

INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGIC PAPERS

France and Australia: Realising our potential as like-minded strategic partners

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In 2011, Colonel Hoskin served in Parliament House as the Defence Adviser to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. In 2011-12, he served in NATO headquarters in Kabul as the lead planner for the handover of security leadership to the Afghan National Security Forces. From 2013 to 2015, he was Defence Attaché Paris, with non-resident accreditations to Morocco and Algeria.

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Abstract

This paper examines the potential for Australia and France to develop closer defence engagement. It contends that both have similar strategic interests, equally focused on regional stability and the rule of law, and that they have similar policy positions for how to achieve these goals. It also asserts that Australia and France are both significant actors, with a similar expeditionary mindset about the globalisation of security imperatives, and with similar political and military cultures with regards to risk.

The paper argues that increased engagement with France would directly benefit Australia's strategic interests, both regionally and as fellow contributors to a rules-based global order. It concludes that Australia should further advance defence and diplomatic engagement with France on security issues, aiming to enhance Australia's ability to influence events while also usefully widening the circle of like-minded partners, as well as maintaining military interoperability for an uncertain future.

France and Australia: Realising our potential as like-minded strategic partners

France is a power in the Indian and Pacific Oceans.... [A]s a permanent member of the Security Council, France is true to its international commitments as well as to its friends and partners.... It is deeply committed to contributing to an international order based on peace, justice, and law.

Jean-Yves Le Drian, French Minister for Defense, April 2014¹

Only the most one-eyed of Australia's 'Asia only' foreign policy Red Guard could have failed to notice France's remarkable re-emergence as a global strategic player.... Overall, there's good reason for Australia and France to look at options for closer defence and security cooperation. We're like-minded countries that want to be serious players in international security.

Peter Jennings, Executive Director, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, February 2014²

Introduction

The *2016 Defence White Paper* foreshadows Australia taking an active role in both regional stability and maintenance of the rules-based global order.³ These two requirements are linked by a simple reality: Australia alone has limited ability to materially change the course of international events without the leverage of multilateralism and like-minded bilateral partners. Therefore, and in addition to Australia's other partnerships, there is benefit to be gained from deepening the relationship with a globally-influential country that is both willing and able to use its national power in the Indo-Pacific region.

France and Australia have similar interests on the various strategic issues in the region and are both significant actors. They share a similar expeditionary mindset about the globalisation of security imperatives, and have similar political and military cultures with regards to risk. For these reasons, this paper will argue that increased engagement with France would directly benefit Australia's strategic interests.

To support this argument, the paper will show that France and Australia are strategically and militarily like-minded, with mutual benefits to be gained from increased defence engagement. The paper will illustrate where successful defence cooperation with France already occurs and where there is unrealised potential for doing more. Freedom of navigation in the South China Sea will then be explored as a topical issue of high significance for Australia that illustrates how further strategic cooperation with France would be valuable.⁴ The paper will then acknowledge the potential risks and counter-arguments for such cooperation and will show how they are outweighed by the benefits.

France's engagement in the Indo-Pacific region

In addition to its roles in Europe, Africa and the Middle East, and its position on the UN Security Council, France is also heavily engaged in the Indo-Pacific region with self-interest in taking this further. As asserted by France's then Foreign Minister in late 2014, '[o]ur prosperity and our security are intimately and inseparably linked to the prosperity and security of Asian countries; any crisis in this region will directly impact our interests'.⁵

France's regional interests and strategy are comprehensively expressed in its 2014 policy paper titled 'France and Security in the Asia-Pacific'.⁶ For example, Asia accounts for 32 per cent of France's imports and 36 per cent of its exports outside the EU, with this trade highly dependent

on regional stability and freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asian sea-lanes. In its foreword, France's current Defense Minister noted that:

The Asia-Pacific region is characterized by the importance of its maritime areas and the sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) which extend from the Yellow Sea to the Arabo-Persian Gulf. These SLOCs are vital both for Asia and Europe and they form globalization's 'jugular vein'.⁷

France has a substantial military presence throughout the Indo-Pacific region, with bases in Djibouti, Reunion Island, Abu Dhabi, New Caledonia and French Polynesia. The 7150 personnel at these bases represent 60 per cent of France's permanent overseas military establishment, titled 'sovereignty and presence forces'.⁸ In addition, France regularly deploys substantial forces for operations and international engagement in the region. Recent examples include deployments of the Aero-Naval Group (based around the aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle*), ship visits and patrols in the South China Sea (typically twice yearly), annual 'Jeanne d'Arc' amphibious and officer-training two-ship deployments, submarine patrols in the Indian Ocean, and increasing bilateral cooperation with the US Marine Corps.

France's commitment is also demonstrated by the emphasis it has placed in recent years on defence engagement with regional states. Formal strategic partnerships have been signed with Australia, China, India, Indonesia, Japan and Vietnam. France also has substantial and deepening defence relationships with Singapore and Malaysia. As part of an extensive diplomatic presence, France has 18 defence attachés in Asia.⁹

France's strategic thinking on the region is explained by Nicolas Regaud, Special Adviser to France's Head of International Relations and Strategy in its Defense Ministry, as follows:

France is not 'discovering' the Asia-Pacific.... After a period of withdrawal following defeat in the War of Indochina, France commenced a 'pivot' starting in the early 90s: multiplication of strategic dialogues, military cooperation linked to defence materiel exports, participation in regional fora (Western Pacific Naval Symposium, Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group, South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting) and numerous regional military exercises. Our 2013 Defence White Paper portrays—like never before—the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific region, the issues with the potential to seriously threaten our interests, and the need to actively participate in regional security.¹⁰

France's increasing presence gives it the potential to be an important 'influencer' in the region, and one that Australia can work with to mutual benefit.

The strategic relationship between France and Australia

There is a solid framework of agreements for security cooperation between France and Australia. The 2009 Defence Cooperation and Status of Forces Agreement provides a legal and administrative basis for bilateral activities, and one which is both robust and flexible in its applicability.¹¹ In the 2012 Joint Statement of Strategic Partnership, the two governments 'reassert the importance of close bilateral cooperation to address major international security issues of common concern ... and their cooperation in the Pacific and Indian Ocean regions, where they both have an interest in promoting peace, stability and prosperity'.¹²

A regular program of senior visits and statements keeps reinforcing these agreements. A joint statement by then Prime Minister Tony Abbott and President François Hollande in Paris in 2015 affirmed that '[w]e have agreed to deepen the security aspects of our bilateral relationship'.¹³ Strategic policy guidance continues in the same vein, with France's 2013 Defence White Paper, for example, referring to the 'growing convergence of the two countries' interests on a large range of subjects, both international and regional, relating to the Pacific and to the Indian Ocean'.¹⁴ Similarly, Australia's 2016 *Defence White Paper* states that:

Australia and France share a longstanding and close defence relationship with a shared commitment to addressing global security challenges such as terrorism and piracy ... [and that] we are strong partners in the Pacific where France maintains important capabilities.¹⁵

This growing engagement extends well beyond the domain of security. For example, there have been some 40 Australian ministerial and 160 senior official visits to Paris since mid-2014, covering many areas of bilateral cooperation and mutual interest.¹⁶ While their capitals are geographically distant, France and Australia are strategically and militarily like-minded. Each takes a global view of its security interests and has capable expeditionary military forces. They are both prepared to accept tactical and strategic risk with their military forces if the situation requires it, and to lead military interventions in their respective areas of influence.

Australia's leadership of the INTERFET deployment to Timor Leste occurred in the face of great uncertainty over potential military resistance from Indonesia and major logistic risks.¹⁷ Similarly, the 2013 French intervention in Mali was launched rapidly against a determined and well-armed insurgent force, and conducted over vast distances that stretched logistics arrangements.¹⁸ Many states make contributions to military interventions but France and Australia are among a particularly select group in the above respects.¹⁹

France and Australia have also alternated as the second most significant contributor to the counter-Daesh intervention in Iraq and Syria (depending on whether the French aircraft carrier group is in theatre). French security relations with both the US and the UK have also significantly deepened. For example, US Secretary for Defense Ashton Carter contended in July 2015 that:

Now, I've been working on Trans-Atlantic Security for a long time, both in and outside of government, and I think ... this is the best our defense relationship has been in a very long time, probably ever, and we're committed to strengthening it still.²⁰

The 2010 Lancaster House Agreement between France and the UK has similarly marked growth in their bilateral defence and security relationship. This is evident from their Combined Joint Expeditionary Force, operations in Africa and the Middle East, materiel cooperation, personnel exchanges, joint facilities, air policing, immigration control and intelligence sharing.²¹ Australia's *2016 Defence White Paper* confirms the primacy of our US alliance and the value of the 'Five Eyes' intelligence community but there is room for Australia to work more with France as well.²²

Current Australia-France cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region

Australia already cooperates well with France, both bilaterally and within multilateral arrangements such as the FRANZ Agreement, the Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group, and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium.²³ The POVAI ENDEAVOUR framework is an Australian initiative for Pacific defence cooperation, and France is a major participant through hosting of exercises such as CROIX DU SUD.²⁴ France was the first regional country to respond to Australia's request for participation in the INTERFET mission in Timor Leste and, during the Fiji crisis, Noumea was used as a staging and logistics base for ADF operations.²⁵

Other examples include a regular program of strategic dialogues and military-to-military staff talks, humanitarian assistance missions, naval passage exercises, individual exchanges, modest French participation (or observer roles) in Australian-hosted major warfighting exercises, materiel cooperation, the Cooperative Fisheries Surveillance Treaty, and a 2015 trilateral Maritime Surveillance Summit in Noumea with France and New Zealand.

Opportunities for increased cooperation

Some of the strategic-level intentions described above are only being partially realised, and there is potential to do more. This would be welcomed by France, with the previously-mentioned Nicolas Regaud asserting that:

We should enlarge our thinking on what brings us together—beyond the Pacific—because, while France is a middle power, it has global reach ... and Australia's interests go well beyond the Asia-Pacific.... We share the same vision of strategic autonomy (that is to say, the ability to act alone if necessary, such as in Africa for France and in the Pacific for Australia, or sometimes with other partners and the United States for major operations); we also share the same

'fighting spirit', a somewhat rare quality.... There is rich potential for cooperation in numerous domains: Africa, Middle East, cyber, counter-terrorism.²⁶

In what is likely to prove a major development in the defence relationship, French company DCNS will be the supplier of Australia's future submarines, and an inter-Governmental Agreement is currently being negotiated. Extensive technical and industrial cooperation will be required but there is also considerable scope for growth to occur in naval and strategic engagement over many decades to come.

A Mutual Logistics Support Agreement between Australia and France was initiated in 2006.²⁷ This will have many benefits for both parties, including providing access for Australia to the French Pacific Territories' basing facilities and logistics support. Noumea's role in World War 2, as an allied base, illustrates its potential strategic significance, particularly in an era of changing regional power balances. However, for a number of years after its signing, the Mutual Logistics Support Agreement was not given a high priority so progressed little until 2013, and is only now approaching finalisation.²⁸

France's participation in Pacific region peacekeeping interventions has been inconsistent: it was not involved in Timor Leste after INTERFET, nor Operation ANODE in the Solomon Islands or Operation BEL ISI in Bougainville. The reasons for this are complicated and will be addressed further below. Nonetheless, encouraging greater French participation would support Australian interests by providing extra military capacity, logistics support efficiencies, and enhanced global profile. Similarly, there is scope for greater French participation in exercises such as TALISMAN SABRE, PITCH BLACK and amphibious training with the US Marine Corps in northern Australia. This would enhance interoperability and deepen military-to-military links with a potentially-valuable future partner.

Australia's recent focus on defence diplomacy (as expressed in the *2016 Defence White Paper*) also suggests a useful area of cooperation. France has a sophisticated approach to military engagement around the world, typified by its relationships with francophone Africa. The 2013 Mali intervention and ongoing trans-Sahel counter-extremism operations are proving highly effective, in a manner non-typical of other recent Western interventions. This was greatly facilitated by longstanding personal and institutional ties, as well as a sound French understanding of how to cooperate effectively with indigenous governments and military forces. This is a good study for Australia, so we could usefully incorporate French insights into our training and education, and into our evolving mechanisms for international engagement.²⁹

A topical example: policy alignment on freedom of navigation and the rule of law

The *2016 Defence White Paper* notes an array of strategic tensions in Australia's region and further afield. But it also particularly emphasises risks to the international order posed by competing territorial claims in the South China Sea and the need to resolve them through the rule of law.³⁰ France's position is strikingly similar, illustrating how it is in Australia's interests for the two countries to work together on such major strategic issues, with France's Defense Minister asserting in June 2012 that:

[R]egional and global cooperation must be underpinned by common structures and standards. France's role is not to come up with the various solutions to bring to the various sovereignty disputes existing in Chinese South Sea, for instance. They must be solved through negotiations in the framework of international law, in a spirit of self-control and dialogue.³¹

China has been willing to push boundaries and has a preference to negotiate bilaterally with other South China Sea claimants in considerably less powerful positions. As Tony Walker observes:

The Chinese will seek to get away with what they can.... [So] it is incumbent on countries such as Australia to invest—with its allies—in what might be described as a hedging strategy, not to 'contain' China but to provide a counterweight to its ambitions.³²

Adding prominence to Australia's unity of messaging with France on the South China Sea would provide greater weight, further reassure the smaller nations in the area, and introduce both a European perspective and that of a permanent member of the UN Security Council. This would make the issue global rather than regional, and would mitigate China's preference to deal bilaterally with other claimants, which accords with the observation in August 2015 by Peter Varghese, then Secretary of Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, that:

Global multilateralism rests on the equality of states. But power resides with the handful of states with the strategic and economic reach to shape events. The story of multilateralism is the constant quest to expand the reach of the former and constrain the raw power of the latter. It works best when states with power accept that their broader interests are served by a system of international rules and norms which apply to all.³³

To date, much of the discussion on this issue has been focused on Japan and the US. This is compromised by two factors; first, the rule-of-law argument is diminished by the US' non-signature of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and by Japan's own status as a claimant in the East China Sea; and second, by Australia's desire to maintain policy independence in its dealings with China. The following observation by Sam Bateman is cautionary in this regard:

Japan is an inherently insecure country. In the current strategic environment a closer security relationship between Australia and Japan is more to the benefit of Japan than it is for Australia. Placing too much emphasis on a strategic relationship with Japan suggests a strategic inferiority complex on the part of Australia.... It's not a matter of choosing sides in Northeast Asia ... it's more a matter of being able to maintain even-handed neutrality.³⁴

Japan has a complicated relationship with China. While Australia is developing its defence relationship with Japan, engagement with China should remain on Australia's own terms—and there is nothing to be gained from being perceived as taking a side on Japan-China issues. Membership of a looser but wider consensus on the South China Sea would leave Australia more freedom of action to finesse the full range of its China relationship.

What might this look like in tangible terms? France has maintained a fairly low profile in its public discourse on this issue. Australia could, therefore, encourage France to more widely reiterate its Shangri-La Dialogue statements and the thrust of its Asia-Pacific strategy paper, and to become more visible in the current debate within the region.³⁵ A recent positive step was public comment by France's Defense Minister during a visit to Australia shortly after the release of Australia's *2016 Defence White Paper*, where during discussions with Australia's Defence Minister, Senator Marise Payne, on the situation in the South China Sea and China's militarisation of disputed islands, M. Le Drian said that 'France definitely wants to see stability in the region, grounded in law, and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea ... [adding that] [a]ny disputes must be settled peacefully'.³⁶

Also, the French Navy conducts two ship visits to China and the South China Sea each year.³⁷ In 2015, these visits were conducted by the Noumea-based frigate *Vendémiaire* and the *Jeanne d'Arc* deployment of an amphibious ship plus a frigate from metropolitan France.³⁸ The 2016 *Jeanne d'Arc* deployment took the same form. These visits demonstrate regional engagement as well as providing an opportunity to demonstrate French views on freedom of navigation by its selection of transit routes through what it would legally regard as non-territorial waters.

Given the similarity of Australian and French policy positions, useful bilateral discussions could be held on naval operational procedures and on communications to the claimants and to the media. There is, therefore, scope to coordinate military activities in the contested region in a manner that retains complete sovereignty and independence but which mutually reinforces both states' assertions about the rule of law.

Risks and counter-arguments

Inevitably, there are risks involved in any change in strategic settings. France has a very particular position in relation to our closer 'Five Eyes' allies, and the merit of closer cooperation is not easy for some to envisage. For example, the word 'France' did not appear a single time in

Australia's *2013 Defence White Paper*.³⁹ There seems to be a persistent sense that France is viewed as too independent, difficult to work with, and not a priority for engagement.

This probably had its origins in French policy settings during the intensely-difficult period following World War 2. After profound humiliation and a complete loss of sovereignty, President Charles de Gaulle and his successors needed to rebuild French self-respect and security autonomy, and were prepared to do so at the expense of others' sensitivities. Hence the ejection of NATO from France and the development of an independent nuclear deterrence, as well as domestic initiatives such as nuclear power to avoid reliance on imported coal or electricity. It took France a long time to recover its desired place in the global system.

In the interim, scars were left by issues such as nuclear testing in the Pacific, competition with the US and UK for spheres of influence and defence equipment markets, and decades of policy differences on Iraq. This has all become history, as is well illustrated by the speed and scale of France's commitment to the Operation INHERENT RESOLVE intervention against Daesh in Iraq and Syria, by the unprecedented request by the US for the French to provide carrier battle group coverage in the Gulf while their own assets were twice unavailable during 2015 and 2016, and by the pragmatic division of labour between the US and France for security in north and west Africa.

Another possible concern is that France has a complicated relationship with its Pacific territories, which also impacts on other Pacific states' willingness to work with them. This has certainly been the case in the past, and has limited French participation in peacekeeping missions. However, depending on how France manages independence demands in New Caledonia and autonomy demands in French Polynesia, there is potential for this to improve significantly.⁴⁰

The conduct and outcome of the 2018 New Caledonia referendum will provide significant indicators, although it seems likely that France will maintain close engagement whatever happens. The recent accession by both French Polynesia and New Caledonia to full membership of the Pacific Islands Forum is a victory for French diplomatic endeavours in the region (and was supported by Australia).⁴¹ Stable relationships between France and its Pacific territories benefit Australia, since France makes a substantial contribution to their stability and prosperity, leaving Australia able to concentrate on the rest of the Pacific.⁴² Assisting France to stabilise its regional relationships would therefore be in Australia's own interests.

One objection could be that French interests in the Indo-Pacific would compete with those of Australia, such that French successes in the region would diminish Australia's own standing. This seems improbable as the two countries have well-established respective zones of direct national interest, where each devotes considerable resources to capacity-building and with no desire for expansion. One possibility for divergent interests would be if Australia and France were to compete as exporters to the region, for example in defence materiel. This, however, is rarely the case, and actually there is potential for Australia-based French defence industry groups to develop regional markets to mutual benefit. Examples include Thales, DCNS and Airbus Group Asia-Pacific.

One potential issue is that an increased French presence would diminish the ability of other regional partners to engage with Australia, due to a finite capacity for government attention. This is a real risk and would need to be managed. Similarly, Australia's own capacity for international engagement is a finite resource, both among Canberra-based agencies and for the ADF. This is squarely addressed in the *2016 Defence White Paper's* guidance on increased international engagement, and it will be a matter of prioritising the extra capacity that will be generated in coming years.

Similarly, Europe's growing concerns over Russia, internal security and immigration flows may result in a reduced ability or willingness to act further afield. This is possible—and France is certainly very engaged on these issues. But France has a global view of its security imperatives and clearly intends to remain a global actor. If anything, this will make France more likely to seek efficiencies from enhanced regional cooperation and from engagement with Australia as a like-minded influencer.

So there are risks and mitigations required—but the same applies to all our allies and partners. There is clearly a net benefit to be gained for Australia from investing more deeply in this relationship.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that France and Australia are strategically and militarily like-minded, with a well-established policy basis for security cooperation. It has shown that the two states' interests in the Indo-Pacific are equally focused on regional stability and the rule of law, and that they have similar policy positions for how to achieve these goals.

Australia's 2016 *Defence White Paper* foreshadows growth in Defence's international engagement capability, in order to better shape Australia's security environment. In addition to deepening engagement with other regional and alliance partners, Australia should further advance defence and diplomatic engagement with France on security issues. This would enhance Australia's ability to influence events, while also usefully widening the circle of like-minded partners, and maintaining military interoperability for an uncertain future.

Notes

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- ¹ French Ministry of Defense, 'France and security in the Asia-Pacific', *Ministry of Defense* [website], April 2014, p. 2, available at <<http://www.defense.gouv.fr/english/dgris/strategic-thinking/defense-foresight/asia-pacific>> accessed 16 February 2016.
 - ² Peter Jennings, 'Sacré bleu! L'alliance essentielle?', *Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI)* [blog], 17 February 2014, available at <<http://www.aspistrategist.org.au/sacre-bleu-lalliance-essentielle/>> accessed 10 February 2016.
 - ³ As expressed in the Strategy and International Engagement sections: Department of Defence, *2016 Defence White Paper*, Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra, February 2016, pp. 14-8 and 22.
 - ⁴ Peter Jennings, 'Pitching the battlefront far beyond the air-sea gap', *Weekend Australian*, 27 February 2016.
 - ⁵ The French Defense Ministry's Head of International Relations and Strategy, Mr Philippe Errera, quoted in Kelvin Wong, 'France highlights Asia-Pacific strategic imperatives', *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 29 October 2014.

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- 6 This was prepared by the Defense Ministry, with significant Ministry for Foreign Affairs involvement, and then issued as a national policy statement: French Ministry of Defense, 'France and security in the Asia-Pacific', p. 3.
- 7 Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian's foreword in French Ministry of Defense, 'France and security in the Asia-Pacific', p. ii.
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- 15 Department of Defence, *2016 Defence White Paper*, p. 140.
- 16 Advice from Australian Embassy Paris, provided to author by email, 28 October 2016.
- 17 As described in Bob Breen, *Struggling for Self-Reliance – four case studies of Australian regional force protection in the late 1980s and the 1990s*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence, ANU Press: Canberra, 2008, pp. 136-48; also in Peter Cosgrove, *General Peter Cosgrove, My Story*, Harper Collins: Sydney, 2006, pp. 166-88.
- 18 The rapid decision by President Hollande and his National Security Committee to accept these risks is well described in Sergei Boeke and Bart Schuurman, 'Operation "Serval": a strategic analysis of the French intervention in Mali, 2013–2014', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 38, Issue 6, 24 July 2015, abstract available at <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2015.1045494>> accessed 6 March 2016, p.12.
- 19 This article describes French military and political culture with regards to the use of force in the national interest in terms that illustrate commonalities with Australia: Michael Shurkin, 'Bet on it: Hollande's counterattack against the terrorists is going to hurt them', *Politico Magazine*, 17 November 2015, available at <<http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/11/the-french-way-of-war-213372>> accessed 6 March 2016.
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- 21 UK Ministry for Defence, 'UK-French defence cooperation reaffirmed on fifth anniversary of Lancaster House Agreement', *UK Government* [website], 3 November 2015, available at <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-french-defence-cooperation-reaffirmed-on-fifth-anniversary-of-lancaster-house-agreement>> accessed 5 March 2016.
- 22 Department of Defence, *2016 Defence White Paper*, p. 122.
- 23 The FRANZ Agreement is a trilateral agreement between France, Australia and New Zealand, signed in December 1992, on disaster relief cooperation in the South Pacific: see <http://www.pacificdisaster.net/pdnadmin/data/original/Franz_2013_Agreement.pdf> accessed 6 November 2016; the Quadrilateral Defence Coordinating Group is a multilateral agreement between France, Australia, the US and New Zealand to provide maritime surveillance support in the Pacific—ADF support is provided under Operation SOLANIA: see

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- <<http://www.defence.gov.au/operations/SouthWestPacific/>> accessed 6 November 2016; the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium is 'a voluntary initiative that seeks to increase maritime cooperation among navies of the littoral states of the Indian Ocean Region by providing an open and inclusive forum for discussion of regionally relevant maritime issues'—see <http://ions.gov.in/about_ions> accessed 6 November 2016.
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