

OBSERVATORY OF MULTILATERALISM IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

MULTILATERALISM IN THE INDO-PACIFIC: (RE)DEFINING COOPERATION FORMATS TO MEET REGIONAL CHALLENGES

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MINUTES FROM THE FRS - INALCO CONFERENCE

The Fondation pour la recherche stratégique (FRS) and the Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales (Inalco) held a one-day conference on June 16, 2023: Multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific: (re)defining cooperation formats to meet regional challenges.

This event was the first international conference organized within the framework of the Observatory of Multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific, a major research program supported by the Ministry for the Armed Forces, led by FRS in cooperation with Institut Montaigne and the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) as well as Sciences Po and Inalco.

Two keynote speeches and three sessions brought together high-level speakers (government representatives, researchers and experts, parliamentarians, industrialists, etc.) to provide an opportunity to understand and analyze in depth the evolution and challenges of multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific.

Introductory remarks

Professor Jean-François HUCHET, President, Inalco, France

Dr. Bruno TERTRAIS, Deputy Director, FRS, France

The Indo-Pacific (IP) region has long been present, although not always under this name, both at Inalco and the Fondation pour la recherche stratégique (FRS). Inalco plays a key role in the Nouméa Accord, especially in implementing the agreement on the organization of scientific research and university teaching in Kanak languages in New Caledonia. More generally, the very aim of Inalco is to offer a decentralized view of international relations and multilateralism, including from countries and cultures of the Indo-Pacific.

FRS has been proactively conducting research on and in the Indo-Pacific zone, through both regional and thematic approaches. It has recently stepped up its initiatives in this area: bilateral (Australia, Korea, India and Japan) and trilateral (France-Australia-India) strategic dialogues supported by French administrations; European exchange platform on the Indo-Pacific in partnership with the German SWP; dedicated research programs on the foreign and security policy of several Indo-Pacific countries (Japan, Korea, Taiwan and India); publication of numerous notes and studies, etc.

The creation of the Observatory of Multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific (*Observatoire du multilatéralisme en Indo-Pacifique*, OMIP) in January this year has prolonged this dynamic. Funded by the French government (DGRIS / Ministry for the Armed Forces), OMIP is a major research program led by the Fondation pour la recherche stratégique, in cooperation with ECFR and Institut Montaigne, as well as CERI/Sciences Po and Inalco. It seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the Indo-Pacific and to promote the influence of French strategic thinking on and in the region.

This first annual conference is part of these ambitious goals, with a view to providing an operational, critical and innovative perspective on multilateral cooperation formats in the Indo-Pacific region, drawing on speakers with a wide range of profiles and backgrounds. Our panels include representatives from South Korea, Indonesia, the Emirates, Sri Lanka, Australia, the UK and

the USA, be they academics, experts, officials, business representatives or parliamentarians. FRS, which is committed to promoting gender equality, has tried to set up rigorously gender-balanced panels but could achieve only relative success on this score for this specific event.

Keynote Speeches

General Patrik STEIGER, Director for International Security Affairs, DGRIS, Ministry for the Armed Forces, France

Professor HAN Sukhee, President, Institute for National Security Strategy, South Korea

Moderated by Dr. Antoine BONDAZ, Director of the Observatory of Multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific and Research Fellow, FRS

The current period, characterized by many South Korean specialists as a “new Cold War” between the US, Russia, and China, has made multilateral cooperation even more necessary. The war in Ukraine, for example, illustrated the strength of a multilateral response to guarantee the international order.

With the support of the EU and its “European Global Gateway”, France is committed to maintaining stability in the Indo-Pacific, recognizing that the multilateral approach is the best way to preserve security and sovereignty. However, it admits that its combination with unilateralism could produce even better achievements. France is indeed deeply aware of the importance of partnerships to maintain a “free and open IP” (FOIP). Hence it wishes to play the role of a “solution provider” in helping its neighbors build on their capacities. Relying on its overseas territories and military deployments there, France also intends to adopt a “deconflicting and balancing posture”.

South Korea has also recognized the importance of mutually beneficial, non-exclusive multilateral cooperation, as highlighted in its recent Indo-Pacific strategy. The latter places a strong emphasis on economic security, which South Korea links directly to democratic development. The country would like to share its experience in this area. Maintaining peace, freedom of navigation, and overflight rights in the South China Sea are also priorities. To this end, South Korea favors multilateral cooperation while accepting unilateralism as long as they do not compromise the work of regional organizations.

France’s and South Korea’s approaches have much in common, even if the means for achieving the same objectives differ. For example, both countries are committed to extending their cooperation not only to interpersonal and cultural relations but also to areas other than security, such as emerging technologies and climate change. On the climate front, South Korea has invested in the Northeast Asia Power System Interconnection (NAPSI), while France is stepping up its HADR missions. The importance of the Pacific is another common thread. As a resident nation, France aims to guarantee the security of the “Pacific family” through a multilateral approach. South Korea, on the other hand, is involved mainly through the prism of China’s growing commitment to the region. Nevertheless, the capacity to play a leading role simultaneously on several theaters remains unsure. More generally, both countries see themselves as sovereignty enablers/enhancers in the Indo-Pacific.

Session 1: Is too many the enemy of the good? Questioning the multiplication of multilateral formats

Professor Delphine ALLÈS, Vice-President, Inalco, France

Dr. Evan LAKSMANA, Senior Fellow, IISS – Asia, Indonesia

Chris HOLTBY, Indo-Pacific Strategy and Delivery, FCDO, United Kingdom

Moderated by Dr. Antoine BONDAZ, Director of the Observatory of Multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific and Research Fellow, FRS, France

The goal of a “free and open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) is shared by most of the actors, despite superficial differences among them. The coordination at the national level (e.g., between France and the overseas territories), at the international level, and between these two levels is less clear. In any case, cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region should not be based only on formal fora.

Minilateralism and multilateralism are often opposed in the general discussion; minilaterals are said to weaken the regional security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region. Historically, however, multilateralism did not precede minilateralism, they emerged at the same time. Both are on a continuum: many players are involved in both formats and try to articulate them. What has changed more recently is the uncoordinated increase in the number of groupings, exercises, etc., without any parallel increase in the quality of engagements. This over-supply has also led to increasing overlap and contradictory situations. While there is a relative plebiscite for ASEAN-centric fora, there is at the same time a latent trend to bypass them. Moreover, multilateralism is perceived as less effective when based only on cooperation between “like-minded” partners. Thus, a context of “network polarity” has gradually emerged. In other words, the more you do with one partner, the less you can do with others. Polarization is also reflected both in the opposition between pro-China and pro-US countries and within each country.

The ASEAN is central to these reflections as the origin and illustration of multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific, but also as an ecosystem integrating minilateral groupings too such as the ADMM+. However, its role is not perceived in the same way by all: while its centrality is seen as “problem-solving” by outside powers, ASEAN countries perceive it as “process driven”. Nonetheless, ASEAN has “successfully socialized the US to ASEAN”, conveying the message of diverse partnerships and inclusion. This diversity and ability to choose partners has also gradually led to a situation of “strategic overcrowding” in the Indo-Pacific. Many in Southeast Asia see the increasing number of Indo-Pacific strategies as a response to the rise of China, and as such as an overfocus on security challenges. While France’s strength in defense and security is one of its major added values, defense is not the only priority for countries in the region. The EU Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum has taken note of this. However, it remains a European initiative, at a time when the EU’s policies are often perceived as non-unified, and many ASEAN countries would prefer to revive the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) or the East Asia Summit (EAS).

Globally, every country is seeking autonomy. But strategic autonomy as such does not exist. It depends on a power’s ability to “craft a strategic context” that is favorable to it, and therefore ultimately to choose its partners and types of partnership accordingly. Combining bilateralism, minilateralism, and multilateralism as three complementary layers of engagement could be the most relevant solution from this perspective. Indeed, some organizations are useful for a few domains only. Areas as diverse as trade, human rights (which are very much under-represented in the various strategies), security, and the energy transition certainly require several fora. For a

country like Singapore, climate change represents an existential threat, whereas for some others it's more of a business opportunity.

The most important remains that the minilaterals respect the rules and adhere to the international order. The problem lies in the fact that some countries are convinced that ASEAN can tackle all issues alone. In addition, it is a priority to make sure that established formats deliver before creating other similar groupings, to avoid an accumulation of formats that ultimately produce little. In the UK, a dedicated “delivery department” has even been set up.

There is also a need to consider the communication associated with each format to avoid disinformation campaigns (for example, AUKUS and the hypothetical nuclear proliferation risk it carries). Such disinformation will spread quite easily if we consider the anti-Western sentiment still firmly entrenched in some Indo-Pacific countries and the persistent perception of one-way formats, with little regard for the reciprocity of commitments between the West and the PF countries.

Several existing formats are successful and could serve as examples. The Malacca Straits Patrol, with its minilateral approach and equal power veto of each member, is certainly one of them. The Just Energy Transition Partnerships (JETP) in Indonesia and Vietnam and their issue-based cooperation, which could be extended, or the Information Fusion Centers (IFC) are other formats seen as successful. What all these examples have in common is their focus on delivery rather than deliberation.

Session 2: A regional architecture impossible to design? The reconfiguration of defense and security cooperation

Dr. Mohammed Ibrahim AL DHAHERI, Deputy DG, Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy; Director for Strategy & Future, Ministry of Foreign Affairs & International Cooperation, United Arab Emirates

Dr. Emmanuel PUIG, CSDP/Military Cooperation & Partnerships, EEAS, European Union

David SANTORO, President, Pacific Forum, United States

Moderated by Dayle STANLEY, Director, Futures Hub, National Security College, ANU, Australia

Although cooperation embraces all areas, defense and security remain central in a region like the Indo-Pacific where power plays are commonplace.

The Gulf States and the European Union (EU) are originally not security players in the Indo-Pacific. They have become involved in this area in different ways. The Gulf States initially refused to adopt an Indo-Pacific strategy. However, because of their strong economic and commercial ties to the region, and their recognition of its centrality to connectivity and climate, they invested in several formats. The idea was to encourage a FOIP in order to safeguard their interests, indirectly implying a commitment to security. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) for example has adopted a non-aligned approach to security, promoting dialogue with all players – with China, for example, considered “too big to be isolated”, or with Iran and Israel at the same time. It has thus engaged bilaterally, minilaterally, and multilaterally in formats such as the I2U2, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and, more recently, the UAE-France-India trilateral.

Likewise, multilateralism is in the EU's DNA, and it has been a central pillar of its political principles, making it a natural trading partner in the Indo-Pacific. Nevertheless, it is not *a priori* a power in defense and security. The EU's 2022 strategy has clarified this point: it states that partnerships are central to the EU's policy, notably to ensure security, set international standards and contribute to stability. In this respect, the Schuman Security and Defence Forum, one of the deliverables of the Strategic Compass, is considered a success. The EU's approach has thus gradually evolved and matured, and today the Union positions itself as a "smart enabler" (and a "security provider" in Europe) *via* tailored partnerships. As a strong believer in holistic security, the EU has engaged at many levels: in operations such as Atlanta, with both anti-piracy and signaling goals, in capacity and capability building and information sharing activities, as well as in countering WMD proliferation, and in foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) projects. Thus, cooperation between the EU and Indo-Pacific countries is growing rapidly as the EU's expertise creates high expectations on its partners' side. However, there is still a need for coordination to face the disruptive dynamics of the constellation of states that make up the EU and the Indo-Pacific, and to enable the EU to fully play its role as a "smart enabler".

The United States is more traditionally oriented towards and committed to defense and security issues. The question remains on how to "make collective deterrence and defense work in the IP". By bringing together scholars from like-minded countries (Australia, Japan, South Africa, the UK, and the US), a recent project conducted by the Pacific Forum aims to build a more robust security architecture. While its goal is to rally countries less aligned with the US, it does not include France. The latter is indeed seen as very important in the region but more difficult to cooperate with because of its quest for strategic autonomy. Among the project's conclusions, the five countries agree on China's intentions, including the fact that Taiwan will remain its top priority whatever happens. To this end, all of them are modernizing their security framework and capabilities and would like to focus more on high-handed strategic deterrence. Although pro-multilateralism, they recognize that the most extensive and inclusive organizations are not always the most effective. The US-Australia-Japan trilateral is seen as a model in this respect and remains fully compatible with the Quad. The idea that there should be a new division of labor between the US and its allies is shared, although it is not clear how it should be done and implemented.

Whether they are directly or indirectly involved in the security of the region, at the multi- or minilateral level, the aforementioned players insist on the ability to deliver as the first factor in evaluating the effectiveness of a format. To improve each of the existing groupings, it would be useful to pay greater attention to feedback from partners with a view to redefining the very foundations of such cooperation. Among these basic elements, it would be a good start to identify together the areas of focus for each partner before working on coordinating them. It should also be ensured that commitments are reciprocal. For example, the US is aware that one of its weaknesses in the Indo-Pacific is the economic component of its strategy, between protectionism and the desire to develop partnerships. Despite this, no trade policy is emerging in Washington, and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) remains a one-way street, offering no opportunity for Indo-Pacific countries to enter the US market. Finally, as in the previous panel, the importance of truly engaging and integrating civil society was reiterated.

Session 3: Who is behind multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific? Practitioner perspectives on regional cooperation

Dr. André GATTOLIN, Senator, VP of the Foreign Affairs, Defense & Armed Forces Committee, France

Asanga ABEYAGOONASEKERA, Senior Fellow, The Millennium Project, Sri Lanka

François DEVOTO, Director for International Affairs, Naval Group, France

CDR Alexis GOLLNISCH, Former Commanding officer of the support and assistance ship Bougainville, Ministry for the Armed Forces, France

Moderated by Marianne PERON-DOISE, Director of the Indo-Pacific Geopolitical Observatory, IRIS, France

Intergovernmental cooperation between the main Indo-Pacific powers is the most visible. However, other major players are involved or should be more involved in countries' strategies, including the civil society but also private enterprises and the region's smaller states.

In France, although foreign policy is mainly the responsibility of the executive, the Parliament and private enterprises are a force to be reckoned with, given their status as "actors-spectators" in the region. The Parliament has highlighted France's lack of a geopolitical approach and its fragmented vision of the Indo-Pacific, inherited from a tradition of bilateralism that it is finding hard to shake off. In this respect, it would be more accurate to speak of mini-bilateralism rather than multilateralism, which remains a long-term objective. In addition to its role of an "advisor", the French Parliament has also become a real player in the region. For example, some MPs are members of the Interparliamentary Alliance on China, which brings together MPs from thirty countries and regularly turns to civil society, even if there is still a reluctance to rely on the contributions of researchers. Nevertheless, parliamentary diplomacy remains closely aligned with France's official diplomacy and is rather one of its numerous tools.

Companies are often quoted in the Indo-Pacific strategies of the region's states as facilitators and vectors of influence. As field players not directly involved in politics, they are better placed than anyone else to observe power plays. And yet, their voices remain largely unheard. For example, until recently, many countries had not considered China's increasingly assertive policy and its impact on its neighbors, mainly because of the Covid pandemic. The AUKUS announcement should not be read as a technical issue but as an expression of the perceived need to strengthen ties with the US in the face of this poorly appreciated strategic shift. From the point of view of companies, for whom stability is paramount, it is necessary to engage partners from outside the Indo-Pacific region, including the US, which remains central to security in Asia (which does not have its own NATO).

In addition to being observers and receptacles of government policies, companies are also direct players. Armament manufacturers are a prime example: "Countries in the Indo-Pacific are not only buying ships, they are also buying sovereignty". Submarines, for example, provide an asymmetric deterrence capability, which will become essential in the years to come for the security of countries in the region. In addition, having local components and maintenance, as well as reliable partners (reliability in terms of maintenance availability and of country stability), is a chief concern. Companies understand these factors, which are also potential prerequisites for deepening diplomatic relations. Thus, they play a direct part in states' strategies and in ensuring a FOIP. Nevertheless, while "arms sales are and should be part of Indo-Pacific strategy, they are no substitute for regular high-level engagements".

The armed forces, more traditionally, are directly answerable to the executive and are a major player in Indo-Pacific strategies as well. France is no exception. From France's hexagon to its overseas territories, they carry out sovereignty missions. They also maintain close regional cooperation, especially in the South Pacific with Human Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) and fisheries control missions, as well as France's bilateral relations with Indo-Pacific countries. Finally, multilateral exercises are a key dimension of France's commitment, since they enable it to signal its intentions while improving its interoperability with other militaries in the region, thus its capacity and legitimacy to act.

Last but not least, the region's smaller states, particularly the coastal ones, are not enough listened to. In addition, they sometimes find it difficult to get together to make their voices heard. This is the case in South Asia, where the creation of a multilateral organization such as ASEAN has never been possible. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for MultiSectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) continues to exist, but it took years to produce its first charter, and its achievements remain limited. The support of countries in specific areas such as the blue economy, within BIMSTEC and the Colombo Conclave, for example, is vital in this respect. Much remains to be done, however, and first and foremost to be understood. Concerning the rules-based order, for example, its implementation in some countries remains a blind spot. Many small countries also feel pressurized to make a binary choice between China and the US, with the strong idea that middle countries, their needs, and their desire for diversification are not considered. The fact that APEC has taken on board issues that are important to certain small countries, such as corruption, is nonetheless welcomed.

Concluding remarks

Vice-Admiral Christophe LUCAS, Deputy DG for International Relations & Strategy, Ministry for the Armed Forces, France

Dr. Antoine BONDAZ, Director of the Observatory of Multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific, FRS, France

The Indo-Pacific represents a priority for France. Commitment in this region must not be seen simply in terms of formats, which are often fetishized. It should first focus on the implementation of concrete actions and deliverables. To achieve this, it is essential to listen to and understand the voices of the Indo-Pacific. This will require improving communication channels beyond the intergovernmental level. To make sure our actions are understood and accepted, we should make sure our official concepts evolve accordingly.

First, France could present itself as a proactive power and a solutions provider. France seeks to be a responsible country with a unique capacity for mobilization and impetus within the multilateral framework. It implements projects that contribute to solving global problems, benefiting populations, and mitigating global imbalances. Second, France is also an enhancer of sovereignty. Through its actions and cooperation, it contributes to facilitating the expression of its partners' sovereignty by presenting a distinct French and European offer that aims to enable decision-making without constraint. This approach, through capacity building and coalition building, empowers them to fully defend their interests.