

# From Maritime Competition to Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: The Role of the EU and France

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Seas and oceans are more than ever at the heart of global geopolitics: in an economically integrated world, they carry more than 80% of international trade. In a finite world, they are a rich and fragile ecological environment, and a reservoir of fishery resources, energy, and strategic minerals. In a world of international rivalries, they are places of friction and tension as well as cooperation and mutual aid. Dependence on the sea has increased and maritime security has become a central strategic issue.

In particular, the maritime area connecting Europe and the Asia-Pacific – often labelled nowadays as the Indo-Pacific area – appears to be an essential zone: not only does it host vital maritime trade routes, it is also the central stage of the Sino-American geostrategic competition. Connectivity projects in the area are not only schemes that aim to foster prosperity by supporting maritime infrastructures but also tools to expand geopolitical influence and to compete with others. In particular, the Chinese Maritime Silk Road (MSR) prompted alternative projects based on the narrative of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific.

A space of competition, oceans are also a place of necessary cooperation: the multiplicity of risks implies the growing involvement of states to monitor and protect the sea routes. Challenges to maritime safety are characterised by their dispersion, and their polymorphic, transnational and interrelated nature; they require an international, coordinated response. The major issue today is the need to find ways to mitigate the negative effects of competition while fostering cooperative behaviours at sea.

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<sup>1</sup> *Disclaimer:* The views presented in this paper are the sole responsibility of the author and do not represent the views of Ifri nor of the French government.

This article presents the current dynamics of competition and cooperation in the maritime Indo-Pacific before highlighting the role the EU and France can play to assuage tensions and foster collaborative behaviours and multilateral solutions. Indeed, the EU is a major trading power and is thus very dependent on the safety of the Indo-Pacific maritime routes. France, in addition to this concern, has sovereignty interests in the area and is developing its own Indo-Pacific strategy. It argues that the effects of growing competition in the maritime domain should be mitigated by ensuring respect for the rule of law, by empowering the regional countries and by maintaining a multipolar and multilateral Indo-Pacific. Cooperation should be encouraged to address crimes at sea and environmental issues while fostering information sharing and efforts to build a comprehensive Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA).<sup>2</sup> In this context, the EU and France appear as capable, experienced and willing actors that are able to make a positive contribution to Indo-Pacific maritime security.

## **DYNAMICS OF MARITIME COMPETITION AND COOPERATION**

### **Maritime connectivity, a new dimension of geopolitical competition**

#### *Geopolitical competition in resource appropriation and power politics*

Traditionally, territory and resource appropriation are major drivers of tensions. Overfishing has led to the depletion of fish stocks in many areas, including the South China Sea, pushing Asian fishermen to sail out of their traditional fishing zones. Frictions over fishing rights and repeated encounters between fishermen and maritime militias have the potential to lead to open conflicts with important geopolitical implications.<sup>3</sup> The competition in deep-sea mining, extraction of critical minerals and the development of sea-based energy resources has also been accelerated by technological progress and depletion of land resources.

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<sup>2</sup> MDA is defined by the International Maritime Organization as the effective understanding of anything associated with the maritime domain that could impact the security, safety, economy, or environment. It requires a multi-layered, systemic surveillance of the seas and oceans.

<sup>3</sup> See, as an example: Eva Pejsova, "What if...fish wars broke out in the South China Sea", in Florence Gaub (ed.), "What If...? Scanning the horizon: 12 scenarios for 2021", *Chaillot Paper*, 150, EUISS, Paris, February 2019, pp. 59-63.

The return of power politics and rivalry is aggravating these tensions. Concerns that the Chinese MSR might lead to a restriction of access and freedom of navigation have indeed been fuelled by the Chinese militarisation of islets in the South China Sea. Persistent territorial disputes in the area lead to regular frictions at sea in a context of important capability gaps between players. The rapid build-up of the Chinese naval forces and the opacity of its overall strategy created a security dilemma that resulted in spectacular naval arms-racing behaviours in the region. The US is dispatching more military assets and conducting regular Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) in order to challenge Chinese claims in the area, accompanied by transit patrols by other key players such as Japan, Australia, France and the UK.

Uncertainty regarding the future evolution of power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region, in the context of a growing Sino-American rivalry, has led to hedging strategies. Anxiety and growing mistrust appear as the most worrying trend when considering prospects for competition and cooperation in the maritime area. Especially as traditional frontiers between peace and conflict are being blurred by hybrid strategies in which fishermen can act as militia and coastguards are used to challenge others' sovereignty.

### *Maritime connectivity: A new competitive sphere*

Asia's infrastructure needs are huge and stakes are high, as efficient maritime infrastructures are key to fostering national and regional prosperity, reducing transportation costs and promoting greater seaborne trade between two major economic poles: Europe and Asia. Competition to fund critical infrastructures in third countries and facilitate market access has been taking place for decades in Asia. However, the launch in 2013 of the Chinese MSR, backed by an unprecedented amount of investments and top-level political involvement, added a clear geopolitical dimension to this pattern.<sup>4</sup>

A development strategy to boost infrastructure connectivity throughout Southeast Asia, Oceania, the Indian Ocean, and East Africa, the MSR has also raised questions and concerns regarding the respect of international standards in terms of lending practices, governance, environmental and social safeguards and debt sustainability. Also, the true collaborative nature of the Chinese MSR was called

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<sup>4</sup> For a documented analysis on Japanese and Chinese investment patterns in the Mekong region, see: Françoise Nicolas, "Catching Up or Staying Ahead. Japanese Investment in the Mekong Region and the China Factor", *Asie.Visions* 99, Ifri, Paris, May 2018.

into question when reports showed that more than 89% of the transport-related projects are being implemented by Chinese contractors.<sup>5</sup> The MSR might not provide real opportunities for cooperation in this perspective. Moreover, the MSR (and the broader Belt and Road Initiative – BRI) is now widely considered as a geostrategic grand strategy.<sup>6</sup> In particular, rising Chinese investments in overseas ports have raised questions about its ultimate goal: contributing to the regional maritime connectivity, taking control of strategic infrastructures, or ultimately militarising such facilities in order to ensure the safe transit of Chinese trade in the Indo-Pacific sea lanes?<sup>7</sup>

Reflecting on these concerns, alternative initiatives have been launched. The Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy (FOIP) announced by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in August 2016 has been presented as a liberal alternative to the BRI and the MSR, based on the promotion of the rule of law, freedom of circulation and free trade; the promotion of connectivity to achieve prosperity through infrastructures and the contribution to peace and security through capacity-building, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HA/DR) and anti-piracy operations. Following Japan, the United States endorsed the FOIP approach in 2017. Australia and India<sup>8</sup> are also supporting it, finding synergies with their own Asian strategies. The reactivation of the Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue in November 2017 is symbolic of this coordination effort between the four countries.

## Mitigating competition and fostering cooperative behaviours in maritime affairs

### *Mitigating the negative effects of competition*

When competition between the major powers is likened to a systemic rivalry, it becomes difficult to really avoid it. Attenuating the competition would require greater transparency, dialogue and confidence-building measures. However, it is possible

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan E. Hillman, “The Belt and Road’s Barriers to Participation”, *Reconnecting Asia*, CSIS, 7 February 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Alice Ekman (ed.), “China’s Belt & Road and the World: Competing Forms of Globalization”, *Etudes de l’Ifri*, April 2019.

<sup>7</sup> See Mathieu Duchatel, “China’s port investment: the flag behind the trade”, *China Trends*, Institut Montaigne, June 2019.

<sup>8</sup> India emphasises an inclusive approach, aiming to balance relations with the US and China. India has been articulating a “Free, Open, and Inclusive Indo Pacific” policy (FOIIP).

to think about the ways to mitigate the negative effects of this competition on smaller countries that might suffer from it.

Competition in supporting maritime connectivity is not necessarily negative, providing that it is neither a zero-sum game nor a race to the bottom in terms of standards requirements. On the contrary, it can provide additional options to deliver higher-quality infrastructures to the Indo-Pacific countries. To protect the recipient countries and ensure they remain in control and are able to choose the best option for their needs, several measures can be promoted:

1. Ensure respect for the Rule of Law

Basic principles regarding transparency, openness and freedom of circulation should be promoted and upheld. International standards related to infrastructure funding and debt sustainability should be respected. Efforts should be made to make these principles and standards be considered as fair and legitimate by recipient countries.

2. Empower the recipient countries

Countries in need of maritime infrastructures and capabilities should be supported so as to increase their resilience. In terms of infrastructures, assistance could be offered to help these countries to adequately plan, implement and manage infrastructure projects so as to multiply their funding options.<sup>9</sup> In terms of maritime capabilities, training in Law of the Sea principles and its enforcement as well as support for the development of maritime surveillance skills and equipment would help these countries to ensure their sovereignty and better defend their interests.

3. Foster a multipolar, multilateral Indo-Pacific

Capacity-building assistance will help in maintaining a multipolar Asia. Inclusive projects and schemes should be favoured so as to not force a binary choice upon the recipient countries. Finally, multilateral solutions should be prioritised to increase smaller countries' leverage.

### *Cultivating cooperative behaviours*

Crimes at sea and environmental issues are transnational risks the management of which is likely to provide grounds for cooperation. Crimes at sea are diverse, from illegal fishing to drug smuggling, piracy and terrorist attacks, and are difficult for a

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<sup>9</sup> Daniel F. Runde, Conor M. Savoy, "Global Infrastructure Development. A Strategic Approach to US leadership", *CSIS Project on Prosperity and Development*, March 2016, p. 3.

state to address on its own. Already, successful examples of anti-piracy cooperation abound, be it in the Gulf of Aden or in Southeast Asia. Other initiatives could arise to foster needed cooperation while building trust.

Environmental issues such as the impact of climate change, the acidification of oceans, and natural disasters also offer many opportunities for cooperation. The rise of the ocean level is already posing vital threats to several countries in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and natural disasters are increasingly devastating. A mutually beneficial domain, protection of the marine environment and disasters prevention and relief, should be considered for further cooperation.

In order to encourage cooperation in these areas, regimes can be set up based on a common set of principles and objectives. Ad-hoc, inclusive and flexible coalitions could allow for efficient cooperation to tackle specific issues while helping to build trust among players.

Tackling all these issues require a greater ability to monitor the seas and analyse what is happening in order to be able to respond in a timely and efficient manner. The promotion of Maritime Domain Awareness thus lies at the core of these efforts. MDA is an enabling tool for maritime cooperation as it enables getting a more precise, updated and informed picture of what is going on at sea (incidents, traffics, crimes at sea, etc.). It requires data, information and knowledge, resulting from cooperation between a variety of actors (civilian and military, public and private), monitoring assets, and the expertise of analysts to make sense of the data.<sup>10</sup> Information sharing is key, and should allow for more transparency and trust.

Successful examples of MDA initiatives also abound in Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean and the South Pacific. For example, the Information Sharing Center of the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (RECAAP) (2006) in Singapore, the Information Fusion Center (IFC) of the Republic of Singapore Navy (2009) and the Piracy Reporting Centre of the International Maritime Bureau in Malaysia (1991) have become models for how to organise information sharing.<sup>11</sup> In the Indian Ocean, the Djibouti Code of Conduct process has been modelled after the Southeast Asian experiment and in 2018 the India's Information Fusion Center for the Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) was established.

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<sup>10</sup> Ralph D. Thiele, op. cit., p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Christian Bueger, "From Dusk to Dawn? Maritime Domain Awareness in Southeast Asia", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 37, No. 2, 2015, p. 158.

## **THE EU AND FRANCE: COMMITTED AND CAPABLE PROVIDERS OF MARITIME SECURITY**

### **The EU: A legitimate and experienced stakeholder in maritime security**

The EU has been affected by various aspects of the renewed competition in maritime affairs, in particular by growing Chinese investments in European ports and Beijing's expanding naval presence.

Chinese investments in European infrastructures have been seen as problematic for several reasons, notably because they do not always follow EU procurement rules, and also because these massive investments allow China to have a political influence on some member states and thus undermine the EU's cohesion. For example, Greece, Hungary and others have been reluctant to support a tougher line from the EU towards China regarding its human rights record or the South China Sea disputes.

In response, the EU adopted its own connectivity strategy. The 2018 "Connecting Europe and Asia – Building Blocks for an EU Strategy"<sup>12</sup> is a political assessment of the importance of a cooperative approach to build up connectivity between Asia and Europe, while promoting investments in Asian infrastructures and opening the way for European companies. It provides a broad framework to push initiatives on connectivity based on principles such as social and environmental responsibility, economic viability and transparency.

In recent years, the EU has also developed a set of statements, policies and treaties demonstrating its close interdependence with the broad Asia-Pacific area and its maritime stability. Its 2014 Maritime Security Strategy reiterates the EU's support for the peaceful settlement of maritime disputes according to the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and respect of the rule of law at sea.

The updated EU Maritime Security Strategy (EUMSS) Action Plan adopted at the end of 2018 states that the EU has the role of a global maritime security provider, in particular in maritime zones of great strategic interest (the Horn of Africa/Red Sea, the South China Sea, the Gulf of Guinea and the Caribbean Sea).<sup>13</sup> In particular,

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<sup>12</sup> "Connecting Europe and Asia – Building Blocks for an EU Strategy", Brussels, 19 September 2018.

<sup>13</sup> "Revised European Union Maritime Security Strategy Action Plan", Brussels, 26 June 2018, p. 3.

the document states the need to protect critical infrastructures, such as ports and energy facilities, and calls for greater coordination between civilian and military agencies.

### *The EU experience in the Western Indian Ocean*

A legitimate actor, the EU has also developed a real expertise in tackling crimes at sea and supporting maritime capacity building, in particular in the Western Indian Ocean. The EU has been a proactive actor in operations to tackle piracy off the Horn of Africa and in the Western Indian Ocean with the decade-old Operation Atalanta (European Union Naval Force [EU NAVFOR] Somalia).

Through the European Development Fund, several programmes on fostering maritime security through capacity-building activities, information-sharing and operational coordination in the Western Indian Ocean have also been launched, such as MASE (Program to Promote Regional Maritime Security, 2012-2018) and CRIMARIO (Critical Maritime Routes, Indian Ocean) (2015-2019). It has led to the creation of several information-sharing and coordination centres.<sup>14</sup> An information sharing and incident management tool, IORIS (Indian Ocean Regional Information Sharing platform), was launched in 2018.

The EU now aims to expand its expertise outside of the Western Indian Ocean. It can build on the high-level dialogue it has been holding with ASEAN since 2013 on maritime affairs, in particular piracy, maritime surveillance and port security.

## **France's Indo-Pacific approach and maritime security**

Recognition that maritime competition and rivalry are now directly challenging France's interests (the French Exclusive Economic Zone [EEZ] is the world's second largest, 90% of which is in the Indian and Pacific Oceans) has led Paris to design an Indo-Pacific approach. President Macron referred to an Indo-Pacific strategy and axis when he visited Australia and New Caledonia in May 2018, and in the following months both the Ministry of the Armed Forces (MAF) and the Ministry of the European and Foreign Affairs (MEFA) issued key documents to present the French vision of the region.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Christian Bueger, "Effective maritime domain awareness in the Western Indian Ocean", *Policy Brief*, ISS, 104, June 2017, p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> "France and Security in the Indo-Pacific", French Ministry of the Armed Forces, June 2019 and "2030 French Strategy in Asia-Oceania. Towards an inclusive Asian Indo-Pacific Region", French Ministry of European and Foreign Affairs, Paris, August 2018.



Centred on maritime security, its strategy first aims at organising a group of like-minded partners in the region in order to maintain a balanced and multipolar regional order, and to ensure an efficient approach in tackling challenges in the region. Paris claims that its commitment to the region is not to act as another player in the great-power rivalry that is pitting China against the US. Rather, it expects to mitigate the anxiety produced by this competition by offering an alternative not aligned to any of the existing initiatives but hoping instead to provide a way out of the polarisation between the US and China. Accordingly, France has not endorsed the US or Japanese versions of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific and is not interested in being formally associated with such formats as the Quad.

Paris also highlights the importance of engaging China, maintaining a robust dialogue and reciprocal partnership, and encouraging Beijing to play the role of a responsible stakeholder on issues such as climate change or the reform of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Paris is therefore emphasising the “inclusive” nature of its own approach. This difficult position of trying to walk a fine line on China is not without contradictions.

### *Maritime security at the core of French Indo-Pacific strategy*

In its approach to the region, Paris is placing priority on the broadly defined maritime security. Admiral Prazuck, Chief of Naval Staff, presented in January 2019 a holistic approach: France is interested in maintaining the safety of “dots” (chokepoints like the Hormuz, Malacca, and Bab-El-Mandeb Straits), Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs), and stocks (fish, hydrocarbons, critical elements)<sup>16</sup>

Accordingly, France supports the strict application of UNCLOS, fights against crime at sea, and is keen on actively demonstrating its commitment to the freedom of navigation. While not taking sides on sovereignty matters, Paris has consistently sent ships to sail in the East and South China Seas since 2014, through the passing of the Jeanne d’Arc mission<sup>17</sup> or the surveillance frigates based in New Caledonia. Beyond defence of the freedom of navigation, the security implications of environmental issues such as the depletion of resources and climate change is a core issue of concern and France is actively pursuing the implementation of the Paris Agreement in all areas.

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<sup>16</sup> Admiral Christophe Prazuck, Chief of Naval Staff, France, at the Raisina Dialogue 2019, Panel: Indo-Pacific: Ancient Waters and Emerging Geometries, 9 January 2019.

<sup>17</sup> The Jeanne d’Arc mission is an annual deployment undertaken by French Navy ships around an amphibious battle group, for training purpose, but also to uphold the freedom of navigation and conduct joint exercises with partners.

Therefore, France aims to develop the maritime surveillance capability in the region, through capacity-building, networking of partners and information sharing. Maritime security and surveillance may indeed be the least common denominator that gathers the majority of the Indo-Pacific countries, from great powers to small island states.

### *France as a leading player in the EU*

Back in 2016, then-Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian called for a greater, coordinated European presence in the South China Sea.<sup>18</sup> British troops and helicopters joined the Jeanne d'Arc Mission in 2017, and UK ships sailed alongside French ones in 2018. After Brexit, France will be the only EU member state with significant permanent forces in the Indo-Pacific. France is thus encouraging a greater European commitment to the region. Paris is also supporting EU membership at the East Asia Summit and the implementation of the EU-Asian connectivity plan and is seeking a revitalisation of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) Dialogue. More generally, France is interested in fostering a common vision for the Indo-Pacific within the European Union.

## **CONCLUSION**

The dynamics in maritime affairs is one of increasing competition. Maritime connectivity is a new area for competitive behaviours as geopolitical interests are now integrated with geoeconomic needs. The hybrid nature of the various connectivity schemes only adds to the growing general mistrust that has been fuelled by the return of great-power politics and rivalry. As a result, a kind of security dilemma has emerged in which the competition is being fed by an action-reaction cycle.

To mitigate the negative effect of competition, the rule of law should be maintained, smaller countries should be empowered, and a multipolar, multilateral Asia should be encouraged. Cooperative behaviours have to be fostered, in particular in the areas of the fight against crimes at sea, environmental challenges and maritime surveillance.

France and the EU have obviously important stakes in the Indo-Pacific maritime security, the safety of its trade routes and the overall stability of the area. They

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<sup>18</sup> Jean-Yves Le Drian, Minister of Defense, "France – Statement for the fourth plenary session: The challenges of conflict resolution", 15th Asia Security Summit, The IISS Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, 5 June 2016.

both aim at reaffirming the respect of fundamental principles such as freedom of navigation and the Law of the Sea, as well as mitigating the negative effects of the rivalry between China and the US. While the European member states hold heterogeneous views on China, the general position of the EU is that China is not only a strategic rival. It is also sometimes only a competitor or can even be a partner, when dealing with climate change, for example.<sup>19</sup> In this regard, the EU is not supporting the US confrontational approach vis-à-vis China and is unwilling to adopt unilateral economic sanctions to make it bend. France is very much in line with this posture. As a result, Europe has been criticising the confrontational US attitude vis à vis China. This does not mean that Europeans are naïve about Chinese projects.

France and the EU have been increasingly critical of the Chinese MSR: the European Commission and EEAS's Strategic Outlook<sup>20</sup> of March 2019 thus clearly calls for greater transparency, true reciprocity and social, financial and environmental sustainability in Chinese connectivity investments. It mentions that a high level of indebtedness could lead to "transfer of control over strategic assets and resources", indirectly referring to the Sri Lankan case.<sup>21</sup> Europeans are also concerned that Chinese claims in the South China Sea and its refusal to accept the 2016 arbitration rulings may "affect the international legal order and make it harder to resolve tensions affecting sea lanes of communication vital to the EU's economic interests".

The European approach to maritime connectivity is thus much more in line with the Japanese Free and Open Indo-Pacific initiative, resting on comprehensive investment packages to enhance the East-West maritime corridors, and helping to integrate the region through high-quality infrastructures. The signature of the Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure between the European Union and Japan<sup>22</sup> last September symbolises this convergence and seals the cooperation between these two like-minded partners to promote maritime

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<sup>19</sup> "European Commission and HR/VP contribution to the European Council EU-China – A strategic outlook", 12 March 2019.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Back in 2017, the Sri Lankan government had to lease the Hambantota Port to China for 99 years as it was unable to repay the huge amount of money it borrowed from Beijing to build the facility.

<sup>22</sup> "The Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure between the European Union and Japan", Brussels, 27 September 2019, [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/68018/partnership-sustainable-connectivity-and-quality-infrastructure-between-european-union-and\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/68018/partnership-sustainable-connectivity-and-quality-infrastructure-between-european-union-and_en).

connectivity respecting the highest level of international norms and the freedom of access.

As for more general commitment on maritime security, the EU has already a solid experience in promoting maritime security in the Western Indian Ocean and is willing to act as a security provider in the Indo-Pacific region. France is taking advantage of its overseas territories to commit to the area, with a focus on maritime security and the promotion of a networked MDA. Paris also emphasises the importance of the security implications of environmental issues such as climate change, and also the protection of marine biodiversity. France's ambition is to offer an alternative to countries that do not want to choose between the US and China by promoting inclusive, flexible frameworks to gather countries with shared interests to cooperate on specific items. As a result, it appears that both France and the EU have important assets to help enhance maritime security and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific area.

One important condition for success would be to ensure the legitimacy and the ownership of the norms, principles, objectives and processes by the regional countries. Only accepted norms and multilateral regimes will trigger cooperation.<sup>23</sup> Another condition would be to make sure that the growing rivalry between Washington and Beijing do not turn too sour. A bipolarisation would push the regional countries to pick a side, something most of them do not want, and would certainly point towards a zero-sum game competition. In this context, the EU and France certainly have a key role to play in implementing these two conditions of success and providing a solid alternative to mitigate the growing polarisation.

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<sup>23</sup> See Seng Tan, "The rules-based maritime order is not completely adrift", *East Asia Forum*, 12 June 2019.