

## WHY DO MIDDLE POWERS PROJECT FORCES IN DISTANT REGIONS? THE CASE OF FRANCE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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### ABSTRACT

*France has steadily increased its military presence in the Indo-Pacific region in recent years. However, a middle power projecting forces far away represents an anomaly for neorealism, which generally expects non-great power states to focus their limited resources on their regional neighbourhood. This article proposes a new neorealist framework to explain why middle powers sometimes intervene in distant regions and tests it on the French case. Such interventions are likely if four conditions are met. First, the middle power must live in a relatively safe neighbourhood. Second, the distant region of interest must be open to power projection. Third, this region must have a potential hegemon that threatens to overturn the local balance of power. Fourth, economic benefits must offset the middle power's cost of projecting forces there. This study helps explain French policy in the Indo-Pacific, fills a gap in neorealist theorising, and contributes to the literature on middle-power behaviour.*

**Keywords:** French foreign policy, Indo-Pacific strategy, middle power, neorealism, power projection

## INTRODUCTION

The September 2021 announcement of the Australia-United States-United Kingdom (AUKUS) trilateral security partnership and the resulting French outrage spotlighted Paris' growing interest in the region. French President Emmanuel Macron affirmed France's status as a full-fledged Indo-Pacific nation on several occasions, and Paris released its first Indo-Pacific strategy document in 2018. France has been conducting high-profile freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) on a regular basis in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. However, Paris' newfound activism in the region is poorly explained by existing theories. Great powers often have both the capabilities and the motives to project power far away and defend their interests in distant areas. But why did France, a middle power with limited military means, create and implement a comprehensive strategy for a faraway region of the world?

To qualify as a great power, a state “must have sufficient military assets to put up a serious fight in an all-out conventional war against the most powerful state in the world” and “it must have some reasonable prospect of turning the conflict into a war of attrition that leaves the dominant state seriously weakened, even if that dominant state ultimately wins the war”. It also requires “a nuclear deterrent that can survive a nuclear strike against it” (Mearsheimer 2014: 5). In other words, a great power is “a state which could insure its own security against all comers” (Rothstein 1968: 296). According to this definition, today's great powers are the US, China, and Russia, in that order (Allison 2020; Mearsheimer 2019). By opposition, a minor power is thus a state unlikely to survive long against the world's first power or that lacks a credible nuclear deterrent.<sup>1</sup> Minor powers represent the overwhelming majority of states, and most lack the capability to project power far beyond their borders. Hence, they are unlikely to pay much attention to power politics in distant corners of the globe.

France belongs to the highest tier of minor powers: the middle powers. The concept of middle power is a notoriously slippery one, often used liberally (Robertson 2017; Robertson and Carr 2023). If a great power can put up “a serious fight in an all-out conventional war against the most powerful state in the world” (Mearsheimer 2014: 5), a middle power can put up a serious fight against the least of the great powers (Monteiro 2014: 46). Middle powers “are those which can disrupt the system, but not change it, through unilateral action” (Mares 1988: 456). Few would disagree that France belongs among the middle powers. Already many decades ago, Wight (1978) saw that “the most obvious middle powers today are the powers which have lost the status

of great power as a result of the two World Wars: Britain, France, Germany and Japan” (65).

This study aims to fill the gap in the literature concerning middle power intervention in faraway regions. Indeed, there is a dearth of neorealist studies tackling the issue. Although many strands of neorealism (or structural realism) exist, most share similar assumptions about how international politics works. Since there is no world government, states live in a state of anarchy. They are reduced to self-help to ensure their survival. States are unsure of other states’ intentions and thus build military forces to preserve themselves. Those mustering superior military capabilities can turn into existential threats. Therefore, states tend to uphold a balance of power to deter or defeat stronger rivals. Consequently, the main explanatory variable of neorealism is the distribution of material power. The two main neorealist schools are defensive (Glaser 2010; Waltz 1979) and offensive realism (Mearsheimer 2014). The main point of contention between the two is whether states are generally content with maintaining the status quo or wish for expansion whenever benefits outweigh the costs. However, our argument that France wants to prevent Chinese hegemony is consistent with both defensive and offensive realist assumptions.<sup>2</sup>

Specifically, realist scholars have paid scant attention to what drives middle powers to direct some of their limited means toward power projection. Indeed, neorealist literature generally assumes that states primarily focus on their home region, and the weaker the state, the more so (Elman 2004; Mearsheimer 2014; Walt 2013). France’s interest in the Indo-Pacific is thus *terra incognita* for the existing realist corpus. Discussions about France’s behaviour in the Indo-Pacific remain centred on policy (for instance, Pajon 2023), and the topic has yet to receive proper theoretical treatment.<sup>3</sup> Also, it adds to the literature on middle powers, which has become since the 1960s a widely discussed concept (Holbraad 1984), although arguably an overstretched one (Cooper 2011; Robertson 2017).

This study focuses on the post-2017 period for two main reasons. First, President Macron took office in May 2017 and soon showed increased attention to the Indo-Pacific region. We follow the general usage in calling “Indo-Pacific” the part of Asia east of Iran, south of Russia, which also encompasses Australasia (Motin 2024: 71). Second, 2017 can be used as a yardstick to mark the shift from unipolarity to multipolarity. Indeed, the 2017 US *National Security Strategy* acknowledged for the first time the rise of China and Russia as rival great powers (White House 2017).

A middle power requires a capable navy, ideally supported by a potent air force, to project power thousands of kilometres away. Can France project power in the Indo-Pacific region despite not being a great power? France's 2021 defence budget reached 39.2 billion euros, and its total military personnel approached 206,000 (French Ministry of the Armed Forces 2021). An array of modern capital ships, the *Charles de Gaulle* aircraft carrier, and nuclear-powered attack submarines provide France with a solid power projection capability. French forces can be deployed from the mainland or bases in or near the Indo-Pacific region. The latter are divided into "sovereignty forces" consisting of troops based in Mayotte and the Réunion (1,700 troops in 2021), New Caledonia (1,450), and Polynesia (900), and "presence forces" based in Djibouti (1,450), and the United Arab Emirates (650). Regional partners regularly provide logistical support for transiting forces.

Indeed, France has a long history of power projection worldwide, including in the Indo-Pacific region. It has a tradition of operating autonomously and conducting military operations against distant enemies—notably in Africa. For instance, in 2021, Paris conducted several air and naval exercises and coalition operations such as *Operation Agenor*, *Operation Atalanta*, and *Combined Task Force 150* in the region, in addition to the abovementioned FONOPs. But why does France desire to project power in the Indo-Pacific, a region distant from its core European territory?

This article presents a new neorealist explanation of why middle powers sometimes get involved in distant regions and applies it to the French case. According to this theory, such interventions are more likely if four conditions are met. First, the middle power's mainland must be relatively secure; if it faces threatening neighbours, it should be unable to project toward distant areas. Second, said distant region must be open to the middle power's endeavours. If a hegemon already exists there, it will have no difficulties blocking the middle power. Third, the middle power has an incentive to defend the region only if a great power seems capable of reaching hegemony. Indeed, a regional hegemon could harm the middle power's local interests and be free enough to project power toward the middle power's homeland. Lastly, deploying a consequential strategy away from home is costly. The economic benefits must outweigh the costs of deploying forces there.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. In the next part, we present our theories' four variables. Then, we check whether these variables are found in the case of France's growing interest in the Indo-Pacific. After that, we discard the most obvious alternative explanations and check whether our theory can travel to other cases before concluding.

## MIDDLE POWERS AND POWER PROJECTION

In this section, we build upon the existing literature to extract four hypotheses and propose a theory of middle power behaviour in distant regions.

### Safe Borders and Freedom of Access

Logically, a middle power should primarily focus on its immediate neighbourhood and ensure no hegemon appears there (Mearsheimer 2014). States are primarily concerned with the distribution of land military power in their regional neighbourhood because formidable ground forces ready to cross one's borders are the greatest threat to a state's survival (Levy and Thompson 2005; Mearsheimer 2014; Motin 2021; Parent and Rosato 2015; Walt 1985). A non-great power state like France can dedicate some of its limited resources to the Indo-Pacific region only if it faces no existential threat in its home region.

Examples of that exist in other cases of middle powers. For instance, during the late 1960s, British decision-makers understood that they lacked the military might to both defend Western Europe and maintain a worldwide extensive base system. Hence, London decided to withdraw its forces "East of Suez" to focus on the overwhelming Soviet threat in Europe (James 2021). The importance of the home region's security leads to our first hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1 (H1): *Permissive regional environment*. The middle power needs to enjoy a level of strategic freedom. A middle power whose survival or territorial integrity is under direct threat is unlikely to have the wherewithal to project significant forces far away.

There is already a rich realist scholarship concerning great power intervention in faraway corners of the world. For Mearsheimer (2014; also, Elman 2004; Montgomery 2016; Motin 2022), a dominant great power in one region (typically, the US in the Western Hemisphere) wants to avoid another great power overturning the balance of power and becoming hegemonic in its region because only a regional hegemon is strong enough to threaten another regional hegemon. Conversely, a great power busy with power competition in its own neighbourhood would not project much power in other regions for fear of wasting resources. Only a power secured from imminent threats can dispatch significant capabilities to distant regions. Furthermore, to project power towards a faraway region, said region needs to be open to outside

intervention. If a hegemon already dominates this region, the extra-regional power is likely unable to maintain a presence there. For example, Britain and France during the nineteenth century were unable to dominate Europe but could swallow vast swaths of Africa and Asia because there was no consequential power there to deter or stop them (Schuessler et al. 2023; Van Hooft 2020).<sup>4</sup> Our second hypothesis is thus that the distant region's balance of power must allow the middle power to enter the area.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): *Permissive extra-regional environment.* A middle power is unable to project power in another region if great powers located in that region do not want it there. A hostile great power wishing to keep the middle power away can manoeuvre to deny it basing opportunities in the region or outright threaten the middle power with retaliations. Therefore, there must be no regional hegemon in the target region. A relative balance of power should exist in the area for it to remain open.

### **Preventing Chinese Hegemony**

Neorealist theorising concerning middle powers' behaviour toward extra-regional affairs remains underdeveloped. For instance, Elman (2005) notices that “offensive realism makes no determinate predictions about what a continental state will do regarding an extra-regional rising great power or hegemon” (313). Theoretically, France has a deep-seated interest in opposing China in the Indo-Pacific region. It could fear access denial (Montgomery 2016; also, Allen 2018) because a regional hegemon like China could reduce Paris' presence in the region or outright push it out. China could monopolise the natural resources and the region's markets, thus closing the area to French interests. A hegemonic Beijing would also probably ask regional states to limit their defence cooperation with Paris and deny French forces basing rights. Regional hegemons generally work hard to keep outside powers out of their sphere of influence (Motin 2022). Even if they refused, the uncontested domination of a hegemonic China would allow it to employ coercion or force to enforce its will.

Furthermore, French territories in the Pacific Ocean could be left defenceless if China was to become hegemonic. With the US presence eliminated from the Indo-Pacific and the Chinese navy free to refocus away from its border areas, France would lack the military capabilities to challenge China's domination. Beijing could easily blockade or even seize Polynesia, New Caledonia, or Wallis and Futuna if it wished so. In addition, a middle

power may also want to contain a potential hegemon in another region for fear that if left unchallenged, this hegemon will become able to project power toward the middle power's home region. Yet, in all likelihood, a middle power will be too weak to weigh on the balance of power seriously; its intervention is unlikely to reverse existing dynamics. Therefore, containing a distant aspirant hegemon may be a motive, but it is unlikely to be the sole one.

Contrary to widely held constructivist and liberal assumptions, peace among Western European states since 1945 has originated from power-politics motives more than ideational or institutional dispositions (Rosato 2011). Relative gains among European states still matter (Byun 2022; Simón 2017). During the Cold War, two critical factors pushed the Western Europeans to cooperate: an overwhelming Soviet threat and the reassuring role of the “American Pacifier” (Joffe 1984; Yost 2002). Washington helped alleviate France and West Germany's fear of each other and pushed them to cooperate against the Soviet threat (Avey 2012; Choi and Alexandrova 2020). Only the American factor remained after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. The US can play this role due to its geographic distance from Europe; Washington poses no threat of conquering European states because it is an ocean away, contrary to historical continental great powers like Germany or Russia. As put by Art (1996), “the United States can play this balancing role because it is *in*, but not *of*, Europe” (36, emphasis in original).

Despite its traditional Gaullist foreign policy discourse, France has since 1945 relied on the American alliance for security (Schmitt 2017; Talmor and Selden 2017; Trachtenberg 2012). The American presence in Europe benefited France by keeping Soviet-Russian power at bay and ensuring that Germany remained benign (Creswell 2002; Soutou 2001). Although Berlin lacks actual military power, its large population, economy, and advanced industrial base offer the foundation for a potentially formidable military force. US presence worked in the past to limit German military capabilities; during the Cold War, Washington thwarted German nuclear ambitions (Gerzhoy 2015). Realist thinkers expected Germany to become a great power in the post-Cold War era and for intense security competition among Western European states to return (Mearsheimer 1990; Waltz 1993). If the US withdrew from Europe, Germany would rearm and threaten its neighbours, including France (Mearsheimer 2001). Yet, that fear did not materialise primarily due to the American factor.

However, the rise of China brings the risk that the US will abandon Europe to focus solely on containing Beijing. Indeed, a middle power would worry that its great power patron could become busy confronting a threat in another region and thus lack the capabilities to protect it. If a patron faces a

formidable threat in a distant region, the middle power's home region could become defenceless against local threats (Kim and Simón 2021). Macron confirms that “over the past 70 years we've achieved a minor geopolitical, historical and civilisational miracle: a political equation free of hegemony which permits peace [...] this went hand in hand with a benevolent United States, acting as the ultimate guarantor”. However, America's “position has shifted over the past 10 years, and it hasn't only been the Trump administration. You have to understand what is happening deep down in American policy-making. It's the idea put forward by President Obama: ‘I am a Pacific president’” (quoted in *The Economist* 2019). The fear that an offshore great power patron could abandon the middle power may thus motivate the latter to assist the patron in a distant region (Cormac 2022). Deploying additional capabilities and bolstering likeminded regional countries would help Washington contain the rise of China. France alleviates the US' burden, which can then encourage the US to keep focusing some attention on Europe. Hence comes our third hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): *Fear of regional hegemony*. A middle power may fear that a regional hegemon would close off the region to its interests and undermine its great power patron's commitment. Therefore, the middle power could decide to support the local balancing coalition.

### **Middle Powers Need to Cash in on Their Efforts**

Sustaining power-projection capabilities and maintaining a military presence in a distant region is costly for middle powers. It diverts some of their limited resources away from other pursuits. According to a recent report (Pezard et al. 2021), France is already “stretched thin” due to existing commitments in Africa, the Middle East, and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) missions. It must now support a growingly ambitious Indo-Pacific strategy. Access denial following Chinese hegemony could lead to significant economic losses. But an already cash-strapped middle power may lack the resources to deploy new forces in a faraway region. In the case of France, sustaining an ambitious Indo-Pacific region entails, over the long run, fielding a stronger navy than it would have otherwise. Therefore, the Indo-Pacific strategy needs to be profitable to remain sustainable in the long run.

France helps fill the region's security deficit and brings advanced military capabilities, quality weapons, and diverse support to the table in the hope of economic rewards. Since states are more likely to enter preferential



trading arrangements with close security partners (Gowa and Mansfield 1993; Mansfield and Bronson 1997), Paris can expect that regional states concerned by their security will offer preferential trade agreements, access to markets, profitable technological cooperation, and prioritise French weaponry for their militaries. Thus, we should find evidence that French decision-makers hoped the Indo-Pacific strategy would bring economic rewards to France. This leads to our final hypothesis.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): *Economic gain*. Due to the cost of the endeavour, a middle power is likely to project power in a distant region only if it can reap economic gains from doing so.

## FRANCE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

This part tests the abovementioned hypotheses. H1 and H2 are straightforward and require only a short demonstration. H3 and H4 require a more detailed discussion. We employ a process-tracing approach (Collier 2011) to check whether our causal mechanisms are present in the minds of French leaders. Process tracing should yield strong evidence due to the realist approach chosen by this study. Leaders are unlikely to speak in realist terms for psychological, ideational, and propagandistic reasons.

First, individuals usually consider themselves generous, peace-loving, and noble-hearted. Decision-makers—like most people (Heath 1999)—will have a conscious or unconscious tendency to deemphasise material gain and self-interest as their primary rationale for action. Second, decision-makers generally sincerely believe that their state is magnanimous and well-intentioned and that, even if their state is forced to threaten or attack others, these actions are motivated by defensive goals or noble reasons. State leaders should thus mostly deny that their state is acting on realist premises. Third, a state has a vested interest in painting its actions in idealistic terms. It usually emphasises the moral righteousness of its behaviour and the malevolence and wickedness of its opponents to win over its own populace's opinion and the public opinion of third states. States that confess power-politics motives are less likely to gain the public's approval. Therefore, one should not expect French leaders to express power-politics motives, and they should emphasise generous and noble aspirations instead. If we find traces of balance-of-power thinking in French officials' speeches and documents, they would strongly confirm our causal claims.

## Freedom to Roam

We hypothesised that France would only project power in the Indo-Pacific if it was secure at home (H1). There is no immediate threat to the survival of France in its home region. France is probably the safest from foreign invasion it has ever been in its history, thanks to the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the withdrawal of the Russian army from Germany in 1994. Indeed, France’s direct neighbours all possess weaker military capabilities than Paris, and none have nuclear weapons. The UK maintains a capable but small military and is separated from France by the Channel (Table 1). Russia is the sole great power of the European continent, but Moscow is far away and lacks the conventional means to endanger French survival; it also remains contained by NATO in Eastern Europe. This secure situation means that France can earmark forces to project power in other regions of the globe.

Table 1: Balance of power in Western Europe, 2021

	France	Britain	Germany	Italy	Spain
Ground troops	114,700	85,800	62,650	96,700	71,300
Main battle tanks	222	227	284	150	327

Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies (2022).

France needs a permissive Indo-Pacific environment to be able to project power there (H2). The Indo-Pacific region is open to French power projection because there is no hegemonic power there. The only state having a realistic path toward hegemony is China. China translated its growing wealth into increasing military spending and now possesses a significant lead in military capabilities over its neighbours; in other words, it has become a potential regional hegemon (Mearsheimer 2010). Regional hegemony is guaranteed when a great power possesses at least 50% of a region’s military capabilities (Fiammenghi 2011). If we compare China’s capabilities to the Indo-Pacific region’s most prominent states, it is clear that China is far from the 50% threshold (Table 2). Furthermore, this account of the regional power distribution does not even include other powers like Australia or the US, which has a sizeable presence in the region despite being an extra-regional power.

Table 2: Balance of power in the Indo-Pacific, 2020

	Ground forces	Main battle tanks	Capital ships	Attack submarines
China	1,000,000	5,650	80	52
India	1,238,200	3,640	28	15
Japan	150,700	580	51	22
North Korea	1,100,000	3,500	2	20
Pakistan	563,200	2,467	8	5
South Korea	493,000	2,321	23	18
Taiwan	98,000	565	26	4
Chinese percentage	22	30	37	38

Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies (2021).

The existence of a growing balancing coalition underlines that China is still far from reaching hegemony. Several regional powers are committed to maintaining the balance of power and containing Beijing alongside the US. Regional states have increased their military spending and formed coalitions such as the “Quad” (Australia, India, Japan, and the US) and AUKUS. Therefore, there is no hegemonic power in the Indo-Pacific region, which thus remains open to outside powers like France.

### Concerns about Chinese Hegemony

As expected, Paris fears the rise of Chinese power and wants to help maintain the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific (H3). During a visit to New Caledonia, Macron (2018) observed that “in this region of the globe, China is building its hegemony step by step [...] if we do not organise, it will soon be a hegemony that will reduce our freedoms, our opportunities”.<sup>5</sup> The 2022 version of France’s *Indo-Pacific Strategy* opens by noticing that “China’s power is increasing, and its territorial claims are expressed with greater and greater strength. Competition between China and the US is increasing, as are tensions at the Chinese-Indian border, in the Taiwan Strait and on the Korean peninsula” (French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs [MEFA] 2022: 9).

During a hearing at the National Assembly, foreign affairs minister Jean-Yves Le Drian warned of growing Chinese expansionism and wanted France and the EU to “assume plainly competition with China, of which we constate its military rise, its hegemonic goals and growing aggressivity”

(Le Drian 2021). Thereby, one of the main objectives of French policy in the region is “the maintenance of strategic stability and military balances of power through international action based on multilateralism” (MEFA 2022: 54). Indeed, France worries about “a potential fracture in both regional and global balances of power” (MEFA 2022: 9). France is therefore working with likeminded regional partners to build balancing coalitions. Concerning the growing security cooperation between France and India, an official noticed that “China is an implicit factor in France’s capacity building with India” (Meijer 2021: 23).

China’s growing military power threatens to impede or deny France access to the region. According to the 2022 *Strategy*, “the increasing strategic and military imbalances are a threat with global consequences, and could as such directly impact Europe – 30% of trade between Asia and Europe goes through the South China Sea” (MEFA 2022: 9). Pierre Vandier, Chief of Staff of the French Navy, sees France “facing a logic of choking” from China (Guibert and Vincent 2021). For him, “every year, like a choke collar, we are a little more under pressure in this region of the world” due to increasing Chinese military activity (National Assembly 2021). When it comes to the “freedom of navigation in international straits, France is opposed to any attempted *fait accompli*, unilateral change in existing systems, or challenge to international law through the use of force” (MEFA 2022: 10). That is why France aims at preserving “access to common areas in a context of strategic competition and increasingly restrictive military environments” (MEFA 2022: 54). Logically, France was less than thrilled by the announcement of a China-Solomon security cooperation agreement in early 2022. The MEFA found the deal “worrisome in multiple ways” and reaffirmed its commitment to “a free and open Indo-Pacific space” (*Le Figaro* 2022). Macron confirms this:

We want the Indo-Pacific to remain an open and inclusive area, with each State observing each other’s sovereignty. In this zone, which is the epicentre of global maritime trade and where tensions are appearing regarding maritime borders, it is essential to ensure freedom of navigation and overflight. (MEFA 2022: 3)

The French also worry that a Chinese hegemony would threaten their territories in the Pacific Ocean. A former Ministry of Defence official told Meijer (2021) that Paris does not fear “that China will come and invade Polynesia, but rather its regular intrusions into France’s EEZ; we must uphold our sovereignty, we must protect this huge EEZ” (13). For the official in charge of the region at the MEFA, the Indo-Pacific strategy “rests primarily on the defence of our

own sovereignty. If we do not live up to our responsibilities and our role in this region of the world, China could be tempted to take that place” (French Senate 2021). A parliamentary report expresses concern about China’s interest in French territories in the Pacific and Chinese links with New Caledonian independentists (Poletti and Tan 2022). In the same vein, a research institute under the Ministry of the Armed Forces sees Beijing courting and supporting pro-independentist forces in the hope that an independent New Caledonia could become a Chinese base to project power. The authors also suspect that the Chinese have ambitions over the territory’s reserves of nickel (Charon and Jeangène Vilmer 2021; also, Eudeline and Hung 2022). To better defend their territories, the French participate in regional multilateral efforts to gain the support of neighbouring powers and the US (French Ministry of the Armed Forces 2019). Indeed, the chief of staff of the French navy warned straightforwardly that “against the Chinese navy, we will win if we fight together, as a coalition” (Aldebert 2022).

### **Economic Gain**

There are clear signs that Paris expects short- and long-term economic gains from its Indo-Pacific strategy (H4). Although the MEFA’s *France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy* (2022) lists security as the first pillar, the economy comes in second. This is notably visible in France’s focus on arms sales. A parliamentary report investigating the strategy observes that “arms exports are the backbone of France’s Indo-Pacific strategy. The Indo-Pacific defence strategy invites to develop structuring partnerships to which armament relations contribute” (Amadou and Herbillon 2022: 67). Thus, arms exports represent both an immediate economic reward and a means to develop long-term beneficial relations with regional states. Arms exports also help sustain France’s presence in the long run. Hervé Grandjean, the spokesperson for the Ministry of the Armed Forces, states that the deal to provide Indonesia with forty-two Rafales “is a sale that clearly gives credibility [...] to France’s Indo-Pacific strategy” (Cabirol 2022), so much so that there is the “risk that French diplomacy appears, in our partners’ eyes, too oriented by arms exports”; furthermore, France should “hide” this interest in arms exports behind other policies such as support for local development (Amadou and Herbillon 2022: 109).

Arms exports are not the sole vector for building profitable relations. The Indo-Pacific strategy counts among its main objectives “supporting efforts of French companies in the Indo-Pacific region” and “deepening partnerships

in research and innovation” (MEFA 2022: 57). More specifically, Paris will assist French companies by “carrying out outreach efforts on the Indo-Pacific strategy, aimed at businesses” (MEFA 2022: 58). Furthermore, the MEFA notes that multilateral development banks carrying out public procurement operations in the region are open to French businesses, and that French companies earned through these operations close to USD60 million in 2019 (MEFA 2022).

The impact of the AUKUS debacle is thus better understood in this light. The French shipbuilder Naval Group was to supply Australia with twelve conventionally-powered attack submarines. However, the Australians broke the contract and announced in September 2021 their intention to build nuclear-powered submarines with the Americans and British instead. Paris even recalled its ambassadors to Australia and the US to signal its anger. The cancellation represents a consequent financial loss for the contractor, and around 650 French employees were working specifically on the Australian submarines (Cabirol 2021). This contract helped the French government make tax money from the Indo-Pacific strategy, and its collapse weakened the sustainability of French engagement in the region.

## DISCUSSION

The empirical part has shown that our causal mechanisms can explain Paris’ motivations for intervening in the Indo-Pacific region. As expected in H1 and H2, France is relatively safe at home, and no hostile hegemon bars its road toward the Indo-Pacific. France is thus free to project power there. Concerning H3, the French are apprehensive about a potential Chinese hegemony in the region and wish to prevent such an outcome. Finally, as for H4, Paris expects its effort in the region to yield significant economic gains in the long run. We now briefly discuss two potential alternative explanations to our argument: territorial defence and ideas.

*Territories to defend.* One could counter-argue that France’s interest in the Indo-Pacific is primarily grounded in its need to defend its territories in the region. First, the defence of French territories in the region is a constant, and analysts have had it in sight for a long time (for example, Anquez 2012). Yet, it did not elicit an Indo-Pacific strategy *before* China became a potential hegemon. Second, territorial defence is unlikely to be a sufficient explanatory variable since Germany and the Netherlands have no territory in the Indo-

Pacific but they have nonetheless established a strategy for the region. Thus, one does not need territory in a distant region to want to project power there.

*Ideas.* Ideology may push the Macron government towards the Indo-Pacific. Macron has indeed expressed his willingness to establish France as a leading defender of the rules-based liberal international order (Staunton 2022). Yet, the commitment to a liberal worldview is nothing new to French foreign policy (Vaïsse 2017). Although we cannot exclude the influence of ideology, it is a constant and thus can hardly explain France's growing interest in the region. If ideology was the leading force behind French policy in the Indo-Pacific, the French commitment to the region should have been stable for many decades because states like the Soviet Union, Vietnam, and North Korea have long endangered the liberal international order before China's rise as a potential hegemon.

Another ideational counter-argument comes from the constructivist approach. McCourt (2014; also, Blagden 2021: 1176–1178) sees France and the UK as “residual great powers”. Even if they lack material capabilities, they still assume the social role of actual great powers. Therefore, they keep projecting power in distant regions. This explanation likely has some truth, as many in the French foreign policy establishment still have delusions of grandeur. But this explanation suffers from the same weakness. National conceptions of a social role are relatively stable over time unless major crises precipitate a change. There has been no crisis or event justifying an identity shift that would push Paris to form a new approach towards the Indo-Pacific. Quite the contrary, although data are lacking, it appears that younger generations of both French people and elites are less subject to the great power myth, which was far more prevalent in earlier decades.

Our framework of strategic freedom, fear of regional hegemony, and economic gain can travel to other cases and be used to enlighten other instances of French power projection, such as the 1991 Gulf War. Indeed, the ongoing collapse of the Eastern Block allowed the French to focus more attention outside of Europe. There was a real risk that Iraq's massive military would establish hegemony over the Middle East and push Western interests out. Meanwhile, Kuwait and other wealthy Gulf states would likely offer those who protected them juicy economic gains. Conversely, in 2003, Iraq was no hegemonic threat, and there was nothing to gain from invading an underdeveloped country.

The French intervention in the Libyan civil war also seems to match our expectations. According to leaked United States Department of State (2011) documents, Libya's Gaddafi planned to use its stocks of gold to establish a pan-

African currency that could dethrone the French franc (CFA). Paris learned of the plan before the start of the 2011 civil war, which became a leading factor in its decision to overthrow Gaddafi. Through the intervention, France hoped to both gain control over a share of Libya's oil and prevent a potential loss of access to Western Africa due to Libyan manoeuvres. Similarly, France had opposed the creation of a Western African Federation in the late 1950s (Kurtz 1970) due to the same fear of losing access and influence in the region.

France's reluctant participation in the Korean War (1950–53; Quisefit 2013) can also be explained by our framework. Although there was a real danger of Soviet hegemony in Asia, Paris' forces were already stretched thin due to the overwhelming Soviet military threat in Europe and its colonial commitments (Kupchan 1994). Furthermore, there was little economic gain to be made in the poor, war-stricken Korean Peninsula that would pay for the war. On the contrary, British commitment to Korea was more significant because the UK's insularity had rendered the Soviet threat less pressing for London; it thus had more latitude to project power outward. In fact, France committed far more troops to the Suez intervention of 1956 than to the Korean War. Nasserian Egypt was the rising star of the Arab world and many feared it would reach hegemony over it. The nationalisation of the Suez Canal threatened French economic interests, and Israel was a major buyer of French weaponry. Therefore, France had far more motivation to intervene in Egypt than it did in Korea.<sup>6</sup>

## CONCLUSION

We aimed here to explain recent French behaviour in the Indo-Pacific region. Will our theory remain valid in the future? We argued that a middle power like France can project significant power in distant areas only if it is relatively secure at home and the French homeland is safe from invasions. Nevertheless, this security may only last for a while. One could imagine a future where Russia keeps expanding and succeeds in subjugating most of Eastern and Central Europe. It would then become once again a major threat to French survival. Our theory would lose relevance if Paris faced an existential threat against its home territory.

Finally, our research suggests that European states are more likely to support the US efforts to isolate China economically than many realists expect. Some believe that the Europeans will refuse to decouple and will want to preserve profitable economic relations with Beijing because China's



military capabilities pose no significant threat to their security (Kim 2022). Yet, the rise of China indirectly threatens Europe. Washington could become too weak to maintain a presence in Europe if Beijing's military strength grows to the extent that all available US resources are required to contain the Chinese threat. In that scenario, the Europeans would be left alone to deal with actual or potential threats from Russia, Germany, and other local conflicts. Therefore, the Europeans will likely be more eager than many believe to limit the growth and sophistication of China's economy. European economies may lose trade and investment opportunities, but these potential costs pale in comparison to the security implications of a hegemonic China.

Other European states have shown a growing interest in the Indo-Pacific; Britain, Germany, and the Netherlands recently proposed Indo-Pacific strategies. Like France, these are middle powers that possess some force projection capabilities and do not face direct existential threats near their borders. Further research to test our framework on these cases would thus be valuable. Going one step further, another avenue would be to discuss the European Union's Indo-Pacific strategy. Although this study's neorealist theoretical framework cannot directly apply to an international institution, one would expect the fear of China's rise combined with economic profit would influence its strategy.

## NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Some scholars would further distinguish between secondary powers (Lobell et al. 2015) and small states (Kassimeris 2009; Knudsen 1996; Rothstein 1968), but we do not attempt such a typology here.

- <sup>2</sup> Narizny (2017) summarises well neorealism’s core assumptions: (1) “The most important actors in world politics are territorially organised entities”; (2) “State behaviour is rational”; (3) “States seek security and calculate their interests in terms of relative standing within the international system”; (4) “Anarchy is the ordering principle of international relations”; (5) “States . . . are undifferentiated by function”; (6) “Structure is defined by the distribution of capabilities among states” (160). Note that Waltz (1979) did not include rationality among his core assumptions. However, this absence creates significant difficulties for the logic of the theory (Mearsheimer 2009).
- <sup>3</sup> An exception is Meijer (2021).
- <sup>4</sup> Mearsheimer’s (2014) “stopping power of water” (114–128) arguably resembles Boulding’s (1962) “loss of strength gradient” concept. However, Boulding’s argument is merely about geographic distance. Even if it remains a general truth that combat power decreases with distance, we know from historical experience that colonial powers like Britain and France conquered massive empires far away from home. They could do so thanks to facing only weak opponents when coming onshore. Hence, the stopping power of water means the difficulty of landing on shores defended by strong opponents.
- <sup>5</sup> Translations from French are from the authors.
- <sup>6</sup> On France’s fear of Nasser, see Rapport (2020).

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## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors state that there is no conflict of interest.

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