How Realistic are French Ambitions in the Indo-Pacific?

On September 9, 2019, the first Russian-French Security Cooperation Council since 2012 took place in Moscow, resuming the bilateral dialog, albeit in a different “2 + 2” format between the French and Russian Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defense. The talks were a new move within a series of other important initiatives and meetings held this year, undoubtedly indicative of a certain degree of warming taking place in relations between the two countries. For example, the two presidents met in France at the end of August ahead of the G7 Summit, where Emmanuel Macron suggested they should let Russia rejoin their “exclusive club”, and the Franco-Russian business community met in St. Petersburg in February.

For centuries, Franco-Russian relations have played an extremely important role for both countries, with a broad spectrum of overlapping concerns: political and strategic interests, economic interests, culture, and of course there are people-to-people ties. Today’s renewed dialog between Moscow and Paris offers some hope that their efforts could gradually be combined to overcome the key problems in Europe and world politics which are frustrating bilateral relations between France and Russia, especially when you consider that political heavyweight Angela Merkel is due to retire from politics soon. However, the renewed dialog with Russia is not the main focus of this article, although it is an extremely important development and does deserve some analysis.

This article considers the wider role France plays in the international arena, led by the country’s young and ambitious President, Emmanuel Macron, who many researchers consider a politician who does not enjoy great support within his own country (judging by his falling ratings), but see Macron as a classic example of a globalist politician who plays a very active role across many different areas in world politics. Macron has advocated creating a vehicle in Europe with “many different gears” to move forward, reorganizing and strengthening EU institutions. He has called for the creation of a more strategically autonomous Europe when it comes to defense, and recently called for the idea of forming a European army to be put back on the table, which caused quite a stir in the United States, where Macron has displayed a good measure of defiance in meetings with Donald Trump on more than one occasion. Emmanuel Macron has taken a proactive approach in addressing the tensions in the Persian Gulf. He has voiced his support for Boris Johnson’s proposal to create a European-led maritime force to guarantee the region’s security, and offered to assist Saudi Arabia in its investigation into the drone attacks which took place on September 14. You could say that the French President is almost always one of the first on the scene in world politics.

However, more attention needs not only to be paid to the measures Paris has taken in the Gulf and the role France plays there, we need to also look at the wider role France plays in the Indo-Pacific, which French policymakers consider is becoming more central to the country’s interests for many reasons. It is no coincidence that over the past couple of years, Paris has published key documents including the French “Defense and National Security Strategic Review 2017” and “France and Security in the Indo-Pacific 2018”. The Indo-Pacific region is home to approximately 1.5 million French citizens in 10 overseas territories in the South-Western Indian Ocean and several others in Oceania. Over 2 million square kilometers or 90% of France’s exclusive economic zones (EEZ) are located in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. More than 8 thousand troops are stationed in the region, and there are also 7 military bases, including bases on the Réunion Island, in Djibouti and the UAE. France is the third largest arms exporter to the Indo-Pacific (mainly to India and Australia). The country plays an active role in the EU’s anti-piracy missions around the Horn of Africa (NAVFOR), in naval exercises at various different levels and with different groups, in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), in the FRANZ agreement (with Australia and New Zealand), in the Pacific Islands Forum, etc.
All of this activity clearly demonstrates the diversity of French interests — France claims to be a middle power but has global ambitions. The way things look, involvement in these alliances is crucial for Paris to achieve its global ambitions, as France may face new challenges and risks due to China’s growing economic power, political weight and naval profile. The infrastructure of the “Belt and Road Initiative” would be one cause for concern, which could create problems for France in terms of protecting global trade, maintaining freedom of navigation and protecting natural resources. There could also be an increase in terrorism spreading from some Islamic States, as well as threats of nuclear proliferation, piracy, illegal fishing and increased migration. Considering the present concerns, French President Emmanuel Macron is focusing on extremely relevant key areas: the search for new partners and allies, the great extent of French participation in multilateral formats and initiatives to create different structures for international cooperation.

At the multilateral level, France became a member of the D10, a group comprised of different democracies — Australia, Great Britain, Canada, Germany, Italy, Japan, South Korea, the United States, plus the EU — who met in Berlin at the end of May to discuss security issues in the Indo-Pacific. According to French experts however, this group which is yet to prove it can really achieve something in practice should be more active, set more ambitious goals, and admit more new members, including India, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia. Paris has repeatedly expressed interest in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Australia, India, Japan, and the United States), and there are rumors that France would also like to receive a formal invitation to act as an observer for the group, the way UK did.

In May 2018 (after a visit to China), Emmanuel Macron put forward his own initiative to create a strategic Paris-Delhi-Canberra axis in the Indo-Pacific, in order to counter the threats China could pose. It has been almost a year and a half since the French President made this proposal, but it is worth highlighting that Macron’s ideas on forming a trilateral alliance are making slow progress, probably because the President is being kept busy in France with the ongoing “yellow vests” protest movement.

The development of relations between the proposed members of the alliance succeeded on more of a bilateral level, India’s proximity to China makes the alliance a greater priority, with Paris clearly prepared to help keep China at bay. The strategic partnership between India and France has seen a great deal of activity, including India’s recent purchase of 6 Scorpène-class submarines and 36 Rafale fighter jets, then there are the annual Varuna naval exercises, which were held for the 17th time on May 22-24 this year, as well as intelligence sharing, etc. The two countries are also partners in the field of civil nuclear technology, which has accelerated certain measures agreed back in 2009 to create this technology, and has paved the way for the Jaitapur Nuclear Power Project, etc. The focus of much attention has been a document on the Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region, signed by President Macron and Prime Minister Modi in March 2018 in New Delhi, along with an Indo-French agreement on reciprocal logistics support for armed forces. The latter agreement is similar to the 2016 Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) between India and the US, but unlike LEMOA, the agreement between India and France is already having a real effect: Indian naval ships can refuel at the French base on Réunion Island, and negotiations are underway to allow them to refuel at the Djibouti base. In exchange, French military vessels are able to use the ports of Mumbai and Karwar, which increases the amount of interaction between the Indian and French navies, with ports stretching from the East African coast to the Strait of Malacca. There is talk of plans for the joint construction of a military base in the Seychelles.

Prime Minister Modi’s visit to Paris on August 22, 2019 marked another important development stage in bilateral relations, where negotiations took place with the aim of pursuing greater cooperation in areas such as space security, artificial intelligence, supercomputers and digital technology. Both sides also made plans to launch 8-10 satellites to monitor the marine space of the Indian Ocean Region. This project with France is India’s largest, out of all its partnerships with other states in space. Paris and Delhi intend to continue to improve their military-to-military relations going forward, and increase the opportunities available for the joint production of weapon systems within the framework of the “Make in India” government program.

India is certainly not the only country on the friendly French radar, and knows how important it is to have allied ties in the Indo-Pacific, in order to be able to work together to protect SLOCs, undersea internet cables across the bottom of the ocean, and other communications. France has made efforts over the past few years to intensify its partnerships with Australia, Indonesia, Vietnam and Malaysia. As for Singapore, this island nation has become the second most important partner for Paris in the field of research on defense and technology, second only to the United States. The Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier berthed at Changi Naval Base on May 28, 2019 was yet another indication of France’s interest in developing strategic ties with Singapore, and was also a reflection of the country’s growing security obligations in the broader Indo-Pacific. Faced with these growing security obligations, the annual
meetings of the Australian and French Defense Ministers, the ongoing strategic dialog, and closer political, diplomatic and military cooperation between Paris and Canberra in the Indo-Pacific are all crucially important in covering a greater area and stepping up the joint fight against terrorism, piracy and other major security threats — not only on France’s Western front, but also in Oceania and even off the Antarctic coast. Both France and Australia have small overseas territories there: the French Kerguelen Islands and Crozet Islands, and Australia’s Heard Island and McDonald Islands. A fair border settlement was recently reached between them, which facilitates joint scientific research in Antarctica and the development of logistics. Nevertheless, French relations with Australia are not as close as they are with India. Therefore, if Emmanuel Macron’s Paris-Delhi-Canberra axis were to take shape, the strategic trilateral relations would not form a balanced equilateral triangle.

France is stepping up its search for partners in the Indo-pacific, and Japan could well become a key ally, given that the Japanese are looking to diversify their strategic security partners and reduce their dependence on Washington. Latent relations with Tokyo promise to be really dynamic and hold exciting prospects. President Macron is energetic, and certainly will not want to pass up these opportunities. Thus, in July 2018, France and Japan signed an agreement to exchange ammunition and military services, and on July 26, 2019, President Emmanuel Macron paid his first visit to Japan, where the two parties agreed the terms of a new bilateral format to discuss the challenges of maritime security and the fight against terrorism in the Indo-Pacific region.

Although France does not have a key position among the leading non-regional players in the Indo-Pacific region, it does appear that Macron is determined to raise the bar and address a number of regional problems more effectively, including security, which will largely depend on how successfully the French manage to cooperate with various regional partners, especially India and Japan.

_Nina Lebedeva, Candidate of Historical Sciences, leading research fellow at the Centre of Indian Research, part of the Russian Academy of Sciences’ Institute of Oriental Studies, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook.”_