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# Reconceptualizing French foreign and security policy in the Indo-Pacific

## Introduction

Since 2017, French foreign policy has encountered a persistent challenge in international communication, especially concerning the Indo-Pacific region. While the dynamism and activism of the President and French diplomacy are acknowledged abroad, there exists a conceptualization problem and ambiguity in public expression. This situation creates unnecessary doubts among partners and undermines France's credibility, despite its recognized international standing. Additionally, this tends to overshadow the numerous projects implemented by various French players worldwide.

The terms "balancing power" and "freedom of sovereignty" exemplify this communication problem and have become the subject of criticism both within France and abroad. Surprisingly, these terms lack clear definitions despite their repeated use in speeches and official documents intended to structure French foreign and security policy. Yet, it is crucial to effectively conceptualize and articulate this policy, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, in order to enhance its comprehensibility and influence among partner countries and populations.

## The rise of the key term “balancing power”

The term “balancing power” (*puissance d'équilibre*) has been a subject of discussion since at least September 2017 when the Foreign Minister used it<sup>1</sup>, but it gained official prominence when the President of the Republic adopted it in 2019. In a speech to ambassadors, the French president highlighted various global imbalances and emphasized what France is not – neither a middle power, nor an aligned power. However, the concept of a “balancing power” was not clearly defined, leaving room for interpretation. It was vaguely described as a power with “*freedom of play, mobility, flexibility*” that needs to “*continue to pursue the profound renewal of its methods*”<sup>2</sup>.

In December 2019, the President associated the term with the development of “*an indispensable form of independence for our diplomacy and our strategic autonomy*”<sup>3</sup>. In February 2020, in a speech on deterrence during his first five-year term, he referred to France as a “*balancing power in the service of peace and security*”<sup>4</sup>. In July 2022, the term was once again used, this time to evoke France’s ability to act as a “*driving force*” (*capacité d'entraînement*) in military terms<sup>5</sup>.

However, in September 2022, in another speech to ambassadors, the term was changed to “*puissance d'équilibres*” with no explanation provided for the use of the plural form. France was depicted as needing to work to “*limit disorder and build new partnerships with a strong military*”<sup>6</sup>. In addition, it is paradoxical that, despite the significance seemingly attached to the concept, the President himself rarely uses the term. For instance, it was not mentioned in a long interview he gave in November 2020, meant to explain his “*doctrine*”<sup>7</sup>. It was also absent from the President’s speeches at various international conferences hosted by France, such as the Summit for a New Financial Pact in June 2023.

The inconsistency in the use of the term is obvious in official documents, further contributing to doubts. Notably, the term was absent from France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy published in 2021 and updated in 2022, which is all the more surprising that presidential speeches label it as specifically adapted to this region. On the other hand, it appeared in the *Revue nationale stratégique* of 2022, setting a goal for France to consolidate its role as a “*balanced, united, radiant, and influential power, driving European autonomy*” by 2030. The draft law on military programming for the years 2024 to 2030 aims to contribute to “*making France a balancing power*”<sup>8</sup>. In this context, France is described as a “*provider of security and sovereignty*”, seeking “*mutually beneficial cooperation to support its diplomacy as a balancing power*”.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Yves Le Drian, Press conference, UN General Assembly, New York, 18 September 2017.

<sup>2</sup> “Discours du Président de la République Emmanuel Macron à la conférence des ambassadeurs et des ambassadrices”, Élysée, Paris, 27 August 2019.

<sup>3</sup> “Déclaration de M. Emmanuel Macron, président de la République, sur la politique de la mer”, Montpellier, 3 December 2019.

<sup>4</sup> “Discours du Président Emmanuel Macron sur la stratégie de défense et de dissuasion devant les stagiaires de la 27<sup>ème</sup> promotion de l'école de guerre”, 7 February 2020.

<sup>5</sup> “Discours du Président de la République aux Armées”, Hôtel de Brienne, Paris, 13 July 2022.

<sup>6</sup> “Discours du Président Emmanuel Macron à l'occasion de la conférence des ambassadrices et des ambassadeurs”, Paris, 1 September 2022.

<sup>7</sup> “La doctrine Macron : une conversation avec le Président français”, *Le Grand Continent*, 16 November 2020.

<sup>8</sup> “Projet de loi relatif à la programmation militaire pour les années 2024 à 2030 et portant diverses dispositions intéressant la défense, enregistré à la Présidence de l'Assemblée nationale le 4 avril 2023”.

## **An ill-defined, misunderstood and counter-productive term**

Upon closer examination, the term “balancing power” might draw inspiration from the theory of international relations and the concept of the “balance of power”. In academic literature, the “balance of power” has multiple dimensions: descriptive, ideological, prescriptive, and analytical. It can describe the distribution of power among international actors at a given moment, legitimize a state’s policy aimed at maintaining a certain distribution of power to its advantage, recommend maintaining a specific power distribution to prevent war, or analyze a mechanism of the functioning of the international system.

However, the prescriptive and analytical definitions of the “balance of power” are undermined by empirical studies and reflect a Euro-centric bias that considers the European “concert of nations” from the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the norm for international relations. This concept may be seen by many in France as a commonsense idea, even though it lacks strong academic support. Moreover, it tends to overlook the fact that power dynamics constantly shape and evolve the balance, as evidenced by the emergence of China in the past few years and, more recently, of India in the global landscape. Additionally, it underestimates the significance of states’ perceptions of power distribution and how these dynamics profoundly influence their behavior.

From a political standpoint, what matters most is that the term “balancing power” is unrealistic, pretentious, misunderstood, counter-productive, and unsuitable. Unrealistic in the descriptive sense, as France lacks the means to single-handedly rebalance an international system partly shaped by the Sino-US rivalry, where France’s relative power is increasingly limited. It also appears pretentious, as it implies that France can prevent global crises on its own, contrary to evidence like the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and conflicts in regions such as the Sahel and the Middle East. The same could be said of France’s claims to rebalance the Indo-Pacific where in fact its military resources and leverage are limited.

Moreover, the term is often misunderstood, especially when translated into English, causing France’s main partners to fear that the country seeks equidistance between Washington and Beijing. While intended in Paris as an expression of France’s independence, it is interpreted in Japan, India, or Singapore as a potential alignment with China, depending on global power relations. This misunderstanding has compelled French diplomats to repeatedly clarify the term, and criticism from our closest partners in non-public exchanges is a recurring issue.

Furthermore, the concept proves counter-productive as it emphasizes the gap between the stated objectives and the actual outcomes of French foreign policy. It tends to fixate on the Sino-US rivalry as the primary frame of reference despite France’s efforts to avoid getting trapped in this dynamic and its recognition that global issues hold equal shaping significance today. Additionally, this focus on the term overshadows projects implemented by France, which benefit local populations but often go unnoticed due to communication being centered at the strategic level. Finally, the term is unsuitable for day-to-day use in presidential and ministerial communication, failing to facilitate a clear understanding of France’s foreign and security policy through a simple and effective concept.

## **The “liberty of sovereignty” pleonasm**

The repeated use of the phrase “liberty of sovereignty” (*liberté de la souveraineté*) by top French officials warrants a closer examination. Since as early as 2019, the President has deemed its

“protection” as the “core of our Indo-Pacific strategy”<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, it has been described as “crucial for our carriers, fishermen, and allies”<sup>10</sup>. The term resurfaced in 2022 in the presidential address to ambassadors, where the strategy for the “Indo-Pacific space” was defined as “preserving the liberty of sovereignty”<sup>11</sup>, a phrase reiterated in the Toulon speech in November of that same year<sup>12</sup>. The paradox lies in infrequent appearance of this term in the speeches of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Armed Forces and its total absence in the nearly 80 pages of the Indo-Pacific strategy.

Poetic, perhaps, this catchphrase is ultimately a pleonasm, as sovereignty inherently encompasses freedom. In English, the translation of the French original term (*liberté de la souveraineté*) as “liberty of sovereignty” is incomprehensible, as highlighted by our key partners, both anglophone and non-anglophone. While the objective is undoubtedly commendable, it is poorly expressed by a term that lacks practical application. Hence, it becomes imperative to devise an alternative that expresses that France’s aim is to empower different countries in the region to fully exercise their sovereignty and make unconstrained choices.

### Communicating to best effect while reconciling constraints

Effective communication at the highest level of government on France’s interests and actions must strike a balance between ambition and the reality of limited resources. It should also reconcile stated foreign and security policy objectives with the inherent political constraints of communication, particularly in terms of understandability and usability. This is all the more crucial that the President of the Republic must navigate three levels of positioning: emphasizing French singularity, fostering European unity, and promoting cooperation with like-minded countries<sup>13</sup>.

Official communication must avoid portraying France as an average power with a diluted role and global standing: being a permanent member of the UN Security Council and a nuclear power, and possessing genuine military projection capabilities, it holds a significant position on the world stage. Furthermore, France ranks as the third-largest diplomatic power in terms of its network, the fourth-largest contributor to international public development assistance, and the seventh-largest economic power. Also, as the world’s leading tourist destination with a rich history and culture that radiate globally, France’s influence extends far beyond that of a mere middle power, despite some experts’ contrary analyses.

### France, a proactive power and a solutions provider

In this context, we propose the alternative concept of “proactive power and solutions provider”. France is a responsible country that possesses a unique capacity to mobilize and drive action in

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<sup>9</sup> “Déclaration de M. Emmanuel Macron, Président de la République, sur les relations entre la France et l’Inde”, Chantilly, 22 August 2019.

<sup>10</sup> “Déclaration de M. Emmanuel Macron, président de la République, sur la politique de la mer”, Montpellier, 3 December 2019.

<sup>11</sup> “Déclaration de M. Emmanuel Macron, président de la République, sur les défis et priorités de la politique étrangère de la France”, Paris, 1 September 2022.

<sup>12</sup> “Déclaration de M. Emmanuel Macron, président de la République, sur la Revue nationale stratégique et la programmation militaire de la France”, Toulon, 9 November 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Antoine Bondaz, “Visite d’État en Chine : de nombreuses opportunités, certaines risquées”, *Notes de la FRS*, n° 10/2023, 4 April 2023.

the multilateral arena. This is evident through its active participation in numerous international conferences and global agreements held in or initiated by Paris. France's proactive engagement on the international stage translates into the implementation of concrete projects that contribute to resolving global challenges for the benefit of populations and address global imbalances.

This concept holds several merits. Firstly, it emphasizes the positive aspects of France's actions and added value. Importantly, it does not overlook the existence of the Sino-US rivalry, but rather positions France as an actor seeking to reduce tensions between Beijing and Washington by promoting spaces for dialogue, international cooperation, and rejecting bloc-based approaches. The concept is readily understandable, effectively communicating both the method and purpose of French foreign policy. Its simplicity and clarity make it easily applicable to all official communications.

Additionally, this concept appropriately highlights the multitude of concrete actions implemented by various players, including ministries like the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of the Armed Forces, government operators such as the French Development Agency (AFD), the Instituts Français, France Volontaires, and even NGOs and French citizens. Each of these entities and actors contributes uniquely to showcasing the "French genius" and embodies it. It also serves as a reminder of France's active involvement in multilateral organizations and processes.

Transitioning from a communication centered on France's aspirations to one focused on tangible achievements would be facilitated by the adoption of the "proactive power and solutions provider" formula. This concept would foster consensus among various ministries, including the Directorate General for Political and Security Affairs and the Directorate General for Globalization, exemplifying the approach taken at the Quai d'Orsay. Furthermore, it would bring to the forefront the men and women who implement France's foreign and security policy, shedding more light on their contributions.

As frequently demonstrated by the author on social networks and in publications<sup>14</sup>, this concept can be easily employed to highlight various positive French initiatives, such as the launch of the Alliance for Multilateralism, France's role in creating the European Political Community, the organization of the One Planet Summit, the Sommet des deux rives, the Paris Peace Forum, the military evacuation of French and foreign nationals from Sudan, the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of the FRANZ agreements with Australia and New Zealand, the proposal for a carbon tax on global shipping, the agreement on Ukrainian wheat exports, and the Kiwa initiative promoting biodiversity in the Pacific Islands.

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<sup>14</sup> Antoine Bondaz, "La France, une puissance d'initiatives en Indo-Pacifique", *Notes de la FRS*, n° 37/2022, 15 November 2022 ; sur Twitter : @AntoineBondaz.

## France, a sovereignty enhancer

This first concept is intricately connected to a second one, “sovereignty enhancer”. Through its actions and cooperation, France plays a vital role in facilitating its partners’ expression of sovereignty by presenting a specific French and European offer, enabling them to make unconstrained choices. France acts as a catalyst for sovereignty, empowering its partners to strengthen their national capabilities and build coalitions to defend their interests, similar to how France reinforces its own strategic autonomy.

This concept highlights the significance of sovereignty, a fundamental principle at the core of the UN Charter, while also addressing the expectations of France’s partners, especially developing countries that often criticize Western double standards. It skillfully avoids evoking a “French third way”, which could inadvertently reinforce a Sino-US frame of reference and overshadow the initiatives of other countries like India, Japan, and Brazil. Using this term would allow to emphasize the broader need to support partners in enhancing their resilience to traditional security threats and in improving their economic security, environmental security, and human security.

As a sovereignty enhancer, France actively engages in numerous cooperation projects encompassing defense, internal security, and civil protection. It guarantees and develops its arms exports, conducts multilateral military exercises and force projection activities, exemplified by the Pegasus 2023 exercise. France also plays a key role in defending freedom of navigation, particularly in the South China Sea, and actively participates in the surveillance of vast areas using its satellite resources. Moreover, France combats environmental crime, such as illegal fishing, facilitates the restructuring of sovereign debts for developing countries, strengthens the resilience of nations vulnerable to the consequences of climate change, and proactively prepares for and prevents future pandemics.

## Conceptualization leading to concrete projects

While these two concepts do not alter French foreign and security policy, they provide a framework to better conceptualize and enhance its understanding among both the French people and France’s partners. Moreover, these concepts harmonize effectively with other frequently advocated ideas, such as strategic autonomy, creating a cohesive narrative for France’s actions on the global stage. By encouraging all government entities to communicate about the projects they implement and the solutions they offer, these concepts amplify the value of their endeavors.

During his visit to the South Pacific, the President of the Republic could propose the establishment of a “Pacific Island Security Forum”. This platform would convene citizens, experts, and officials from the region, focusing primarily on issues related to environmental and human security, which hold paramount importance for island states. This collaboration mechanism would provide genuine added value by positioning itself at the intersection of defense, diplomacy, and development, complementing existing forums such as the South Pacific Defence Ministers’ Meeting (SPDMM) and the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command’s Indo-Pacific Environmental Security Forum (IPESF). Its explicit purpose would be to identify effective strategies to address the specific needs of the concerned stakeholders and activate the levers necessary to meet these challenges.

To give this initiative further momentum, an annual summit could be held with the active support of the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of the Armed Forces, and the AFD Group. The inaugural summit could take place in New Caledonia as early as 2024, then alternatively, once every two years, in one of the region's capital cities, starting with Port-Vila in Vanuatu in 2025. This summit would assemble regional players around unifying themes, fostering the identification and implementation of concrete projects on a scale appropriate for the needs of the region. Each year, the achievements and implementation of the projects would be evaluated, and the most successful endeavors duplicated and amplified.

Far from being a mere forum for dialogue, this mechanism would swiftly become a symbol of France's commitment to be a proactive power and a solutions provider, as well as a sovereignty enhancer.



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ISSN : 2273-4643

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