

(intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance) and refueling capacity will allow limited but regular deployments of task groups, while prepositioned assets in La Réunion, New Caledonia, and French Polynesia ensure baseline presence. Cooperation agreements with India and Japan are expected to optimize logistics and information sharing. Yet the strategic balance remains fragile. Even with the new budget, France cannot simultaneously fulfill deterrence obligations in Europe and sustain high-intensity operations in the Indo-Pacific. The most plausible outcome is a selective engagement model: episodic deployments backed by diplomacy and industrial cooperation. In essence, the LPM equips France not to dominate the Indo-Pacific, but to remain a credible and autonomous participant within a coalition of likeminded powers.

Constraints and Trade-offs: NATO, the EU, and the African Rebalance

France's Indo-Pacific ambitions operate under the gravitational pull of three interlocking constraints: the demands of European defense through NATO, the evolving architecture of the European Union's security policy, and the ongoing military disengagement from Africa. Together they expose the structural tension between France's global narrative and its finite capabilities – a tension at the core of its strategic autonomy dilemma.

NATO: The Atlantic Anchor and the Autonomy Paradox

Although France formally reintegrated into NATO's military command structure in 2009, it continues to promote an autonomous European defense identity within the Alliance. This duality defines the core paradox of French strategy: Paris depends on NATO, and by extension, U.S. command structures, intelligence, and logistical networks, for its fundamental security, even as it seeks to assert a strategic initiative independent of Washington. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine brutally reinforced this dependence, pulling critical resources back to Europe and making clear that France's Indo-Pacific ambitions exist only at the sufferance of American power guaranteeing European stability. For the Indo-Pacific, this means French naval deployments are symbolic gestures that operate within a U.S.-controlled logistical corridor, a dependency starkly at odds with the rhetoric of global independence.[19]

Politically, the crisis reaffirmed U.S. leadership within NATO just as Paris sought to project influence in Asia. French officials acknowledge that "strategic autonomy" cannot mean strategic solitude; hence the emphasis on complementarity rather than competition with the Alliance.[20] Yet the result is a form of bounded autonomy: freedom to act where U.S. priorities are peripheral, but

limited discretion when European security is at stake. For the Indo-Pacific, this means that France's military profile will remain secondary to its diplomatic and industrial instruments. Its Indo-Pacific missions rely on U.S. logistical corridors, shared intelligence, and access to allied facilities – a dependence at odds with the rhetoric of global independence.

The Autonomy Paradox: French Strategy and American Power.

The duality of the situation becomes obvious when the "partner-privileged" framework clashes with the French political priorities. While the 2024-2030 LPM represents a significant financial commitment to modernizing France's force structure prioritizing munitions stockpiles, a new-generation aircraft carrier (PANG), and advanced submarines — these investments procure sovereign platforms, not sovereign operational capability. Sustaining a carrier strike group on a protracted deployment like Operation Clemenceau requires a dense network of enablers that France alone cannot provide at scale: persistent, theater-wide ISR from U.S. satellite constellations; aerial refueling and strategic airlift that dwarf French capacity; and a global logistics chain anchored by the U.S. Military Sealift Command.

Consequently, French power projection operates within a logistical corridor and an informational ecosystem ultimately guaranteed by Washington. This reality creates a complex dilemma as NATO, driven by U.S. leadership, formalizes its interest in the Indo-Pacific. On one hand, NATO's engagement, as articulated in its strategic concepts and the 2025 Parliamentary Assembly resolution linking Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security, offers France a legitimizing, multilateral framework to share burdens and amplify its influence.[21] On the other hand, it presents the threat of strategic subordination, potentially funneling French efforts into a U.S.-centric containment strategy against China, thereby eroding the independent decision-making that defines strategic autonomy. France's 2021 veto of a NATO liaison office in Tokyo is a testament to this fear. Thus, French autonomy in practice is not the absence of interdependence, but a continuous and pragmatic negotiation of it: a calibrated effort to leverage American power without being subsumed by it, preserving the sovereignty of choice even when the means of action are shared.

The European Union: Strategic Multiplier or Bureaucratic Constraint?

If NATO represents structural dependence, the European Union offers France a potential multiplier. Since 2017, Paris has pushed for deeper EU defense integration, culminating in initiatives such as the *European Intervention Initiative* (EI2), *Permanent Structured Cooperation* (PESCO), and the 2022 *Strategic Compass*. The Indo-Pacific features prominently in these documents, largely due to French advocacy.

The EU's 2021 *Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific* reframes the region as a shared European concern, allowing France to embed its national agenda in a collective framework. Naval missions under the *Coordinated Maritime Presences* (CMP) concept in the Indian Ocean illustrate how Paris leverages EU instruments to extend reach at minimal cost. However, this Europeanization also dilutes unilateral agency. EU missions proceed by consensus, and most member states remain cautious about antagonizing China. Moreover, the EU's resources –diplomatic and financial rather than military– cannot substitute for hard-power projection.[23] Thus, France's effort to "Europeanize" its Indo-Pacific strategy produces symbolic solidarity but limited force multiplication.

From an analytical standpoint, by anchoring its Indo-Pacific strategy in a multilateral setting, France mitigates the perception of unilateral adventurism and spreads costs across partners. Yet the dependence on consensus and the EU's incremental pace of decision-making slows the translation of policy into action.[24] Strategic autonomy is therefore shared but diluted – a compromise between ambition and practicality.

Africa: Retrenchment and the Redistribution of Attention

The third major trade-off stems from France's retrenchment in Africa. The progressive drawdown of *Operation Barkhane* (terminated in 2022) and expulsions from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger mark the end of an era of large-scale French interventions. Officially, this pivot frees resources for other theaters, including the Indo-Pacific.[25] In practice, the transition exposes new vulnerabilities.

First, the African withdrawals are politically costly: they erode France's credibility as a security provider and undermine its image as a global stabilizer. Second, the logistics and personnel released are not easily reallocated; forces specialized in counterinsurgency cannot be redeployed overnight to maritime or high-intensity operations. Third, instability in the Sahel and renewed competition from Russia and China still require diplomatic and intelligence attention, consuming bandwidth in Paris's strategic apparatus.

Nevertheless, the African shift has indirect benefits. It forces the French defense establishment to confront its capability–commitment gap by prioritizing theaters where interests are vital and local partnerships strong.[26] By reducing the scale of African commitments, France aims to preserve readiness for high-end contingencies in Europe and selective presence in the Indo-Pacific. The LPM 2024–2030 explicitly enshrines this logic of "selectivity" and "endurance".[27] In this sense, retrenchment is not only a constraint but also a necessary condition for rebalancing.

Balancing Continental and Maritime Priorities

The interplay of NATO, EU, and African dynamics demonstrates the structural trade-offs of France's grand strategy. Paris remains the global middle power, that has enough ambitions to transform into the rising major power – able to deter on the continent, intervene in its near abroad, and project influence into the Indo-Pacific. But the same finite set of assets must serve all three ambitions. This generates what can be termed a tri-theater tension: European commitments guarantee relevance within the Alliance; African withdrawals test resilience and reputation; Indo-Pacific deployments sustain France's global profile. Managing these simultaneously requires constant arbitration between symbolic presence and operational substance.

From a conceptual lens, these tensions reveal the limits of autonomy in practice. Autonomy is not the absence of interdependence but the ability to choose among dependencies. France's strategic behavior reflects this pragmatic understanding. By engaging in NATO for deterrence, leveraging the EU for legitimacy, and rationalizing its African footprint, Paris constructs an adaptive – not absolute – autonomy. The cost of this adaptability is diffusion: without clear prioritization, each theater risks under-resourcing. The challenge for the coming decade will be to maintain coherence across these commitments while avoiding the trap of strategic overstretch disguised as global ambition.

For the Indo-Pacific specifically, these constraints mean that France will continue to act as a selective contributor rather than a theater leader. Its comparative advantage lies in diplomatic access, industrial partnerships, and symbolic presence through occasional deployments. NATO's European demands and Africa's instability ensure that the Indo-Pacific remains a domain of opportunity but not of concentration. Still, within this constrained autonomy, France retains strategic value: it offers the European Union an external projection vector, the United States a reliable yet independent ally, and Indo-Pacific states a partner without hegemonic baggage. Navigating these overlapping expectations defines the essence of France's third-way diplomacy – a balancing act sustained as much by credibility and endurance as by material power.

Discussion and Conclusion: Between Ambition and Realism

To declare France a 'middle power' is to state a partial truth. While its material resources and inability to dictate the regional order alone fit the classification, this label obscures more than it reveals. France is not a typical middle power like Australia or Canada; it is a **Systemic Middle Power.** Its hedging strategy is distinctive not in its goal of avoiding binary alignment, but in its unique starting position and the singular tools at its disposal. A critical dissection of

French official rhetoric, treating it not as fact but as a strategic claim, reveals that its pursuit of autonomy is a project of managing inescapable dependencies, not transcending them. The distinctiveness of French hedging lies in three constitutive elements that simultaneously enable and constrain its ambitions.

First, France hedges from within the heart of a major alliance. Unlike non-aligned states such as India or traditionally hedging powers like ASEAN members, France's strategic position is fundamentally anchored in NATO. Paris rhetorically champions strategic autonomy as a bulwark against over-reliance on Washington, yet its entire operational posture in the Indo-Pacific is structurally dependent on U.S.-led security infrastructures. The official narrative of the *Revue nationale stratégique 2022* and the LPM speaks of 'sovereign choice' and 'freedom of action.' However, the reality is that a French naval deployment, such as the Mission Clemenceau, operates within a U.S.-controlled logistical corridor, reliant on American ISR satellites, aerial refueling capacity, and the global reach of the U.S. Military Sealift Command. This is not autonomy; it is privileged dependency. France seeks to leverage the Alliance's benefits while publicly denying its pervasive influence, a luxury unavailable to a middle power outside such a structure. Its hedging, therefore, is an intra-alliance maneuver, seen as an attempt to carve out a niche of political discretion within a security system it cannot and will not leave.

Second, France instrumentalizes the European Union as a unique force multiplier. When French diplomacy speaks of 'Europeanizing' its Indo-Pacific strategy, it is not merely pursuing multilateralism; it is engaging in a form of scale-jumping. By embedding its national agenda within the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy and mechanisms like the Coordinated Maritime Presences (CMP), France gains diplomatic weight and resource pooling that a standalone middle power like South Korea could never muster. This allows Paris to punch above its weight, presenting its national interests as collective European concerns. Yet even this multi-play has its own limits. The EU is a consensus-based body where most members more recently prioritize economic relations with China, parallel to their constant fear of antagonizing Beijing. Consequently, the 'Europeanized' presence is often diluted to the lowest common denominator, e.g. symbolic naval port calls and normative initiatives on maritime governance that lack hard-power credibility. France uses the EU to mask its own material shortcomings, but in doing so, it trades unilateral agency for a slow, often anodyne, collective diplomacy. The EU is thus a crutch, not a catalyst, for genuine strategic autonomy.

Third, and most fundamentally, France's claim to be a 'resident power' is not just diplomatic posturing but a legal and physical fact grounded in sovereign territory. With 1.6 million citizens and 7,000 military personnel across Réunion, Mayotte, New Caledonia, and French Polynesia, France possesses a

permanent, legally undeniable footprint in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. This is a distinction no other middle power can claim. Official sources relentlessly promote this 'residency' to justify France's place at the regional table. However, this very asset also constitutes a critical vulnerability. These territories magnify France's capability-commitment gap, stretching its limited logistical and military resources across vast distances. They create a duty of presence that forces Paris to make constant, costly demonstrations of commitment, lest it be seen as a neglectful metropolitan power. The sovereignty that grants it a voice also chains it to a dispersed and expensive defense burden, compelling a strategy of 'selective engagement' that belies the rhetoric of being a full-spectrum resident power.

In conclusion, the distinctiveness of French middle-power hedging lies in this triad of characteristics: intra-alliance positioning, EU instrumentalization, and sovereign residency. Together, they create a form of 'systemic' influence, allowing France to operate across multiple scales of global governance. Yet, a critical voice must emphasize that this very distinctiveness is rooted in contradiction. The gap between the rhetoric of autonomy and the reality of dependency is not a temporary failing but a permanent condition. France's strategy is not a path to true independence but a sophisticated, and at times self-deceptive, management of its constrained position. It is the hedging of a power that was once great, operating within a system it can no longer command, but from which it retains unique and irreducible privileges.

Endnotes

1. The author used Language Tool for grammar and spell-checking. In addition, the author used ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-5) to: (1) translate primary sources from French to English, (2) assist in formatting citations for sources used in the manuscript, (3) shorten vast informational blocks to increase the readability of the text. Voyant was used for content analysis of the documents cited in the paper. All AI-assisted content was verified and edited by the author.

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