

# France joins “Asian Quad” Indian Ocean naval drills, threatening China

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On April 5-7, for the first time, Indian as well as Japanese and Australian warships took part in a French naval exercise codenamed “La Pérouse,” in the Bay of Bengal.

This provocative drill took place after a March summit and naval drills by the anti-Chinese “Asian Quad” alliance of the United States, India, Japan and Australia, as well as visits to India by US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin and South Korean Defence Minister Suh Wook. During the “La Pérouse” exercise, warships carried out 90 drills including helicopter and resupply operations. Another Indian-French naval war game, the Varuna exercise, is scheduled for April 25-27.

Arnaud Tranchant, the captain of France’s amphibious assault ship Tonnerre, which headed the “La Pérouse” drill, told Indian media it aimed to strengthen interoperability between the two navies.

Indian Navy Spokesperson Commander Vivek Madhwal said, “Participation by the Indian Navy in the exercise demonstrates the shared values with friendly navies ensuring freedom of seas and commitment to an open, inclusive Indo-Pacific and a rules-based international order.”

These drills highlight mounting war tensions as the Biden administration takes office and calls on the European Union (EU) to “work together” with Washington against alleged “expansionist” Chinese policies in Asia. Last year, the “Quad” countries carried out “Malabar” naval exercises in the Bay of Bengal. Now, as the EU powers continue boosting their collective military spending amid the pandemic, even after it hit \$300 billion in 2019, they are also developing an aggressive policy in Asia.

These exercises are in line with a new strategy document recently rolled out by French armed forces chief General Thierry Burkhard, signalling a turn by French imperialism to preparations for large-scale “state

against state” wars.

“The world is evolving quickly enough and badly enough,” he said, pointing to growing conflicts and “uninhibited re-militarisation.” The army “imagined a situation in 2035 ... But in 2020, a certain number of check-boxes are already ticked.” France now confronted “the end of a stage of conflicts” involving wars in the Sahel and Afghanistan, in which French forces enjoyed overwhelming military superiority against the targeted populations. The army expects new, “symmetric” conflicts, Burkhard said, “state against state,” that is, between major, nuclear-armed powers.

This comes after France spent €49.7 billion on its defence budget for 2021, as planned in the 2019-2025 military program law, with plans to raise this to €54 billion by 2024.

In March, only weeks before the Franco-Indian naval drills were to begin, the European Parliament issued a report titled “The Quad: An emerging multilateral security framework of democracies in the Indo-Pacific region.” It noted that the adoption of Indo-Pacific strategy papers by France, Germany and the Netherlands “has stepped up expectations about the forthcoming strategy for the region by the EU as a whole.”

The EU powers, while not lining up entirely with Washington against Beijing, are nonetheless signalling increasing hostility to China. While calling US policy “the expression of a strategic US-China rivalry,” the EU parliament report noted: “The EU, on the other hand, looks at China as an economic partner and a systemic rival, but also as a partner for negotiation and cooperation on key issues (including climate change).”

However, it also echoed rising war propaganda falsely blaming China for having allegedly triggered the COVID-19 pandemic. It claimed, “The appetite for engagement with China may have subsided in some European capitals,” provocatively asserting that Beijing

aims “to distract public opinion from China’s responsibility for the pandemic.”

This aggressive policy is connected to a deep crisis of the capitalist system bound up with the emergence of Asia as a centre of world economy, soon to have 62 percent of world Gross Domestic Product and buy 35 percent of EU exports. France and the EU as a whole are reacting by pouring tens of billions of euros into their military machines. Financed by austerity against the working class and “herd immunity” policies on COVID-19 that have claimed over 1 million lives in Europe, these funds are preparing catastrophic wars.

Paris and New Delhi are escalating long-standing strategic ties. After the 1991 Stalinist dissolution of the USSR, both French imperialism and India sought to promote notions of a “multi-polar” world order. Then-French Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine criticized the United States as a “hyper-power,” and Indian governments responded positively to attempts by Paris to market itself as a somewhat more reliable and less unpredictable and threatening partner than Washington.

France was supportive of India’s nuclear tests in 1998, when most of the imperialist powers reacted by imposing sanctions. Franco-Indian cooperation has grown over the last two decades to cover nuclear, space, defence, cyber security, intelligence-sharing and counter-terrorism cooperation. Bilateral military exercises, beginning with the navies in 2001, followed by the air forces in 2004 and the armies in 2011, have now become a regular feature.

What this history shows is that none of the imperialist powers, including Washington’s supposedly less aggressive European allies, have any alternative to the accelerating drive to war and police-state rule.

France has stepped up its involvement as it became increasingly concerned over China’s growing economic influence abroad. China set up its first overseas military base in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa in 2017 and has invested in developing, managing or acquiring strategically located ports in countries surrounding India, including Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Myanmar. This cuts across not only US but also European and French interests, notably the interests of Paris in maintaining its fading domination of its former colonial empire in Africa.

Paris and New Delhi have repeatedly moved closer to a military alliance, with France signing a basing deal giving it access to facilities in India in 2018. In February 2020, the French and Indian navies, for the first time, conducted joint patrols from the Indian Ocean island of Reunion.

*The Hindu* last November reported that visiting French

Navy Chief Admiral Christophe Prazuck had stated that Paris is “looking forward to organising joint patrols with the Indian Navy” in 2020 and working on the precise objectives. Speaking at an event, he said the region of the patrols could be the northwestern Indian Ocean or southern Indian Ocean “around the islands that are part of France.”

At the same time, Paris and New Delhi have moved closer based on the anti-Muslim policies of both French President Emmanuel Macron and India’s Hindu-supremacist Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Indian media and officials have tweeted their support for France’s “anti-separatist” law, which aims to restrict Muslims’ freedom of religion and expression by claiming that certain Islamic practices amount to separatism against the French Republic.

France has also supported India in Kashmir, a Muslim-majority region Modi has stripped of its autonomy and subjected to violent police-state rule. Thousands of Kashmiris and prominent politicians have been detained, communication lines cut and mobility in the Kashmir Valley severely restricted with the deployment of tens of thousands of additional Indian troops in one of the world’s most militarised zones.

In January, Emmanuel Bonne, a diplomatic adviser to French President Macron, visited India for an annual strategic dialogue and insisted that France supports India on Kashmir. He said, “Even if it is Kashmir, we have been a strong supporter of India in the Security Council, we did not let China play any kind of procedural game. When it comes to the Himalayan regions, you should check our statements, we have been completely clear. There is no ambiguity in what we say in public.”



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