France is getting Involved in Regional Power Games in Asia - but in What Capacity?

In view of two noteworthy events which occurred in early September this year, it may be interesting to take another look at France’s plans to joining the power games being played out in the Indian and Pacific Ocean region, which is becoming a key arena in the current phase of the global political contest.

It is “another look”, as NEO briefly dealt with this subject back in 2016 in connection with a speech given by the French Minister of the Armed Forces, Jean-Yves Le Drian (now Foreign Minister) in the Shangri-La Dialogue forum, which is held every year in Singapore by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies.

Back then, France made quite an impression, as the first of the former European colonial powers to take an interest in a region which, in the days when France and Britain shared the “white man’s burden”, was second only to Africa in importance. An impression which was further strengthened by Jean-Yves Le Drian’s subsequent visit to Vietnam. The government and people of that former French colony gave the minister a very warm welcome.

In his speech, Jean-Yves Le Drian named a number of partners with which France had declared itself ready to work in order to ensure security in the region. These included the USA, Australia, “and even Japan”, but no mention was made of China. This was unlikely to have been an oversight by his speechwriters - after all, following his trip to Singapore, his next stop was Vietnam, a country whose relationship with China could be described as “far from straightforward”.

The same expression - if not something stronger - could be used to describe China’s relationship with another of its neighbors, India, where Florence Parly, the current French Minister of the Armed Forces, flew on September 9. There are three points of interest in connection with her trip: the official reason given for the visit, some of the
The reason for her “lightning” trip to India was the delivery of five new Rafale fighter jets for the Indian Air Force - the first consignment of a total of 36 aircraft to be supplied by the French company Dassault under a contract signed in 2016.

The minister’s visit was to the Ladakh air base, where the five Rafale jets are kept, and very close to where a number of confrontations between Indian and Chinese border forces have taken place since the beginning of May. On both sides, the border forces are supported by an increased military presence in the region. There have been several meetings between representatives of the two countries, but so far there has been no progress in defusing the tensions. In fact, the conflict is getting more serious. A day before the meeting between the two countries’ foreign ministers, held on September 11, the Chinese newspaper Global Times published an editorial on the talks, with the headline “Talks with India come with war preparedness”.

Against that background, and in that very place, Florence Parly promised India that it could “count on us”, and spoke about the “rock-solid” friendship between the two countries.

After the delivery ceremony, the guests had a meeting with Ajit Doval, National Security Adviser to the Indian Prime Minister, who is seen as one of the main architects of India’s national security policy. The details of their conversation were not disclosed, but it seems likely that they did not discuss the “Chinese issue”.

Of course, there is nothing unusual about selling military hardware in today’s world, even though this business is frequently criticized as “profiteering from bloodshed”. But the French Minister of the Armed Forces seems to have chosen a particularly bad time to draw attention to what is (in reality) a very ordinary piece of business.

In fact, now would have been a very good moment to mediate between these two major world powers and try and defuse a conflict which could have serious consequences for everyone. That is what Moscow, among other countries, attempted to do in the latest minister-level meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which took place at the same time as the French minister’s visit to India.

As many observers have pointed out, exactly half way between the two visits by French ministers described in this article, Emmanuel Macron, the new French President, proposed a new strategic alliance between France, India and Australia. He was quite clear about the main reason behind his initiative: China’s “assertive policy” in the region. The phrase “assertive policy” it should be noted, has become something of a meme in recent years, being frequently used by China’s detractors.

Rather than just being quietly forgotten, the French President’s proposal “got off to a flying start”, as was demonstrated by the first video-conference between senior officials from the three countries’ foreign ministries. That conference took place on September 9, on the very day when the French Minister of the Armed Forces visited India’s air base in Ladakh, not far from the Chinese border.

During their discussion, the three participants talked about “maritime cooperation” issues, and the possibility of providing each other with logistical support. They also touched on the “Chinese question”.

Of course, it should not be forgotten that all France’s (far from friendly) messages to China in the first part of September came just a week after the three-day visit to Paris by the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, during which he had meetings with Emmanuel Macron and Jean-Yves Le Drian, and was able to make a speech to an audience of French experts in various fields.

As for Australia, it has, in turn, been moving closer to France. It should be emphasized that Emmanuel Macron first spoke about his proposal during his visit to Australia in May 2018. As is clear from the report on the prospects for developing relations with France, which was published by the Australian Senate in August this year, bilateral cooperation in the area of defense was a “central theme” of the Joint Statement, which was adopted at that time. The Senate’s report also contained a section on cooperation on defense.

NEO has pointed out on more than one occasion that Australia’s various foreign policy initiatives over the last few years have mainly been directed against China, where the phrase “anti-China” is now being used in connection with Australia. Australia’s behavior seems all the more strange in view of the fact that China is its main trading partner, and is thus largely responsible for Australia’s economic prosperity. The course currently being followed by Scott Morrison’s government is putting that prosperity at risk.
To conclude, it should be noted that certain symptoms of “post-colonial syndrome” can now be seen in the foreign policy of the UK, France’s main rival back in the days of the “white man’s mission”. We have already commented on this recent tendency in British politics.

But, in the light of the new developments that have taken place since then, it clearly deserves a closer look.

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