

AUKUS spurs French strategic review with tilt toward Japan, India

Officials visit Tokyo to coordinate '2+2' ministerial meeting by year-end

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TOKYO -- France is reviewing its Indo-Pacific approach after being blindsided by the AUKUS alliance that scuttled its submarine deal with Australia, a French official said in Tokyo on Tuesday, with Paris keen to strengthen ties with Japan and India.

"What is at stake is what kind of Franco-American and trans-Atlantic partnerships, particularly in relation to the Indo-Pacific, there should be," Philippe Errera, the French Foreign Ministry's director-general for political affairs and security, told reporters in reference to AUKUS.

France was outraged when the pact between the U.S., U.K. and Australia led to Canberra unilaterally scrapping a deal to acquire French submarines last month. Under the three-way arrangement, Australia's partners will supply it with nuclear submarine technology instead.

Errera said this was not only a "shock" to France but was "a decision that led to questions about the fundamentals with the partnership with the U.S. and Australia."

But France -- which has been raising its profile in the Indo-Pacific region amid China's growing assertiveness and other security risks -- does not appear to be backing away.

Errera was visiting Japan with Alice Guitton, director-general for international relations and strategy at the Ministry for the Armed Forces, to meet with their Japanese counterparts and lay the groundwork for a "2+2" ministerial-level meeting by the year-end.

France has also been boosting ties with India in recent years. In 2019, the two countries accelerated their strategic convergence with a two-day summit in Paris, which led to joint military exercises and India agreeing to buy French fighter jets under a contract worth 7.9 billion euros (\$9.2 billion).

Together with Japan and India, "we note a convergent vision on the fact that the Indo-Pacific stakes are not reduced to military competition with China," and should include areas such as economy and health, Errera said.

"There is also the need to build together architectures in the region to strengthen security and cooperation," he added.

For Paris, considered the most proactive proponent of an Indo-Pacific approach within the European Union, the increasingly tight-knit Anglosphere may be a motivation to shore up its own security presence.

French President Emmanuel Macron said during a news conference in September that Europe must assert independence from the U.S., which considers China its most serious competitor, saying the EU "would be naive, or rather we would make a terrible mistake, to not want to draw the consequences."

France this year has made a series of moves in Asia. It sent a nuclear-powered submarine through the disputed South China Sea in February. It held joint amphibious exercises with the U.S., Japan and Australia in May at Japan's southern island of Kyushu. It also led the La Perouse naval exercise with the four Quad powers -- the U.S., Japan, India and Australia -- in the Indian Ocean, while sending Rafale fighters to Polynesia and Hawaii.

In July, France released its "Indo-Pacific strategy," which said that given France's existing territorial assets including Mayotte and Reunion islands and New Caledonia, Paris had a major role to play in counterbalancing China's regional ambitions. France counts a population of 1.65 million and 7,000 military personnel in its regional territories, giving the country the world's second-largest exclusive economic zone after the U.S.

The French strategy positioned Australia as a major partner, alongside India and Japan, and also referred to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, for which France became a development partner.