



# AIC COMMENTARY

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## **India-France-Australia Trilateral: Opportunities Galore for ASEAN** **Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury\***

*India-France-Australia, three different powers from three different geographies, have one common vision – a stable Indo-Pacific region where rules-based international order is adhered for the common good and economic prosperity. India, France and Australia are committed to advancing their shared values and working together to achieve a free, open, inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific. Maritime cooperation will be a key area of focus for India-France-Australia trilateral like similar trilateral grouping in the Indo-Pacific region. This commentary presents the recent developments of the trilateral cooperation between India, France and Australia and the opportunities it offers to ASEAN.*

### **1. Introduction**

India-France-Australia, three different powers, from three different geographies, have one common vision – a stable Indo-Pacific region where rules-based international order is adhered for the common good and economic prosperity. While France is one of the P-5 nations with veto power in the UN Security Council (with territories in the Indo-Pacific region), India is an Indo-Pacific economy and Australia has been a traditional power in the Pacific. The trilateral that the three have formed can bring a lot to the table for the entire Indo-Pacific region spanning the Eastern African coast to the Pacific give their combined comprehensive national power.

### **2. Emergence of Trilateral Cooperation**

India, France and Australia are committed to advancing their shared values and working together to achieve a free, open, inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific. The three are determined in 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. This is significant to balance China, another veto-wielding power, whose territorial ambitions and aggression have been a concern for several nations.

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India is an important partner in the Indo-Pacific initiative, and relation with ASEAN is one of the cornerstones of India's foreign policy. In other words, the ASEAN-India partnership is the foundation of the Indo-Pacific. ASEAN-India Centre (AIC) at RIS in its flagship report - *ASEAN-India Development and Cooperation Report 2021* - identified the avenues to cooperation in Indo-Pacific (AIC-RIS, 2020). Deep integration between India and ASEAN is likely to provide a strong platform for the larger economic integration, particularly in the post-Covid-19. Some of the other dialogue partners of ASEAN such as Australia have been taking particular interest in the Indo-Pacific construct. Australia, with its unique geographical location a bridge connecting the Indian and the Pacific Oceans and with a two-ocean navy has an enduring interest in the peace, stability and economic prosperity of this strategic arc. France on the other hand, recognising geopolitical shifts, has begun to stress on its identity as an Indo-Pacific nation and willingness to strengthen its partnerships with the major players in the region. France though geographically not a part of Indo-Pacific but policy discourses within France identifies her as a "nation of the Indo-Pacific". France has overseas territories in the Indian Ocean as also in the Pacific.

In an article in 2018, a group of scholars (Raja Mohan *et al.* 2018) referred to the "striking convergence of security interests, defence capabilities and maritime geography" that brings Delhi, Canberra, and Paris together<sup>1</sup>. The article emphasised that the three "respect a rules-based order informed by the sovereign equality of nations and the need to guard against coercion and interference, whether from states or from terrorism." Later during French President Emmanuel Macron's visit to Australia, he spoke of "the Paris-Delhi-Canberra axis" that should be strengthened as "an established regional structure, reflecting an Indo-Pacific 'geo-strategic reality in the making.'"<sup>2</sup> France has military facilities in the island of La Réunion, Mayotte, and the French Southern and Antarctic Lands in the Indo-Pacific region. India and France share military logistics agreement and this can give reciprocal access to each other's military facilities. Pandey (2020) explained the rationale behind the trilateral<sup>3</sup>. "The new trilateral aims at building on the existing robust bilateral relationships between the three countries. India has close relations with France, the two are strategic partner since 1998. India's ties with Australia have significantly progressed in recent years. During the recent 'India-Australia Leaders' Summit' held virtually on 4 June 2020, the relationship was elevated from 'Strategic Partnership' since 2009 to a 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership' (CSP) based on "mutual understanding, trust, common interest and shared values of democracy". The relationship between France and Australia is also strong. The two countries signed the Joint Statement of Enhanced Strategic Partnership in 2017 to strengthen engagement in the Indo-Pacific region."

### **3. Trilateral and ASEAN**

India sees France and Australia as having a significant presence in certain parts of the Indian Ocean and feels it can combine with the two to significantly shape the maritime environment without the direct involvement of the US. While Australia has been engaged with India in the Indo-Pacific construct for the last few years, France has recognised the centrality of India in ensuring the right to free navigation in the Indo-Pacific region.

ASEAN has potential to benefit economically in a big way from the Trilateral. Australia maintains a strong presence across the ASEAN. India-ASEAN economic partnership has grown in strength over the last three decades. France, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, is a key economic player from Europe and can bring its expertise in energy, manufacturing, auto, retail, textile (and can even become a market for Southeast Asian garment industry) and food sectors. France is the world's seventh-largest economy by 2020 nominal figures and the tenth-largest economy by PPP.

India, France and Australia have decided to work together with a range of partners to promote the rules-based maritime order based on respect for sovereignty and international law. They have affirmed the centrality of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and that UNCLOS provides the legal framework for all activities in the oceans and seas.

This trilateral is committed to ASEAN's centrality and their support for ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, and at their recent Foreign Ministers meet in London in early May 2021 noted its complementarity with India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI). The Ministers welcomed the French decision to join IPOI by taking lead on the Marine Resources pillar and acknowledged Australia's lead on its Marine Ecology pillar<sup>4</sup>. It should be noted that the trilateral was formed in 2020 amid India's growing ties with both France and Australia.

During the May 2021 Ministerial Dialogue, the three countries shared mutual concerns regarding the strategic, security, economic and environmental challenges in the Indo-Pacific region. They pledged to work together and acknowledged the important role of regional forums such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, ASEAN, the East Asia Summit and the Pacific Islands Forum.

The three have now decided to enhance trilateral cooperation in confronting the challenges emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic. They desire fair and equitable access to high quality, safe, effective and affordable COVID-19 vaccines and treatments globally, which will be a central factor in collective recovery, especially for those who may be in vulnerable situations, including women and girls, in the most vulnerable countries, particularly in Africa. India has made a positive contribution to supply COVID-19 vaccines to various countries globally, both bilaterally and via multilateral mechanisms (COVAX) which France and Australia fully support and contribute to.

The trilateral want to address climate change and to expand cooperation through multilateral mechanisms such as the International Solar Alliance, particularly in the perspective of the COP26. They are also committed to developing sustainable, resilient and quality infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific region and agreed to work together through the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure in advancing this objective.

#### **4. Regional Partnership**

The first India-France-Australia Foreign Secretaries' Trilateral Dialogue held on 9 September 2020 have laid the foundation for this partnership which has progressed on three pillars: maritime safety and security, marine and environmental cooperation, and multilateral engagement<sup>5</sup>.

The Ministers agreed to deepen cooperation on maritime safety and security in the Indo-Pacific region. A trilateral information sharing workshop was held on maritime domain awareness held at the Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), where both France and Australia have assigned a liaison officer. Information sharing between humanitarian and disaster relief agencies of the three countries is on the cards.

Illegal Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing is a transboundary and transnational problem that affects the biological sustainability of relevant fish stocks and impacts the livelihoods of fishers, especially small-scale fishers and coastal communities in developing countries and Small Island Developing States. IUU fishing especially in the areas beyond the national jurisdiction (ABNJ) is a global concern, requiring a coordinated approach, and that the Sustainable Development Goal 14 (Life Below Water) has identified targets to combat this issue and address more broadly the issue of unsustainable exploitation of global fish stocks.

Among other issues, the three have decided to work together to enhance the health and management of the oceans, including by promoting the development of a sustainable blue economy, protecting coral reefs, supporting marine biodiversity, and combating marine pollution, particularly plastic pollution.

The COVID-19 crisis had demonstrated that, more than ever, that the world needs strong multilateral institutions, underpinned by principles of openness, accountability and balance, which deliver for all countries as we tackle global challenges. The three are committed to a reformed, UN-centred multilateralism and in this regard, the Ministers of Australia and France reaffirmed their support for India's permanent membership of the UNSC.

The trilateral has decided to intensify coordination in multilateral institutions including the World Health Organisation (WHO), standard-setting bodies and the UN Human Rights Council (UNHCR). It is also committed to close engagement through the G20, with a particular focus on economic recovery and the response to COVID-19. They reiterated their commitment to the Paris Agreement as a guiding force for the discussions on climate change within the G20.

Terror is a challenge for all three in the trilateral and must give importance of cooperation to address risks to international security from malicious cyber activity and to ensure that technologies critical to shared interests in security and prosperity are designed and developed in line with public safety and democratic values.

There is a plan for an engagement at Leader-level, and to expand trilateral cooperation to new avenues that can ensure security, stability, openness and prosperity for all in the Indo-Pacific region.

## **5. Way Forward**

Maritime cooperation will be a key area of focus for India-France-Australia trilateral like similar trilateral groupings in the Indo-Pacific region. India has regular bilateral maritime dialogues and bilateral naval exercises with both Australia and France. In 2020, India and France conducted the first joint Coordinated Patrol exercise (COIRPAT) in the Reunion Island. India and Australia announced a significant Joint Declaration on a Shared Vision for

Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific during their 2020 bilateral summit, acknowledging that “many of the future challenges are likely to occur in, and emanate from the maritime domain”. Besides, economic engagements will pick up pace along side. It is, therefore, in this sphere that most ASEAN member states which have coastline have an important role to play and may explore a partnership in the maritime sphere with India-France-Australia trilateral for lasting stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

### Endnotes:

1. Refer, Raja Mohan, *et al.* (2018)
2. Refer, Hindustan Times (2020)
3. Refer, Pandey (2020)
4. Refer, Chaudhury (2021) and MEA (2021)
5. Refer, MEA (2020)

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## About AIC



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Considering the work of the ASEAN-India Eminent Persons Group (AIEPG), and its Report with recommendations for forging a closer partnership for peace, progress and shared prosperity, the Heads of the State/Government of ASEAN and India at the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit 2012, held at New Delhi on 19-20 December 2012, recommended the establishment of ASEAN-India Centre (AIC), which was formally inaugurated by the Hon'ble External Affairs Minister of the Government of India on 21 June 2013 at RIS. AIC serves as a resource centre for ASEAN Member States and India to fill the knowledge gaps that currently limit the opportunities for cooperation. AIC is closely working with the Indo-Pacific Division of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India to undertake and disseminate evidence-based policy research and provide policy recommendations.

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