

HERVÉ MARITON

Mayor of Crest, Chairman of the Franco-British Council, Chairman of the Federation of Overseas Companies (FEDOM)

John Andrews, Author, journalist and contributing editor to *The Economist*

The floor is yours, Hervé.

Hervé Mariton, Mayor of Crest, Chairman of the Franco-British Council, Chairman of the Federation of Overseas Companies (FEDOM)

Thank you, Thierry, for having the Indo-Pacific as an issue again this year and I am just proposing to share a French point of view on this. France has its stance on the Indo-Pacific and its stakes. There are a bit more than one and half million inhabitants in French Overseas Territories in the Indo-Pacific, Pacific and Indian Ocean. We also boast the second largest maritime domain in the world at 10 million square kilometers, behind the US with 12 million square kilometers, while Australia has 9 million square kilometers and New Zealand 7 million square kilometers. I would not say that New Zealand is a major strategic power despite this but the French do actually boast of their 10 million square kilometers, which are mostly in the Indo-Pacific.

The first thing I want to stress is that we do not necessarily define the concept of the Indo-Pacific in exactly the same way as others. I remember having some discussions about this last year and, as most of you probably know, the Americans mostly have defined the Indo-Pacific in a more northern and eastern way than we have had. The French would actually insist that the Indo-Pacific is the Pacific but also the Indian Ocean. If I get it right, American organizations, particularly the military ones, use the term Indo-Pacific but actually concentrate mainly on the Pacific and tend not to look at the Indian part much, although it has bases in the Indian Ocean in cooperation with the UK. Second, the US looks on it at mostly northern, despite AUKUS and all that, and since our territories are mostly in the Southern Hemisphere, the French view of the Indo-Pacific is mostly southern. That means that there is a difference in concept, not only between France and the US but between the US and some other countries.

France defines itself as a balancing power in the region. We had a short discussion with Jean-Pierre this morning and the French term is *puissance d'équilibre* and we are not quite sure that balancing power is a very good translation or that the concept is exactly the same in French as it would be in English. However, the French insist on *puissance d'équilibre* and we are not actually the only ones in the region, but I propose to use the term balancing power.

John Andrews

It is a nice phrase to have.

Hervé Mariton

I propose to discuss these two aspects, balancing and power. France boasts of being an Indo-Pacific country through its doctrine and influence. First, the doctrine in itself provides a status,

saying we are an Indo-Pacific power, a balancing power, gives us a position among the major powers, maybe not quite the size of US and China, but a major power. This is important for us and obviously geography and history help define us as that kind of power. We do understand that we are not in quite the same position as the major powers in the region, nor the small Pacific Islands, for example, thus the very convenient definition as a balancing power. The status is underlined as being a position beyond the antagonism between the US and China, which is the French tradition of defining itself as a kind of third-party power in many circumstances. However, this is the root of the first difficulty with the fact that there are a lot of balancing powers, small or medium-sized in the region. The Pacific Islands would not acknowledge any kind of alignment with China or alternatively the US, nor would ASEAN countries. Indonesia defines itself as a balancing power and India is a considerable size, with an economy that is not quite yet there, but as far as I understand, it does not acknowledge any alignment with either the US or China.

When we define our position as being a balancing power, it is not as specific as we suppose. In fact, the US themselves being part of many forums, cooperation and dialogue schemes in the region, also plays on that. In some circumstances, they are looking for some kind of alignment between powers but in others, understanding the subtlety of different countries' positions, they play their role in different forums that do not necessarily require any kind of alignment. You have the Quad and AUKUS, but the US has also organized, for example, what is called Partners in the Blue Pacific, which is a cooperation with the many island countries in the middle of Pacific that do not necessarily require any alignment. Nor does the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, IPEF, which at a lower level replaces the 2017 withdrawal from the TPP.

In this framework, particularly with the US, France is an ally with many reserves and in a way, we pay the price for that. Obviously we are not in the Quad, which is the US, Japan, Australia and India. We are not in AUKUS, and as you underlined in your introduction, it is related to how we lost a contract with Australia for nuclear submarines. The problem is that being a balancing power is a positive definition in itself but it is also a negative one in the way it defines itself as participating in many forums that others share, but having decided not to participate in some of the important forums that are aligned with the US.

France has actually enhanced the assertion of the Indo-Pacific as such, being the driving force in the definition of a trade policy for the European Union in the region. For example, we stimulated Europe's engagement in 2022 with a ministerial forum between Indo-Pacific countries and members of European Union governments. Our assertion is not only about overall discussions and forums, it is actually a military presence, although we often present humanitarian cooperation and presence, with military being used for humanitarian missions, which is fair and useful but the terms should not be confused.

We purport to have reality on the ground and at sea. France, as an Indo-Pacific country through its presence and connection, the presence is several territories in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific with more than one and a half million inhabitants. However, we must remember that most of the connection from these territories, be it French Polynesia or Mayotte, between Madagascar and Africa, are with mainland France and there is an obvious deficit so far on regional connections. We may have no choice in the future in fact, the chairperson from the ECG showed some slides yesterday presenting what everybody knows as the regionalization of globalization, which for example, weakens the maritime routes we depend on. All the trade between Europe and the French territories in the Pacific depend on maritime routes that are extremely fragile today because of the evolution of globalization. We have a direct strategic concern, shared with our allies, on the security of these routes, as everybody understands in the Pacific. However, we have a more direct interest in the fact that



they are obviously changing today and this should encourage us to turn to new opportunities in the region.

There is a gap to bridge with regard to our connections on shared interests. There are political connections with all the forums we belong to such as the South-Pacific Community, the Pacific Commission, the Pacific Island Forum, the Indian Ocean Commission. However, there are some problems, for example, in articulating roles and positions because our local governments in all these regions and territories are frequently members of these different groupings and sometimes wield real power and influence. For example, trade responsibility concerning the Pacific French Territories is not the responsibility of the national government but of local government. These local governments actually have economic responsibility although today they mostly understand their Pacific or Indo-Pacific role as a political one, obviously underplaying their role in the economy. We need to build up more economic connections, as I was saying, economies today are very much linked to mainland France but there are some realities. For example, oil supply to these territories coming from Singapore for Reunion, as well as very strong tourism from Japan and Australia for New Caledonia or from the US West Coast to French Polynesia. We have not succeeded in being regional hubs, where other territories have normally succeeded better than us. This is history but France is taking a very prominent role in renewable energies for example. Many renewable energy companies in Australia are French, Neoen for example. However, they do not develop in the region from our territories but from Australian bases. Obviously, tomorrow, we have to reconcile the political assertion we are on today and the economic developments in the future.

John Andrews

Thank you very much — you have flown the flag for France!