

France calls for its own “pivot to Asia” amid US war drive against China

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10 October 2016

In pursuit of reactionary financial and strategic objectives in the Asia-Pacific, French imperialism is announcing its ambitions to boost its military deployments to this region.

This was detailed in a June report, “France and Security in the Asia-Pacific,” presented by French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian at the International Institute for Strategic Studies’ Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in June. It is part of an updated version of the 2015 Military Programming Law, stipulating that Paris must invest in major upgrades of its military capabilities to develop its influence in Asia.

In the foreword, Le Drian wrote, “The evolution of the strategic balances has strongly accelerated in Asia as well as in the Indo-Pacific. In a nutshell, the geopolitical entity comprising Asia and the Indo-Pacific, which is a seat of economic dynamism, demographic growth and technological innovation, represents a source of overall prosperity, exposed to vulnerabilities. Securing this area is thus essential, within the framework of a rules-based order based on dialogue and the respect of multilaterally set rules.”

The paper highlights the Asia-Pacific’s strategic importance for Paris, declaring, “France has started to re-balance its strategic centre of gravity towards the Indo-Pacific, where it is a neighbouring power.” France has many island possessions in the Pacific and Indian oceans. It aims to develop these as springboards for naval influence. It already participates in the QUAD (Quadrilateral Defence coordination group) planning Pacific island security policy with the United States, Australia and New Zealand.

French strategists have been formulating this policy for years, since the Obama administration announced its “pivot to Asia” in 2011 to encircle China and subjugate Beijing to US interests.

An examination of Le Drian’s report makes clear the financial interests underlying French plans for a major military escalation in Asia. The report identifies Asia as the world’s centre of economic growth and a key market for French corporations and investors, noting that in 2012, French Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) stocks in the Asia-Pacific already amounted to US\$75 billion.

France’s yearly trade deficit with China is around €25-35 billion, France’s largest trade deficit with any single country. French and international corporations use China and the entire Asia-Pacific to provide cheap consumer goods to French and European markets, relying in the final analysis on US and European military influence to dictate profitable terms to Asian suppliers.

French imperialism also views China as a potential competitor in France’s former colonial empire in Africa, where it still maintains a major political and military presence. Since 2011, Paris has launched a series of wars and military interventions—in Libya, Ivory Coast and the Central African Republic—targeting regimes that developed economic ties with China and threatened to cut across French neo-colonial interests.

In the pursuit of these interests, President François Hollande’s Socialist Party (PS) government aligned itself with the US “pivot to Asia,” even as Washington stoked a confrontation with Beijing in the South China Sea that could trigger a conflict between the two nuclear-armed powers.

France’s 2013 military White Paper declared, “[T]he equilibrium in East Asia has been profoundly modified by the rising power of China. ... Reinforcing America’s military presence in the region can contribute to controlling tensions in Asia.” It added, “France would, in the event of an open crisis, make a political and

military contribution at the appropriate level.”

At a 2013 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit, then foreign minister Laurent Fabius declared, “France has also, itself, launched its own ‘pivot.’ Not to try to be in style, but because France wants to be where the world of tomorrow is being built. And the Asia-Pacific will evidently be at the heart of the 21st century.”

Such plans to assert French military interests in Asia have ominous implications. It takes place amid a resurgence of all the imperialist powers’ neo-colonial ambitions, most clearly shown by the US-European war drive in Africa and the Middle East. In Asia, French imperialism is returning to the scene of some of its most horrific crimes. France was a brutal colonial power in Southeast Asia, and the 1946-1954 French Indochina war cost hundreds of thousands of lives before French imperialism was forced to abandon the region by its humiliating defeat at Dien Bien Phu.

Paris’s attempt to embark on military escalation in Asia is bound up with the intractable crisis of European and world capitalism. With the European Union (EU) mired in a deep economic slump, and pursuing a bankrupt policy of deep austerity against the working class combined with trillion-euro handouts to the banks, Paris is desperately seeking new targets for financial plunder.

The French Institute for International Relations (IFRI) think tank wrote, “The French ‘pivot’ to Asia serves the principal objective of the Hollande administration, which is to find sources of economic growth that no longer exist in Europe.” It added, “For French parliamentarians, the current economic context creates an ‘Asian imperative for France,’ which cannot be ignored on pain of ‘missing a strategic turn.’”

Claims that a French “pivot” to Asia would produce economic benefits are militarist lies, however. A French “pivot” would require a massive increase in military spending and, thus, corresponding social cuts aimed at workers. The IFRI wrote, “Moreover, considering a ‘pivot’ to Asia when budgetary constraints limit the French military’s power projection capacities seems strange. ... Despite voluntarist speeches with ambitious objectives, the future of French foreign policy in Asia seems rather uncertain in this context.”

An Asian “pivot” by France or other European powers would intensify the contradictions of world

capitalism, which already threaten to explode into a world war between nuclear-armed powers. Nor is it clear, in the longer term, against whom such a “pivot” would be waged—China, some other coalition of Asian powers, or even the United States.

France’s Asia policy is shot through with contradictions. On the one hand, it has developed military ties with allies of the US “pivot” to Asia—including India, Australia and Japan—with major arms sales to India and Australia. On the other, while tacitly backing the US war drive against China, it has developed economic ties with Beijing together with other European powers. Last year, it defied US requests and, like all the other major EU powers, joined Beijing’s Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

The AIIB is designed to invest in China’s Silk Road Economic Belt and “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR) initiative, which involves up to \$1.4 trillion in rail and road infrastructure to create a rapid-transit overland route from China across Russia, Central Asia, and the Middle East to Europe. The OBOR plan was a response to the US “pivot,” which blocked Chinese influence in trade routes in the Indian and Pacific Oceans vital for the security of Chinese energy imports from the Middle East.

The Brexit has sharpened such strategic rivalries between the EU and Washington. Since Britain voted to leave the EU, France and Germany have pushed to create an independent EU military that would effectively rival the NATO alliance between the US, Canada, and the European imperialist powers—a move long opposed by Washington and London.



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