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French assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific



The French naval commands in the Indo-Pac. Source: French Navy – Marine Nationale

French assertiveness concerning the Indo-Pacific has been clear in recent months. This was demonstrated in Task Force 473's naval deployment and in comments made by the Defence Minister Florence Parly at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore.

Task Force 473 is France's most powerful combat group. Its 2019 deployment involved the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier the *Charles de Gaulle*, the guided missile destroyer FS *Forbin*, the anti-submarine destroyer FS *Latouche Treville*, the multi-mission frigate FS *Provence*, and the nuclear-powered attack submarine FS *Amethyste* – crossing the Indian Ocean in *Operation Clemenceau* from April–June. In that time, deployment highlights were bilateral: *Varuna* (from the name of a Vedic deity associated with the seas) exercises with India in the Arabian Sea, *Operation Perouse* (from the name of a French explorer of the

XVIII century) quadrilateral exercises with Australia, Japan and the US in the Bay of Bengal, exercises with the US in the Andaman Sea, and FS *Forbin*'s deployment to Vietnam.

The *Charles de Gaulle* aircraft carrier was a talking point on reaching Singapore, attracting a visit by Parly on the 1st of June. She told the crew “*you affirm our status as a maritime power*”, and that “*France is a sovereign power in these waters and each of your actions bears the seal of our Indo-Pacific strategy*”. The “Indo-Pacific strategy” referred to the French Defence Ministry’s report entitled *France’s Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific* released on the 29th of May, which highlighted the maritime diplomacy embedded in French deployments to the Indo-Pacific.

Parly’s afternoon appearance on the *Charles de Gaulle* deck was preceded earlier by her appearance at the Shangri-La Dialogue. Reiterating France’s Indo-Pacific presence, her speech at the Dialogue on the 1st of June was noteworthy for two points. First, she specifically referred to the presence of the Task Force 473 as a “*mighty instrument of power projection*”, that was facilitating “*the emergence of an Indo-Pacific axis*” between France and other China-concerned democracies in the region. Given the various bilateral and quadrilateral exercises carried out, Parly concluded “*what better incarnation of such a [Indo-Pacific axis] project than this carrier strike group*”?

Second, Parly was assertive on the South China Sea. She commented that “*we will preserve, with our partners, free and open access to maritime lines of communication. This is normally where I wag the elephant in the room*” – pointing at China, the elephant in the room. More practically, she announced that “*we will continue to sail more than twice a year in the South China Sea. There will be objections, there will be dubious manoeuvres at sea*” from China, “*but we will not be intimidated into accepting any fait accompli, because what international law condemns, how could we condone? We will also call for all those who share this view to join in*”. This invoked France’s “Indo-Pacific axis” (*l’axe Indo-Pacifique*) first proposed by President Macron in his visit to Australia in May 2018. That said, the organisation of operational commands in the area still does not reflect enough the new geopolitical orientation.

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