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## Exploring Indo-Pacific Convergences: The Australia-France-India Trilateral Dialogue

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# Exploring Indo-Pacific Convergences: The Australia-France-India Trilateral Dialogue

On September 9, 2020, Frances Adamson, Secretary of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT); François Delattre, Secretary-General of the French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs; and Vardhan Shringla, India's Foreign Secretary, held their first trilateral meeting in an effort to strengthen cooperation among the three countries. According to the terms of the joint communiqué, “the trilateral dialogue helped underscore the goal of guaranteeing peace, security and adherence to international law in the Indo-Pacific by drawing on the excellence of bilateral relations between France, India and Australia” and emphasizing their will to “successfully conclude concrete cooperation projects in the maritime sector and those promoting global commons (climate, environment and biodiversity, health).”<sup>1</sup>

The Indian press elaborated further, indicating that the dialogue was about “synergizing the respective strengths [of the three countries] to ensure a peaceful, secure, prosperous, and rules-based Indo-Pacific Region,” addressing economic and geostrategic challenges, and building Indo-Pacific cooperation during the COVID-19 pandemic. They also discussed cooperation on marine global commons; potential areas for practical partnership at the trilateral and regional level, including through regional organizations such as the Association of

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Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and the Indian Ocean Commission; and the challenges and priorities of multilateralism.<sup>2</sup> The three countries agreed to hold this dialogue on a regular basis.

This article analyzes the significance of this ongoing rapprochement among Australia, India, and France as materialized by their recent trilateral dialogue and the dynamics that led to it. It argues that the dialogue is at the confluence of three national concepts of the Indo-Pacific that are not totally identical but share two main characteristics:

- a common willingness to manage the rise of China peacefully and cooperatively, and
- an intention to keep away from the consequences of the China-US rivalry.

But the trilateral dialogue is also the outcome of the separate evolution of the bilateral partnerships between each pair of the three countries; it is an instrument to build a coalition of middle powers that Australian, Indian, and French experts have been calling for years, for which the Indo-Pacific strategy provides an adequate framework. It is therefore the first stage of an uncertain process through which the three countries intend to evolve common policies in the Indo-Pacific. As such, the dialogue is also a tool to manage their respective relationships with the United States in an era of growing uncertainties regarding the trajectory of the latter.

## The Way to the Dialogue

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The idea of an Australia-France-India trilateral dialogue was not new—it had long been discussed by officials and experts of the three countries. In January 2018, a track-1.5 exercise had been held in Delhi under the auspices of Carnegie India, the French Foundation for Strategic Research, and the National Security College of the Australian National University to explore potential areas of cooperation.<sup>3</sup> In May 2018, representatives of these three institutions wrote an op-ed, calling for “India, France and Australia to join forces” in an “innovative security triangle” and underlining their “striking convergence of interests, defense capabilities, and maritime geography” as well as shared values.<sup>4</sup> More importantly though, a few days earlier in Sydney, French President Emmanuel Macron had called for a Paris-Delhi-Canberra axis to become an established regional structure, reflecting an Indo-Pacific “geo-strategic reality in the making.”<sup>5</sup>

Yet, the idea of “Paris-Delhi-Canberra” was not immediately popular. Both India and Australia found the term “axis” too confrontational vis-à-vis China, although Emmanuel Macron cautiously stated the objective of reestablishing

some equilibrium in relations with Beijing. Despite France's best efforts, no official trilateral dialogue materialized before September 2020.

Bilateral relationships between France and India, France and Australia, and India and Australia have evolved on different rationales, dynamics, and paces. The congruence of their objectives, however, although not absolute, was real. But the three countries had operated in different strategic spaces. India's decision to make public its Indo-Pacific vision in 2018 at the Shangri La Dialogue allowed for a greater degree of convergence among the three countries,<sup>6</sup> while New Delhi's cooperation with Canberra in security matters developed substantially with the June 2020 virtual summit between the Indian and Australian Prime Ministers.

Meanwhile, tensions in the Indo-Pacific kept mounting. The rise of China and, more specifically, its unprecedented assertiveness under Xi Jinping's leadership—including during the COVID-19 crisis and the lethal border clashes on the India-China border—increased the necessity for better coordination in the Indo-Pacific, eventually leading to the September 2020 trilateral.

**China's unprecedented assertiveness under Xi Jinping's leadership eventually led to the trilateral**

## Indo-Pacific Convergences

The endorsement of the Indo-Pacific concept by Australia, France, and India was not the cause of the trilateral dialogue, even though they eventually met within the "Indo-Pacific" framework they each defined. Neither was the pace of the discussions determined by existing differences among the three visions of the Indo-Pacific. These differences were not based on geography. Regions are, among other things, "social constructions created through politics [...] cognitive constructs that are rooted in political practice."<sup>7</sup>

From this perspective, the Indo-Pacific is primarily the geographical translation of a strategic concept, a mental map to propound a geopolitical reality in the making, and ultimately a convenient framework to shape policies. Differences were not conceptual either. The three countries shared a willingness to manage the rise of China peacefully and, to the best of their interests, preserve their relationships with the United States irrespective of the administration in power, while extricating themselves as much as possible from the Sino-US rivalry. Therefore, even if Australia, France, and India differed on the precise contours of their respective Indo-Pacifics, they could nevertheless identify common objectives. What did matter, however, were the parameters through which the main objectives of the three concepts could be translated into actual cooperation.

### Australian Perspective on the Indo-Pacific

Australia did not coin the term “Indo-Pacific,” first uttered by Japan’s Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2007. But it was the first country to develop, systematize, and popularize the concept, starting in 2013 with the publication of its national strategy.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Australia is the only one of the three partners that elaborated an Indo-Pacific doctrine before President Donald Trump announced a US strategy for a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” in a speech at the APEC CEO summit in Da Nang (Vietnam) on November 10, 2017.<sup>9</sup>

For Canberra, the term refers geographically to “the East Indian Ocean and Western Pacific Ocean as interlinked waters, with the South China Sea as a middle intervening stretch.”<sup>10</sup> This description encompasses a space seen as a critical part of the global commons where the major regional actors (the United States, China, and India) are all active and in which Canberra evolves its military strategy and strategic partnerships. It is noticeable that the geographic space thus defined does not cover the entire Indian Ocean. It excludes, for example, the Eastern and Southern shores of Africa, which are very much part of the French and Indian concepts.

Australia’s conceptual perspective of the Indo-Pacific, as expressed in its 2017 *Foreign Policy White Paper*, is of a space where “China’s growth is accelerating shifts in relative economic and strategic weight,” to the effect that its “power and influence are growing to match, and in some cases exceed, that of the United States” in some parts of the region, and where, as a result, the Indo-Pacific seas and airspace are becoming more contested.<sup>11</sup> In such a context, the Australian government still sees the US role as a significant stabilizing influence, underlines the significance of the security partnership with Washington while encouraging “the United States and China to ensure economic tension between them does not fuel strategic rivalry or damage the multilateral trading system,” and seeks partnerships with India, Japan, Indonesia, and South Korea in order “to influence the shape of the regional order.”<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, France, although present in the space defined by Canberra as the Indo-Pacific through its South Pacific Islands, was not part of the 2017 Australian concept. Strategic cooperation with India was then a higher priority, even though it was still a work in progress, and could not compare at the time with Australia’s strategic cooperation with France.

This apparent contradiction reflected Canberra’s uncertainties regarding Paris’ commitment to regional security and initial difficulties in accepting Paris as a resident power of the Indo-Pacific. But it has also a larger significance. The Indo-Pacific as defined by Australia is a space where the Indian Ocean has always had a lower strategic priority than the South Pacific. India is part of Australia’s geographic definition of the Indo-Pacific, reflecting an understanding of India’s potential economic importance for Australia and its value as a potential

balancer to China. But the lesser strategic importance given to the Indian Ocean demonstrates an equal skepticism about India's capability and political willingness to play such a role, despite shared concerns about Beijing's assertiveness in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, and India's interest in the Western Pacific as expressed by its Look East Policy.

Australia's hierarchy of priorities in the Indo-Pacific reflects the preeminence given to China both positively (as an economic opportunity) and negatively (as a potential security threat in the Indo-Pacific and a risk for the regional and global rules-based order), which frames the Australian debate about the right equilibrium between the necessary economic engagement with China and the no less indispensable military-diplomatic balancing against it. But the Indo-Pacific concept defined by Canberra does not really say where the equilibrium lies—therefore, it did not automatically generate immediate cooperation or trust from partners like India. Nor was cooperation brought about by conceptual clarification. It was to be the outcome of Chinese interferences and pressures.

**Australia's priorities reflect the preeminence given to China both positively and negatively**

### **The French Concept**

According to the French Ministry of the Armed Forces, the Indo-Pacific is “a security continuum which extends from Djibouti to French Polynesia”<sup>13</sup> and from the shores of East and Southern Africa to the American coasts. Although its geography differs from the Australian definition, the main components of the French strategy, announced by Emmanuel Macron in May 2018,<sup>14</sup> are the outcome of considerations regarding the region's evolution, similar to the Australian ones.

The 2017 *Strategic Review of Defense and National Security*, published in September of that year a few months after the French presidential election, highlighted the Sino-American rivalry and the risks posed to regional stability (and French interests) by the assertion of Chinese power.<sup>15</sup> It also underlined the threats to multilateralism, the growing uncertainty about alliances after Trump's election, and the “choice of a posture openly favoring the balance of power” by certain great powers.<sup>16</sup> Macron went on to repeat those themes, including warning China against any hegemonic temptation, several months later in two speeches in China and India.<sup>17</sup> The French president also systematically reaffirmed France's historical, political, and strategic ties with Washington.

Perhaps more than India and Australia, France needs to assert itself as an Indo-Pacific power. French officials like to boast about the 1.6 million French citizens

living in the region as well as of its many islands in the Pacific and Indian Oceans that shape an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) for France second only to the United States' own EEZ. But the qualification of the Indo-Pacific is often disputed by states that consider the French territories and populations as remnants of its colonial past and therefore deny its legitimacy.

Interestingly, this need to be formally recognized as an Indo-Pacific power also informs the French Indo-Pacific concept in other ways. France advocated mini-lateral partnerships—or the “diplomatic process of a small group of interested parties working together to supplement or complement the activities of international organizations in tackling subjects deemed too complicated to be addressed appropriately at the multilateral level”<sup>18</sup>—in the enunciation of its Indo-Pacific project. Emmanuel Macron called for the constitution of a “Cannes-Delhi-Paris axis,” a coalition of the states of the Indian Ocean with enough capacity, meant to help strengthen a weak and somewhat dysfunctional regionalism.

**F**rance intended multilateralism to be at the very heart of its Indo-Pacific concept

Indeed, France intended multilateralism to be more than just an incantation or wishful thinking—it was at the very heart of its Indo-Pacific concept. By cooperating effectively with states endowed with actual economic, political, and military capacity in order to help enhance capabilities in the entire region, smaller powers can reclaim some of their decision-making autonomy and effectively contribute to regional stability.

### **The Indian Vision**

India was the last of the three countries to make its own Indo-Pacific doctrine public. In his June 2018 keynote address at the Shangri La Dialogue, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi described the Indian definition of the Indo-Pacific as extending “from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas,” including “all nations in this geography as also others beyond who have a stake in it” and where it was vital to prevent the “return to the age of great power rivalry.”<sup>19</sup>

India's Indo-Pacific vision has sometimes been described as an extension of its Look East/Act East Policy.<sup>20</sup> It does confirm the shift from quasi isolation to involvement undertaken some 30 years ago with the launch of the Look East Policy. Like that policy, it does insist on partnerships, both bilateral and multi-lateral, as a way to expand India's “footprint across the region while facing significant capacity and capital constraints,”<sup>21</sup> but also obstacles of a more political and strategic nature. India's insistence on the security architecture, as characterized

by ASEAN's institutions, also establishes an evolution from the Look East Policy to New Delhi's current Indo-Pacific vision. ASEAN's centrality primarily underlines the value for India of a consensus-based decision-making process seen as the best guarantee against any hegemonic temptation from within or without the region.

But like the Look East Policy, India's vision for the Indo-Pacific is not without ambivalence. If India intends to distance itself from any grouping or alliance of containment, its vision for the Indo-Pacific is not a static concept. It is part of a fluctuating international context in which India needs to engage in a non-escalatory reinforcement, balancing China while maintaining some form of cooperation. For its own security, closer cooperation with the United States has to be carefully calibrated against the risk of unnecessarily antagonizing China.

Ultimately, the Australian, French, and Indian concepts of the Indo-Pacific overlap more than they coincide and complement one another. But they provide enough of a geographic and thematic quid pro quo to engage in coordination where they do complement one another and cooperate where their interests narrowly coincide.

### **The Trilateral Dialogue: A Meeting Point of Asymmetrical Bilateral Relationships**

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If convergent Indo-Pacific projects provided the base of a quid pro quo and a convenient framework for the trilateral dialogue, they were not enough to allow its materialization. The trilateral dialogue required good relations and a sufficient level of bilateral understanding among all three countries. These two sets of processes influenced each other but developed independently from one another. France and India did publish their own respective versions of the Indo-Pacific concept long after they established a solid partnership. The formalization of what is for Australia and France a "strategy" and for India a "vision" is parallel to the evolution of their bilateral relations and has, to some extent, been influenced by them, though it does not define them. Yet the concept does provide a framework for the consolidation and deepening of the three bilateral relations.

Similarly, the Australia-France-India trilateral dialogue was not the logical or inevitable outcome of the parallel evolution of the bilateral relationships between each pair of the three countries. The meeting, which is meant to become a permanent feature of the trilateral relationship, was the uncertain (if not improbable, at some point) outcome of the slow inflexion of previously parallel trajectories that ultimately converged, but neither at the same time nor at the same pace.

### The Quasi India-France “Alliance”

Not without reason, Paris sees the India-France partnership as foundational to the trilateral relationship. The cooperation between Delhi and Paris is older and deeper than the two other bilateral relationships. It preceded by far the emergence of the Indo-Pacific concept. France was one of the very few countries—the other one being Russia—that did oppose US sanctions on India after its 1998 nuclear tests. Furthermore, France sought to limit India’s isolation and later work with the US administration to facilitate “New Delhi’s reconciliation with the global nuclear order.”<sup>22</sup> Paris and New Delhi have been building a robust strategic partnership ever since.

Indian and Australian strategic interests in the Indian Ocean are closely aligned with France. Delhi’s security establishment gradually woke up to the benefits of cooperation with France, and both countries are monitoring the activities of potentially revisionist and nefarious newcomers. France is a long-term supplier to the Indian Navy and Indian Air Force, providing India with *Mirage-2000* fighter aircraft in the 1980s and the current *Rafale* and the *Scorpene* submarines that are being built in India under technology transfers from France. The armies, navies, and air forces of the two countries have been conducting regular joint exercises that have grown more elaborate year after year. They also share similar visions regarding sea-borne nuclear proliferation and concerns about freedom of navigation.

Despite India’s historical discomfort, Modi has spoken of an “alliance” between India and France

The special relationship further consolidated after the election of Emmanuel Macron to the French Presidency in 2017. Macron followed in the steps of his predecessors, but the relationship took an increasingly political and resolutely more regional dimension as Chinese pressures and uncertainties about US policies grew. The relationship today is multifaceted, spanning multiple domains from defense, civil nuclear, and space to climate change, clean energy, and urbanization. More importantly, it has never

been as deep as it is now: despite India’s historical discomfort with alliances, in 2019 India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke of “the alliance between India and France.”<sup>23</sup>

### Australia and France: More than Submarines

Australia-France relationships have undergone a spectacular change since the beginning of the 21st century. Although Australia traditionally saw France as

an old ally in Europe, the historical colonial rivalry in the South Pacific and the French nuclear tests in Mururoa continued to shape perceptions. France's persisting presence in the South Pacific ran against Australia's strategic denial instincts in the area, which drove the latter to be the top strategic partner for island states in the South Pacific while minimizing the role of outside powers, and it was resented as such.<sup>24</sup>

Relations evolved considerably after the end of the nuclear tests in 1996, and France is now seen in Australia as a constructive partner and a fellow status quo power in the Pacific. Australia's 2016 *Defence White Paper* mentions France as one of its partner countries along with Japan, New Zealand, and the United States.<sup>25</sup> Australian decision-makers are also aware that France is ready to assume its share of responsibilities in the Indo-Pacific, where its freedom of action is a guarantee that it can move quickly and decisively.

France, on its side, is deeply aware of the importance of its cooperation with Australia in its quest for access to regional bodies, influence, and legitimacy in the Indo-Pacific as well as of its need to secure industrial partnerships in the region if it wants to sustain its role and presence there along with its technological capabilities. Paris sees Canberra as a partner of choice for its Indo-Pacific project, a like-minded country, and one of the few regional states capable of contributing substantively to the stability of the Indo-Pacific. Paris is deeply aware of the central role of Australia in advancing regional institutions and intends to deepen its partnership with Canberra further in the future to make these institutions more effective.

In this context, the AU\$50 billion (31 billion Euros) submarines deal signed in 2016 between the two countries was much more than a simple commercial venture. The contract between Australia and Naval Group, a French consortium with state backing, for 12 attack-class Barracuda submarines will not only transfer to Australia capabilities described by French Armed Forces Minister Florence Parly as "so closed to the core of [French] sovereignty," but also links the two countries for more than 50 years, signaling a very high level of confidence between Australia and France.<sup>26</sup> France and Australia share a longstanding close defense partnership, but the 2016 submarine deal stands at the intersection of a series of concerns which go far beyond defense with significant implications for the future of the two countries. The objectives on which the potential future cooperation was to be built were set during the 2018 state visit of Emmanuel Macron to Australia, when, beyond cooperating to bolster regional maritime security together and with likeminded partners, the two countries committed to strengthening the Indian Ocean region's architecture, including through trilateral and other high level dialogues.

### India-Australia: The Third Side of the Triangle

In this gradual process, the complex relationship between India and Australia was the main obstacle to trilateral cooperation. The two countries operated for a long time in separate strategic spheres. Australia was part of the US-led system of alli-

**A** spectacular rapprochement between India and Australia has emerged in the past two years

ances, while India was a leader of the non-aligned movement and a strong advocate of strategic autonomy. Moreover, India's policy of economic autarky did not leave much room for cooperation. In the 1990s, India's Look East Policy and its rapprochement with the United States opened a space for cooperation, while a common concern with China's impact on the regional strategic environment created a convergence that did not immediately translate into an active partnership.

The two countries started getting closer only in the early 2000s at Australia's initiative. The 2009 Australian *Defense White Paper* insisted on the need to strengthen maritime security in the Indian Ocean as well as to develop a defense relationship with India, (a statement reiterated in the 2013 *White Paper*).<sup>27</sup> That same year, the two countries signed a joint declaration enumerating the domain of their forthcoming security cooperation.<sup>28</sup> Yet, persisting Indian mistrust of Australia because of its economic dependence on China and a relatively weak involvement of the Australian navy in the Indian Ocean did slow down the developing relationship.

Increased Chinese interferences and pressures on both countries, a change of attitude in New Delhi regarding the value of trilateral cooperation under Subramanyam Jaishankar's leadership (both as Foreign Secretary from 2015–18 and Minister of External Affairs since May 2019), and Australia's commitment to greater involvement in the Indian Ocean led to a spectacular rapprochement between the two countries in the past two years. The January 2019 address to the Raisina Dialogue in Delhi by Australia's Foreign Minister Marise Payne, in which she announced greater Australian involvement in the Indian Ocean, was well received in New Delhi.<sup>29</sup> In June 2020, during Australia Prime Minister Morrison's visit to Delhi, India and Australia signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership as well as a "Joint Declaration on a Shared Vision for Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific."<sup>30</sup>

Beyond its specific content, the 2020 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership marked a qualitative change in bilateral relations. It signaled that the two countries had managed to overcome their inhibitions about security cooperation.<sup>31</sup> The Joint Declaration on a Shared Vision for Maritime

Cooperation stipulated that “India and Australia [would work] together, bilaterally, regionally and multilaterally, and in minilateral arrangements, to support regional architecture in line with their shared values and interests.” The stage was set for a trilateral dialogue among Australia, France, and India. It was neither the first such trilateral dialogue for India and Australia nor the most immediately operational, but it was potentially the most consequential for the future of the Indo-Pacific in general and the Indian Ocean in particular.

### The China Factor

The factor that China plays in each bilateral relationship and in the final trilateral dialogue deserves particular examination in this context. All three countries have developed their own individual relationships with Beijing, but each of them has described its own Indo-Pacific doctrine as inclusive of China: the use of the term “inclusivity” in all three doctrines is not just a way of saying that the Indo-Pacific is not about containing China. The three countries all have genuine interests in cooperating with China even if their and Chinese positions on many issues, global or regional, do not align. For example, to different degrees all three countries are economically dependent on China. All three are aware that China is too big to be ignored on global issues such as climate change and biodiversity, and that no progress is possible unless it is an active and willing partner to the negotiations.

**All three countries have described their own Indo-Pacific doctrines as inclusive of China**

At the same time, all three countries have experienced difficulties with China, which have drastically changed perceptions since Xi Jinping’s accession to power and threatened interests in each of the three countries. Differences existed in the perceptions of Australia, France, and India, although they translated in sometimes surprising ways. France’s geographic distance from China inevitably generated a different threat perception of China than India and Australia. Yet, the terms of the equation (weighing engagement versus balancing) were no different in France and India. On the contrary, as long as India perceived Australia’s economic dependence as dominating any other concerns in Canberra’s relationship with Beijing, progress with New Delhi in security matters remained limited. This change in China’s relations with Australia, France, and India, but in particular with Australia and India, contributed to the trilateral dialogue.

Frustrations with the lack of reciprocity in economic exchanges, as well as Beijing's systematic distortion of international law and subsequent attempts to impose its own international order, were not specific to Australia, France, and India. Many analysts have found cooperation among the three countries desirable for a long time, especially in the Indian Ocean,<sup>32</sup> where the security architecture is appreciably weak, but this has so far failed to materialize despite real—though not synchronous—efforts by all sides. But different factors related to China have highlighted the value of increased cooperation and contributed to a climate conducive to dialogue.

First, the depth of the Chinese penetration in the Indian Ocean could no longer be ignored. Australia in particular could no longer focus exclusively on the Pacific and had to factor in the Indian Ocean in its strategic calculations much more than in the past,<sup>33</sup> a change that increased the rapprochement between Canberra and New Delhi. Chinese interferences in Australia's domestic affairs—through espionage, economic blackmail, or attempts to buy off Australian politicians<sup>34</sup>—became particularly salient and changed the way Canberra looked at its traditional dilemma between security and prosperity, substantially reducing whatever mistrust persisted in New Delhi.

Second, the India-China border crisis of summer 2020, which degenerated into violent clashes, most likely reinforced India's conviction that, under continued pressure from Beijing (the incident was the third major one since Xi Jinping's ascent to power), it needed to deepen its engagement with middle powers. Doing so was necessary if it wanted to avoid the polarizing trap of the zero-sum game created by China-US competition and preserve some measure of strategic autonomy in a context of persisting uncertainties about US commitment to regional security beyond narrowly defined US interests.

The COVID-19 crisis also created a general and growing discontent over Beijing's management of the pandemic and the growing dependency on China for supplies of critical goods. This state of mind was prevalent in France, which, together with other EU member states, supplied China with masks and medical equipment early in the crisis but got only vicious attacks from Beijing in return.

But concerns over China were not the only factors informing the promising cooperation among the three countries, and it is unlikely that issues related to China were the only ones the three will intend to address. The range of potential threats that they had to address increased to include environmental ones and the terms of coalition-building in the Indian Ocean. This wider range of threats allowed for more inclusive groupings of a less confrontational nature that provided a different set of options with no less strategic value, including the trilateral dialogue, through which cooperation could be built.

## Minilaterals as a Prelude to Coalition of the Middle Powers?

Although still in its infancy, the India-Australia-France trilateral dialogue is ultimately the symptom of a more integrated Indo-Pacific region in what is not yet a post-COVID-19 world. Although unremarkable in principle, minilaterals are becoming commonplace in practice. India also holds trilateral meetings with Australia and Indonesia since 2018, as well as with Australia and Japan since 2015. As part of this trend, the September 2020 India-Australia-France meeting was politically significant. It was both the outcome of a long and sometimes complicated process as well as symptomatic of Indo-Pacific dynamics in which middle powers are increasingly playing a leading role in order to avoid being caught in the deteriorating zero-sum Sino-US rivalry. And although France is an Indo-Pacific resident power thanks to its territories and populations in the Indian and Pacific oceans, the meeting was also symbolic of Europe's political and strategic investment with the Indo-Pacific, a shift that Paris had been leading for some time.

**Minilaterals are becoming commonplace in practice**

At the present stage, though, the value of the dialogue among the three like-minded partners lies probably less in its content than in its very existence. Taking place after years of accumulated resentment vis-à-vis China, though for different reasons, the dialogue was bound to be perceived as aiming at the latter, irrespective of the actual intentions and narrative of the organizers. This perception should not, however, question the primary objective of Australia's, France's, and India's respective Indo-Pacific concepts. All three countries still aim to establish a more balanced relationship with China or, in the words of Emmanuel Macron at the Garden Island naval base, a "level playing field."<sup>35</sup> None of them are seeking confrontation.

The question remains open as to how this trilateral dialogue among Australia, France, and India will develop. It could amount to the kind of "coalitions of the middle powers" for which Indian analyst Raja Mohan and Australian diplomat Rory Medcalf advocated in 2014 in order "to cope with the power shift in Asia and an uncertain evolution of US-China relations." Judging by what has been made public of the content of the discussion, it aims indeed at creating a sort of "flexible partnership to advance and protect the interests of the participating countries" while "coping with change" that the authors originally outlined.<sup>36</sup> In their paper, they attributed the following functions to middle power coalitions: conduct political consultations, coordinate diplomatically, exchange intelligence, conduct military exercises, transfer and share technology, and build capacity. Most of these activities are already conducted by the

three countries today, although often bilaterally. The challenge is to enlarge cooperation while maintaining their effectiveness as a way to strengthen regional multilateralism.

It is indeed no coincidence that minilaterals seem to develop as hopes shrink that economic interdependence and regional institutions will guarantee stability and security. They intend to bring pragmatic responses to practical problems. Yet Australia, India, and France do not see their effort as an alternative to existing regional institutions. They do recognize the weakness, if not the dysfunctional character, of the latter. But their cooperation aims at strengthening, not replacing, these institutions. Canberra, New Delhi, and Paris may not yet be acting as an “axis” as suggested by Emmanuel Macron, but they are certainly moving in that direction.

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