

The Encirclement of China is Well Underway: France Prepares to Lead EU Missions in the South China Sea

By [Asia-Pacific Research](#)

Asia-Pacific Research, July 22, 2016

Region: [China](#), [Pacific](#), [South-East Asia](#),
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The naval encirclement of China is well underway. It was [started over a decade ago by the United States](#) with the [re-militarization of Japan](#) and the tightening of Washington's military partnerships [with countries like Australia and South Korea](#). The same [is true about the missile shield being erected in South Korea](#), which targets China, Russia, and North Korea.

The excerpts that will follow are taken from a 14 July 2016 article written by Yo-Jung Chen, a Japanese-educated naturalized French diplomat that immigrated to France from Taiwan. The retired French diplomat wrote the article in [The Diplomat](#) seeking to justify the deployment of the French military into the South China Sea. Coming from a retired French diplomat who was stationed in Asia, the article offers some interesting insights. Aside from his post as the deputy consul of the French Consulate-General in San Francisco, Yo-Jung's Chinese background helped qualify him as the press attaché for the French Embassy in China and deputy consul at the French Embassy in Singapore.

Yo-Jung Chen misleadingly identifies "Chinese aggression" as the reason for the plans of France to redeploy to the South China Sea and to lead a series of European Union military expeditions in the body of water against the People's Republic of China. Never questioning the French occupation of places like Polynesia or New Caledonia, the retired French diplomat also tries to naturalize the French military presence in the South China Sea by talking about the colonial history of France in Vietnam and the South China Sea and by referring to France as a Indo-Pacific nation. What Yo-Jung fails to identify and mention is the inalienable rights of the Chinese to peacefully navigate in the South China Sea and the security and military threats emanating from the US and its allies against the Chinese.

The [maritime dispute between the Philippines and China has been](#) used as a pretext by the US and its allies to target China. Nor has Beijing threatened the freedom of navigation. Over 100,000 vessels sail through the South China Sea every year and there has never been any major cases of China preventing freedom of navigation.

On the contrary, Beijing fears that the US and its allies seek the tactical capability to halt Chinese shipping in the South China Sea. Nothing is mentioned by Yo-Jung Chen about "US aggression" or Washington's plans to cut off Chinese shipping in the South China Sea. This

is what has pushed Beijing to try its best to prevent Washington and its allies from militarizing the South China Sea by claiming as much adjacent waters and nautical miles as possible.

What the plans of France and the European Union to militarily deploy their naval forces to the South China Sea illustrates is that the European Union is Washington's accomplice and military partner in the objective of encircling China. This announcement is in line with the return of [German naval forces to the Pacific](#) Ocean. It is also no coincidence that many of the countries involved in the naval encirclement of China are either NATO members, like France and Britain, or NATO partners, like Australia and Japan.

Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya, Asia-Pacific Research Editor, 22 July 2016.

South China Sea: The French Are Coming

Yo-Jung Chen, 14 July 2016

The U.S.-led international efforts to defend the freedom of navigation guaranteed by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), aiming at preventing the entire South China Sea from becoming an exclusive Chinese lake, has just received a powerful boost in the form of the July 12 ruling of The Hague-based UN Permanent Court of Arbitration. Much to China's anger, most of its sovereignty claims over the South China Sea are rejected in this ruling.

To the surprise of many, a seemingly unrelated European power, France, has announced its intention of coordinating the navies of fellow European Union nations to conduct Freedom of Navigation Operations or FONOPs in South China Sea. On June 5, at the Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore, French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian [mentioned this initiative](#) for joint EU patrols of "the maritime areas of Asia" and for a "regular and visible presence there."

From a strictly strategic viewpoint, France's announced plan will not have a determining impact on the situation in the South China Sea. After all, despite being a major military power with global reach, France's military presence in the region is limited. Besides, outside of France, what other EU nation has a permanent naval and air presence in the Pacific?

But however small the strategic impact may be, the French initiative promises to weigh in heavily on the diplomatic front, adding significantly to China's already stark isolation in this case.

The scope of this diplomatic impact should be measured in the wake of the July 12 ruling of the UN Permanent Court of Arbitration, in a context where China is attempting, without much success, to put together a "coalition of the willing" of countries presumably supportive of its position in the South China Sea.

The French initiative thus has the potential of further weakening China's position by conspicuously bringing Europe in as an additional heavyweight to the international pressure for respecting the rule of law, represented by The Hague-based arbitration court's ruling.

France in the Asia-Pacific

Contrary to general perception, France is no stranger in this volatile theater in the Far East. The announced French initiative may not be so surprising when one recalls that France is also an Asia-Pacific nation with vital interests in the region. It has territories in the Southern Pacific: French Polynesia, New Caledonia, and Wallis & Futuna islands. Combine this to territories in the Indian Ocean (La Reunion, Mayotte, Kerguelen, etc.), and France is also an Indo-Pacific nation.

These overseas territories add to those in the Caribbean's to give France the world's second largest Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) (11 million square kilometers) after the United States, 62 percent of which is located in the Pacific and 24 percent in the Indian Ocean. 1,500,000 French citizens live in the French Indo-Pacific territories (500,000 in the Pacific) besides the 130,000 French nationals in various Asia-Pacific countries.

These territories, EEZ, and population necessitate adequate protection and policing. This explains the permanent presence of 8,000 French military personnel in the Indo-Pacific area (2,800 in the Pacific). In the Pacific area alone, France operates two surveillance frigates, four patrol vessels, two multi-mission ships, five maritime surveillance aircraft, four tactical transport aircraft, and seven helicopters.

Although the European Union as such does not particularly shine as a visible strategic presence in the Asia-Pacific region, France, through various treaties and agreements, maintains a network of "strategic partnerships" with Asian countries such as Japan, China, India, Indonesia, Australia, Singapore, and Vietnam.

France also has developing strategic relationships with Malaysia and New Zealand. And it takes part in almost every major regional strategic forum such as the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the Pacific Coast Guard Forum, to mention only a few. France is the first of EU nations to have signed up to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, the TAC.

Moreover, France is a major provider of defense equipment in Asia. It has recently inked a deal to provide 12 new submarines to Australia. It is in the process of selling Rafale jet fighters to India and it has assisted Malaysia in setting up its submarine force. France also maintains research cooperation on defense matters with Singapore. Few people know that fighter pilots of the Singapore Air Force train on a permanent basis in southern France.

On a historical note too, France is not new in the region. According to Professor Shawn McHale writing in May 2016 for the "Rising Power Initiative," France, as colonial ruler of Vietnam at the time, in 1931 asserted its sovereignty over part of the South China Sea. French sovereignty was challenged by Japan throughout World War II and both stopped their claims only in the 1950s.

Why France and the EU?

Given this background, questions may still linger on why France, which, along with other European countries, has important trade interests with China, would choose to ruffle Chinese feathers at this point by entering the fray in the South China Sea.

Excerpts have been taken from [The Diplomat](#) by Asia-Pacific Research.

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