



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



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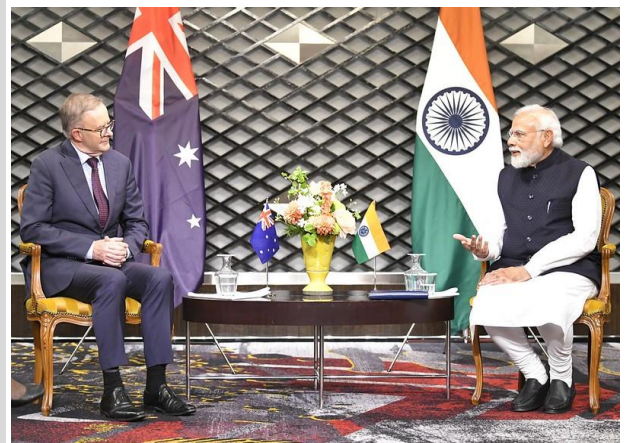
Reviving India-France-Australia Trilateral Cooperation in the Indian Ocean

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Volume VII, Issue 31

July 18, 2022



Delhi Policy Group

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www.delhipolicygroup.org



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Cover Photographs:

India's Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi and French President Emmanuel Macron meet in Paris on May 4, 2022. Source: MEA Photo Gallery/Flickr

Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese meets Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at Tokyo on May 24, 2022. Source: MEA Photo Gallery/Flickr

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by
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Introduction

The visit of Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese to Paris on July 01, 2022 resulted in the apparent normalisation of Australia – France relations after the AUKUS induced hiatus. “We share a vision for a free, open, inclusive and resilient Indo-Pacific, enabled through dialogue and joint initiatives with regional partners”, says the Albanese-Macron Joint Statement¹. It goes on to speak of the determination of the two leaders to enhance cooperation, especially through maritime surveillance agencies, including in partnership with India. Does this imply that revival of the India-France-Australia (IFA) trilateral, which was effectively scuttled by the AUKUS Agreement in September 2021, is imminent?

The IFA Trilateral – A Reprise?

Six months after the then US President Trump adopted the vision of a ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’², President Emmanuel Macron mooted the idea of an IFA trilateral. A possible objective was the creation of an independent alternative to the US-led (and dominated) regional architecture Macron foresaw emerging. Speaking at Australia’s Garden Island naval base on May 2, 2018, he called for the formation of a new strategic alliance between France, India and Australia to respond to challenges in the Asia-Pacific region, including the growing assertiveness of China³.

This was not a spur-of-the-moment announcement. Macron had evidently discussed the idea with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his March 2018 visit to New Delhi. The shared vision of India-France cooperation in the Indian Ocean concluded during that visit said, “The two leaders are desirous of associating other strategic partners in the growing cooperation between India

¹Joint Statement by France and Australia, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2022/07/01/joint-statement-by-france-and-australia>

²Remarks by President Trump at APEC CEO Summit, Da Nang, Vietnam, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-apec-ceo-summit-da-nang-vietnam/>

³Macron wants strategic Paris-Delhi-Canberra axis amid Pacific Tension, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-australia-france-idUSKBN1I330F>

and France, as and when required and, in this regard, would establish trilateral dialogues”⁴. Australia’s location, maritime capability and bilateral relationship with both France and India made it the front runner for such a trilateral. The three countries are resident Indian Ocean powers (France because of its territorial possessions in Reunion and other islands), and form a natural security triangle that spans the entire Indian Ocean.

The prospective benefits of the trilateral became evident when the three countries came together to rescue India’s Cdr Abhilash Tomy from the Southern Indian Ocean in September 2018, after a storm had wrecked his boat and left him incapacitated with severe back injuries⁵. The discerning observer would note that the sequence of events involved - search, locate, track, respond – form the bedrock of almost all maritime security operations.

The elevation of the India-Australia strategic partnership of 2009 to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership on June 04, 2020⁶ opened the doors for formal IFA cooperation. Among the agreements entered into was the shared vision for India-Australia maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific⁷ whose objectives, from the security perspective, were broadly similar to the India-France vision of March 2018⁸. Three months later, IFA foreign secretary equivalents met virtually for the first Senior Officials Dialogue⁹. A second meeting at the official level occurred on February 25, 2021¹⁰. A ministerial meeting was scheduled in New Delhi on the sidelines of the Raisina Dialogue in April 2021; however, an upsurge in COVID-19 infections in India led to the Australian Foreign Minister calling off her visit at the last moment. The first IFA

⁴ Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region (New Delhi, 10 March 2018), <https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/29598/joint+strategic+vision+of+indiafrance+cooperation+in+the+indian+ocean+region+new+delhi+10+march+2018>

⁵ For an account of the rescue, see “Updates: How Navy Commander Abhilash Tomy was Rescued”, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/live-updates-abhilash-tomy-stranded-indian-navy-officer-rescued-safely-1347408-2018-09-24>

⁶ Joint Statement on a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Republic of India and Australia, https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/32729/Joint_Statement_on_a_Comprehensive_Strategic_Partnership_between_Republic_of_India_and_Australia

⁷ Joint Declaration on a Shared Vision for Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific Between the Republic of India and the Government of Australia, https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/32730/Joint_Declaration_on_a_Shared_Vision_for_Maritime_Cooperation_in_the_IndoPacific_Between_the_Republic_of_India_and_the_Government_of_Australia

⁸ Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region, Op Cit.

⁹ First Senior Officials India-France-Australia Trilateral Dialogue, https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/32950/1st_Senior_Officials_IndiaFranceAustralia_Trilateral_Dialogue

¹⁰ Australia-India-France Trilateral Senior Officials’ Meeting, https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/32950/1st_Senior_Officials_IndiaFranceAustralia_Trilateral_Dialogue

Ministerial dialogue took place on the sidelines of the G-7 Foreign Ministers' Meeting in May 2021¹¹.



India's Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi and French President Emmanuel Macron meet in Paris on May 4, 2022. Source: MEA Photo Gallery/Flickr

This dialogue committed the three countries to working together to achieve a free, open, inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific. The Ministers "reaffirmed their support for the rule of law, freedom of navigation and overflight, peaceful resolution of disputes, democratic values, and respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity"¹². Three distinct focal areas for deepening cooperation were identified: maritime safety and security in the Indo-Pacific; marine and environmental cooperation; and multilateral engagement. A number of other areas of cooperation, including countering climate change, developing quality infrastructure, counter-terrorism and critical and emerging technologies were discussed. The ministers reaffirmed their commitment to maintaining the momentum of engagement, including at the Leader-level.

¹¹India-France-Australia Joint Statement on the occasion of the Trilateral Ministerial Dialogue (May 04, 2021), https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/33845/IndiaFranceAustralia_Joint_Statement_on_the_occasion_of_the_Trilateral_Ministerial_Dialogue_May_04_2021

¹²Ibid.

Meanwhile, three months after the signing of the New Atlantic Charter in June 2021¹³, the US-UK alliance drew Australia irrevocably into its strategic embrace through the incentive of providing nuclear propulsion technology and integration of national scientific, industrial and military capabilities. AUKUS, announced on September 15, 2021¹⁴, signified a decisive shift by Australia from a multipolar vision of the world to a unipolar, US-led one. It caused cancellation of the 'Attack-class' submarine project that was an integral part of the Australia-France enhanced strategic engagement and a diplomatic rupture in the relations of France with both the US and Australia. The French Foreign Minister Jean Yves Le Drian likened French anger over AUKUS to "the blowback from American allies over the abrupt and messy withdrawal from Afghanistan"¹⁵. A side effect was killing prospects for the leader-level meeting of the IFA, which would have put the leadership's stamp on IFA trilateral cooperation.

Post AUKUS Geopolitical Developments

Geopolitically, much movement has taken place since the IFA trilateral dialogue was interrupted. The pandemic has adversely impacted economies and disrupted supply chains throughout the region, highlighting the importance of supply chain resilience. China's economic and military expansion, assertion and attempts to rewrite international law, including UNCLOS, in its own favour, have gathered pace, as has China's push to exercise administrative control over claimed areas in the East and South China Seas and on its border with India. In addition, China's strategic thrust into the Southern Pacific appears to have surprised the West. An opaque agreement with the Solomon Islands, acknowledged by that country's Prime Minister¹⁶, holds out the potential for sharply expanding China's security footprint in the region and creating a potential barrier in the maritime connect between the US and Australia. Kiribati has also gone into the China camp. Evident concern about these developments has led both the US Indo-Pacific Coordinator¹⁷ and the

¹³The New Atlantic Charter, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/10/the-new-atlantic-charter/>

¹⁴Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS, September 15, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/15/joint-leaders-statement-on-aucus/>

¹⁵US Spat With France Shows Challenge of Keeping Allies Unified, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-spat-with-france-shows-challenge-of-keeping-allies-unified-11632082796>

¹⁶Solomon Islands-China Security Cooperation Signed, <https://solomons.gov.sb/solomon-islands-china-security-cooperation-signed/>

¹⁷Readout of Senior Administration Travel to Hawaii, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and Solomon Islands, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements->

Australian Deputy Prime Minister¹⁸ committing to doing more in the region. The Pacific Islands Forum is meeting for the first time since 2019 at the time of writing. The Western Pacific may occupy China's attention for some time, but its burgeoning maritime capacity will inevitably be brought to bear in the Indian Ocean in the near future.

A China-Russia no-limits partnership was announced during the Putin Xi Summit of February 4, 2022¹⁹. This goes far beyond the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of 1939, which led to the USSR and Germany dividing Poland between them. The Putin-Xi Joint Statement encapsulates the differences between the US, on the one hand, and China and Russia on the other. A litany of complaints about the actions of some actors who "continue to advocate unilateral approaches to addressing international issues and resort to force; they interfere in the internal affairs of other states, infringing their legitimate rights and interests, and incite contradictions, differences and confrontations, thus hampering the development and progress of mankind"²⁰ binds the outlook of Russia and China. How long this partnership will survive in view of other divergences in the interests of China and Russia is a separate question. For the present, their coming together cannot but be an unwelcome development for India's vision of a multipolar Asia as part of a multipolar world.

Russia's military action in Ukraine, initiated just 20 days after the agreement with China, brings the prospect of aggressive territorial revisionism back to Europe. Barely three years ago, the then US President Trump was contemplating exiting NATO²¹. Following the unilateral US pullout from Syria, President Macron of France had described NATO as "brain dead" and expressed concern about a waning commitment from the US towards the transatlantic alliance²². Today, the conflict in Ukraine and the spectre of Russia and China acting together against Western interests has spooked the West into focusing

[releases/2022/04/22/readout-of-senior-administration-travel-to-hawaii-fiji-papua-new-guinea-and-solomon-islands/](#)

¹⁸Richard Marles Address: Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/minister/rmarles/speeches/address-center-strategic-and-international-studies-csis>

¹⁹For an overview of this partnership, see Lalit Kapur, "The China Russia Entente" in the Indo-Pacific Monitor, Vol III Issue 2, https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads_dpg/publication_file/voliii-issue2-3755.pdf

²⁰Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>

²¹Trump Discussed Pulling US From NATO, Aides Say Amid New Concerns Over Russia, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/14/us/politics/nato-president-trump.html>

²²NATO alliance experiencing brain death, says Macron, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-50335257>

on hard balancing, uniting allies ranging from Japan and Australia to Germany and France behind the US (and its leadership) in a way that could not have been contemplated in the recent past. Finland and Sweden have applied to join NATO, while Germany, Japan, Australia and South Korea have announced sharp hikes in defence spending. The perception in the West that Putin apprised Xi of his intentions before launching military action in Ukraine has increased suspicions about China. Cracks in Western unity remain, including due to concerns about economic factors, energy security and climate change. Whether security considerations will overcome these in due course or not will be a function of how effective Western leadership is in playing the 'authoritarian threat to democracy' card. Meanwhile, India is being pushed to choose sides between democracy and authoritarianism, circumscribing its strategic autonomy.

There has been pushback against China's expanding influence, most notably from the Quad, which has progressed from the dialogue mechanism it was at the time the IFA dialogue was launched to holding four Quad Summits: two virtual, on March 12, 2021 and March 3, 2022; and two in person, on September 24, 2021 and May 24, 2022. The Quad's regional vision bears striking similarity to that of the IFA Trilateral. It provides a soft-balancing option, while keeping hard-balancing in the background. The Quad has moved decisively into the implementation phase: vaccine delivery is well underway, the education partnership will induct its first students in 2023 and the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) has been announced²³. The number of areas being discussed for Quad cooperation have increased manifold. It now encompasses the three pillars envisaged by the IFA trilateral and much more, including cooperation in the climate change, critical and emerging technologies, maritime security, cyber, anti-terrorism, quality infrastructure, countering disinformation, supply chain resilience, space and education domains. However, the Quad's geographic footprint is coterminous with the footprint of the US Indo-Pacific Command. A separate I2U2 Quad, comprising India, Israel, the UAE and the US, has been announced linking India to the Middle East²⁴.

²³For an analysis of the IPMDA, see Lalit Kapur, "Assessing the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness, <https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/publication/policy-briefs/assessing-the-indo-pacific-partnership-for-maritime-domain-awareness.html>

²⁴ Joint Statement of the Leaders of India, Israel, United Arab Emirates and the United States (I2U2), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/07/14/joint-statement-of-the-leaders-of-india-israel-united-arab-emirates-and-the-united-states-i2u2/>



Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese meets Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at Tokyo on May 24, 2022. Source: MEA Photo Gallery/Flickr

AUKUS and the budding Japan-Australia alliance have strategically divided the Indo-Pacific into two regions adopting different strategic approaches towards balancing China: the Western Pacific and the Eastern Indian Ocean²⁵. In the former, the dominant approach focuses on deterrence through US-led military balancing. South Korea appears ready to set aside its differences with Japan and join the bandwagon, the UK has signalled the intent to increase its military presence through the deployment of the HMS Queen Elizabeth Carrier Strike Group to the Indo-Pacific in 2021 and even Germany has deployed a frigate to the region. Soft balancing developmental initiatives and multilateralism form a subsidiary track and remain limited in impact because of the continued attraction of China's growing market and the barrier of US protectionism. Whether this US-led approach will succeed in addressing short-term concerns such as Taiwan, North Korean provocations and the grey zone strategy China has adopted to achieve its objectives in the South and East China Seas is a matter of opinion.

²⁵For an analysis of AUKUS, see Lalit Kapur, "The AUKUS Alliance: Return to the Past?", <https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/publication/policy-briefs/the-aukus-alliance-return-to-the-past.html>

In the Indian Ocean, in contrast, military balancing has taken a back seat. A multilateral approach and the Quad's initiatives to provide public goods comprise the primary track. Whether soft-balancing alone will suffice to deal with the region's security concerns, including the spread of Islamic extremism and China's growing coercive influence, or hard balancing will be required has been left unaddressed.

The West is coalescing to address the authoritarian challenge from both Russia and China. This trend is visible in the revised NATO Strategic Concept, released during the Madrid Summit June 28-30, 2022²⁶. NATO's core tasks remain unaltered: deterrence and defence; crisis prevention and management; and cooperative security. However, perceived challenges have expanded manifold. Russia now tops the list, followed by terrorism; conflict, fragility and instability in Africa and the Middle East; China's stated ambitions and coercive policies; a contested cyberspace; emerging and disruptive technologies; the erosion of arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation architectures and climate change²⁷. Even though Russia's action has drawn US focus away from the Indo-Pacific and back to the Euro-Atlantic, there is understanding that Russia is the short-term challenge and the much greater China challenge lies ahead. Unlike during the Cold War, where the primary theatre was the Euro-Atlantic, the contest for global hegemony will necessarily expand to include the Indo-Pacific this time. As NATO shifts more attention towards the Indo-Pacific and China enhances its thrust to dominate Asia, India's strategic autonomy doctrine will be increasingly tested.

There is greater concern about China even in the EU. Notably, the EU-China Summit of April 1, 2022, yielded no joint statement²⁸. Statements from the two sides portrayed two differing narratives, with the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy saying, "... the dialogue was everything but a dialogue. In any case, it was a dialogue of the deaf"²⁹. He added, "Given China's increasing assertiveness, both at home and abroad, it is clear that we

²⁶See Lalit Kapur, "The NATO Madrid Summit June 2022" in the Indo-Pacific Monitor, Volume III Issue 6 (June 2022), https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads_dpg/publication_file/indo-pacific-monitor-3883.pdf

²⁷NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf

²⁸For an overview of the Summit, see Lalit Kapur, "The EU-China Summit" in the Indo-Pacific Monitor, Volume III, Issue 4, https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads_dpg/publication_file/voliii-issue4-3831.pdf

²⁹EU-China Summit: Speech by High Representative /Vice President Josep Borrell at the EP plenary, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-china-summit-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-ep-plenary_en

do not share the same political values". Major differences include China's outlook on Ukraine, human rights, its sanctions against Members of the European Parliament, coercive measures against the EU's Single Market and Member States, WTO reform, ocean governance and cyber security. "The EU continues to deal with China simultaneously as a partner for cooperation and negotiation, an economic competitor and a systemic rival", is the EU's official line³⁰. However, space for cooperation appears to be shrinking. European countries are increasingly expressing views about the Indo-Pacific at odds with those of China. France, Germany, the Netherlands, the UK and the EU have all published regional strategies that are opposed to China's maritime claims and its territorial assertions. There is greater EU interest in India, and if harnessed, this can serve India's interests well.

Other issues in the Indian Ocean littoral demand attention and solutions. Instability continues in Mozambique, depriving the world (and India) of an important new source of energy. Yemen is seeing a temporary ceasefire, but the potential for renewed conflict remains high. Afghanistan has effectively been left to Islamist extremists, generating high potential for regional instability. Iran and its nuclear plans remain a cause of regional concern. Pakistan continues to sponsor cross-border terrorism and is in hock to China for CPEC; its use by China as a proxy against India is expanding. The Galwan standoff continues. Sri Lanka is experiencing a political meltdown, with the President having fled the country. Myanmar remains a powder keg. Post-pandemic economic recovery remains a distant dream, with rising food, fertiliser and energy prices sharply impacting the economies of all regional countries. Asia is in ferment, with the geopolitical situation becoming more complex by the day. As an aspiring regional power, India will have to contribute to addressing these problems, particularly within its Indian Ocean backyard.

The IFA Trilateral in Addressing Indian Ocean Geopolitical Challenges

With over 1.6 million citizens living in Reunion, Mayotte and the French Southern and Antarctic Lands and an EEZ of about 2.6 million Km² in the Indian Ocean (larger than that of India), France is a resident western Indian Ocean power. It maintains a military presence in Reunion, Djibouti and Abu Dhabi. Its stated aim is to be a stabilising force, promoting the values of freedom and rule and law, and providing solutions to the security, economic, health, climate

³⁰EU-China Relations Fact Sheet, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/EU-China_Factsheet_01Apr2022.pdf

and environmental challenges facing the region³¹. Its strategy to achieve this aim is based on four main pillars: security and defence, economic, effective multilateralism and commitment to providing common goods. Each of these pillars contains several clearly identified objectives³². The congruence between France's Indo-Pacific vision and India's SAGAR vision is striking³³.



Indian Navy Destroyer INS Chennai and French Navy frigate FS Courbet exercise together in the Arabian Sea on April 03, 2022. Source: PIB

Australia, on the other hand, is an eastern Indian Ocean power. Its relationship with India has expanded substantially in the last few years. It acknowledges that "India's location makes it the natural leader of this region, which Australia strongly supports"³⁴. As Australia expands its trade with India and Africa, its

³¹ France's Indo-Pacific Strategy, February 2022,

https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/en_dcp_a4_indopacifique_022022_v1-4_web_cl878143.pdf

³² For details, see the strategy *ibid*.

³³ See "Text of PM's Remarks on the Commissioning of Coast Ship Barracuda, 12 March 2015, <http://www.pib.gov.in/newsite/erecontent.aspx?relid=116881>

³⁴Speech: National Defence College New Delhi, India, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/minister/rmarles/speeches/speech-national-defence-college-new-delhi-india>

need to ensure SLOC security and regional stability in the Indian Ocean will grow. Capacity constraints will prevent the US from playing a larger security role in the Indian Ocean, at least till the outbreak of open great power conflict in the region.

The regional objectives of India, France and Australia are thus broadly congruent. However, none of the three nations has the resources to achieve these objectives singly; all will require cooperation with like-minded partners and regional nations. The reality is that the only like-minded partners who can bring capacity and capability to bear within the region are France, India and Australia; other states lack capacity. This, in fact, is one of the underlying reasons why the IFA trilateral developed so quickly in the past.

The AUKUS breach no doubt impacted France deeply. "Australia's decision in September 2021, without prior consultation or warning, to break off the partnership of trust with France that included the Future Submarine Program (FSP), has led to a re-evaluation of the past strategic partnership (between) the two countries", says the French Indo-Pacific Strategy of February 2022³⁵. But continued pique will not address French interests when China's revisionism gathers momentum. The status of the Indo-Pacific as the world's fastest growing region has not changed. Managing its security, including in the Indian Ocean, will require harnessing the resources of capable partners. French recognition of this reality is evident from the words "France will pursue bilateral cooperation with Australia on a case-by-case basis according to its national interests and those of regional partners" in the joint statement³⁶. In the event, the Australian government has agreed to pay France's Naval Group € 555 million³⁷, enabling the two to move forward with the relationship. It has also expressed deep respect for France's role and active engagement in the Indo-Pacific³⁸.

"We agree to establish a new agenda for cooperation based on three pillars: defence and security, resilience and climate action, and education and culture", says the recent Macron-Albanese Joint Statement³⁹. Concrete areas of cooperation have been identified. However, media coverage, particularly on the French side, appears to have remained low-key. While strategic

³⁵ France's Indo-Pacific Strategy, February 2022, Op Cit.

³⁶ Joint Statement by France and Australia, <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/joint-statement-france-and-australia>

³⁷ Naval Group Settlement, <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/naval-group-settlement>

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Joint Statement by France and Australia, <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/joint-statement-france-and-australia>

circumstances dictate cooperation with Australia, it will take time and effort to rebuild trust.



Australian PM Anthony Albanese and French President Emmanuel Macron meet in Paris on July 1, 2022. Source: Twitter/PM Anthony Albanese

Restarting the IFA Trilateral process serves the interests of all three countries despite conflict between the multipolar visions of the future world order that India and France share and Australia's unipolar vision. France and the US are allies, even if not completely aligned on all matters. So IFA objectives can initially remain the three pillars on which there was agreement in May 2021: maritime safety and security, marine and environmental cooperation, and

coordinated multilateral engagement with the objective of building a stable Indian Ocean order. The lead for this is best taken by India: French reservations will have to be mitigated and common meeting ground found.

The first step towards meaningful IFA cooperation should be a trilateral summit, which puts the leadership's stamp on areas of cooperation. This will have to be followed by building requisite structures that enable meaningful cooperation: dialogue mechanisms for strategic coordination, intelligence sharing and maritime domain awareness, coordinated presence, establishment of standard operating procedures for response to developments, measures to enhance interoperability including a periodic trilateral joint exercise, expansion of reach and sustainability of forces of the three nations, and building up of regional capacities to secure at least their own maritime zones. Creation of a trilateral mechanism patterned on the Five Eyes could be explored. The Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) could be expanded to include the Fusion Centre at Madagascar, as well as US facilities in Bahrain. On reach and sustainability, bilateral Mutual Logistics Support Agreement between the three partners already exist. Consideration can be given to expanding these to Reciprocal Access Agreements.

Conclusion

The shift of economic power to Asia, China's continued assertions and uncertainty about US commitment will define the Indo-Pacific for the foreseeable future. For India, with its primary Indian Ocean focus, balancing the advance of China's regional influence is essential. IFA cooperation offers the potential to address shared interests in the south-western Indian Ocean, filling the geographic void left by the Quad and I2U2. It complements US efforts. IFA cooperation can also provide the foundation to pull in other interested parties, including the EU, which shares the same values and interests and already has a presence in the western Indian Ocean.

India should consider taking the lead in renewing the trilateral with Australia and France, drawing them into Indian Ocean maritime security cooperation in pursuit of shared interests. As the Quad has so amply demonstrated, it will take time to turn dialogue mechanisms into concrete instruments of cooperation that serve not only present day maritime security needs, but can be expanded to encompass hard balancing structures if the need arises. The recent thaw in France-Australia relations provides an opportunity that needs to be seized.



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