



## IDEATING AN INDIA-FRANCE-UK TRILATERAL FOR THE INDO- PACIFIC

BY EERISHIKA PANKAJ

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Multilateral modes of dialogue—in which regional powers lead and stakeholder states actively participate—are increasingly drawing the Indo-Pacific's political map. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)—India, Japan, the United States, and Australia—has gained tremendous importance while trilaterals, like [India-Japan-Australia](#), [Japan-US-Australia](#), and the recently established [India-Australia-France](#) dialogue have further expanded the region's security outlook. As China's power grows, an increasingly number of states have begun reorienting their strategies toward the Indo-Pacific. [France](#) and [Germany](#) have formally adopted the “Indo-Pacific” terminology; the Quad's third ministerial even highlighted Europe's [increasing support](#).

In this context, India's growing ties with the United Kingdom and France can potentially build a new trilateral that can shape the maritime future of the Indo-Pacific—politically, economically, and in the security realm.

France hopes to build a “[stable, multipolar order](#)” driven by rule of law, free and open movement, and practical multilateralism; it identifies the Indo-Pacific as the “heart” of this strategic vision. France's [€200 million](#) (about \$242 million) COVID-response fund

for India, promise of armed forces support in the [immediate aftermath](#) of the Galwan clash, and [speedy delivery](#) of Rafale jets are evidence of New Delhi's importance to Paris. In line with France's growing focus on the Indo-Pacific and India—further highlighted by the India-Australia-France trilateral—the time to upgrade their [strategic partnership](#) to a “special” or “comprehensive” bilateral has arrived. France-India synergy is quickly gathering momentum and can shape the future of India's maritime security, especially in the Western Indian Ocean, traditionally a key area of influence for France. Paris' support of European engagement in the Indo-Pacific—highlighted by its contributions to an increased European Union presence in regional forums such as the [strategic partnership with ASEAN](#)—and the [priority it gives](#) to improving the regional military power balance makes France a novel choice as a trilateral partner.

Concurrently, amidst a tense post-Brexit geopolitical landscape, [deteriorating ties](#) with China, and the financial [challenges](#) of COVID-19, London realizes that previous alliances are “[all in question](#).” London's report [Global Britain in a Competitive Age](#) highlights how the United Kingdom wants “deeper engagement” in the Indo-Pacific and recognizes the “importance of [regional] powers” such as India. UK Secretary of State Dominic Raab's 2020 visit to India saw the two states [prioritize](#) creating a decade-long “360 degree roadmap” for upgrading the India-UK partnership. They have also classified UK-India ties as a “[global force for good](#)” and upgraded them to a “comprehensive strategic partnership.” The United Kingdom also [invited](#) India to be part of the 2021 G7 meeting during its presidency.

India welcomes the Indo-Pacific-driven shift from both countries. France's [importance](#) to India's changing China policy has grown, while the United Kingdom is taking on a [prominent](#) role in India's Indo-Pacific outlook. Furthermore, ties between the two European powers themselves have taken on a nuanced shape post-Brexit. While surface hostility translates into [sparring](#) on financial matters, both countries recognize the other's political [importance](#). Economically, both countries have major stakes in the other. In the security realm, they are Europe's two

most significant military powers, have veto power in the UN Security Council (where they have supported India's bid for permanent membership), and agree on most foreign policy issues (except the European Union). China is a mutual concern, yet all three states share strong economic ties with Beijing that they would like to salvage, especially in the difficult post-pandemic fiscal recovery.

### Potential Areas of Growth

India's Act East Policy has built strong ties between New Delhi and East/Southeast Asian economies that the United Kingdom and France can exploit for trade and economic benefit. Cooperation in renewable energy, climate change, sustainable supply chain creation, counter-terrorism, and anti-piracy operations could mark a natural evolution of the trilateral. France, like India, wants an "[inclusive](#)" Indo-Pacific while acting as an "[inclusive and stabilizing mediating power](#)"; the United Kingdom's "[commitment to a multi-polar world](#)" ties well with this overture.

As maritime democracies, a UK-France-India trilateral can build on the common goal of developing the [blue economy](#), while improving ties with littoral states in the Indo-Pacific. The United Kingdom's "[Commonwealth Blue Charter](#)"—of which India, as a commonwealth nation, is a party—highlights Britain's goals for "sustainable ocean development" and can build commonwealth-driven multilateral synergy. Owing to its overseas territories, France possesses the [second-largest marine zone](#) in the world, rendering oceanic resources pivotal to its overall economy. India has begun [drafting](#) an official Blue Economy Policy post identifying the potential for maritime resources to be the "next multiplier of GDP."

The blue economy can also link with the Japan-India-Australia-led Supply Chain Resilience Initiative. Including the United Kingdom and France in this initiative could help expand it into Europe, finding synergy on vaccine cold chains, trade routes, maritime resource-sharing, and linking island states, creating a cross-continental connection between Europe and Asia. Furthermore, with India and Australia as [member states](#) of the Indian Ocean Rim Association, and France, the United States, and Japan as [dialogue](#)

[partners](#), greater synergy could help promote deeper engagement with small-island nations, especially with Western/African Indian Ocean nations.

The trilateral will also provide immense scope for third-country cooperation—the [2019](#) meeting between leaders of France, India, and the Vanilla Islands on a French overseas territory marked such cooperation between France and India in the Western Indian Ocean. UK inclusion in such third-country cooperation—via the [British Indian Ocean Territory](#)—can strengthen India's ties in the Indian Ocean, where China's influence is rapidly [growing](#). Given the United Kingdom, France, and India's strong ties with Japan—and their interest in countering China's political and economic clout in Africa—the trilateral could also link with the "[Platform for Japan-India Business Cooperation in Asia-Africa](#)" to boost connectivity in the Indo-Pacific domain. Importantly, politicization of the India-France International Solar Alliance ([ISA](#)) could build a bilateral vaccine partnership by providing solar-powered logistics, also simultaneously fulfilling the [Quad's vaccine partnership](#) goals. The United Kingdom joined the ISA in [2018](#); cooperation via the organization with African and Asian economies in creating sustainable energy with infrastructural aid from the West can make the ISA a [major foreign policy tool](#) for taking on China's Belt and Road Initiative via a "One Sun One World One Grid."

Cooperation in the defense and security sector must also be actively advocated. The United Kingdom is one of the world's most [successful](#) defense exporters; however, production has become more [expensive](#). Meanwhile, [a thriving defense export sector](#) is crucial for Paris's post-COVID economic recovery. As India begins its "[pointed-alignment](#)" strategy, recognizing India as a "[base for production of defense equipment](#)" could build a structured defense partnership for the trilateral.

Existing bilateral maritime security collaboration between the three states can further grow into one of the most significant avenues of cooperation. The Indo-French bilateral military exercise Varuna began in 1993; recently, the two increased interoperability capacity via [Samudra Setu and Resilience](#) operations.

India and the United Kingdom have established maritime exercises such as the “[Konkan Exercise](#)” and army exercises like “[Ajeva Warrior](#).” The United Kingdom’s deployment of the [HMS Queen Elizabeth](#) to the Indo-Pacific region later in 2021 for maritime exercises with Japan provides scope for India to engage in a maritime trilateral with them; France’s inclusion can also be espoused. Beyond joint trilateral maritime exercises, the United Kingdom and France could also join with the Quad in Malabar, similar to the Quad’s recent [inclusion](#) in the French La Perouse exercise.

A trilateral with India—especially given Paris and London’s bilateral attempts at improving relations with New Delhi—can enhance cooperation and address shared interests. It will give the United Kingdom a link to the European Union via France in Indo-Pacific security outreach and aid India in promoting Europe’s deeper integration as a security and political player in the region. Its ideation as the Indo-Pacific’s next vital trilateral must receive urgent strategic focus.

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