



# The Case for Enhanced France-Philippines Maritime Cooperation

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## ► Key Takeaways

- France and the Philippines, two Indo-Pacific nations, can capitalize on their shared interests, needs, and expertise in maritime security and governance, ultimately fostering strategic rapprochement.
- Paris and Manila emphasize international law, multilateralism, and partnerships in their maritime strategies. Both face similar maritime risks and challenges impacting the Filipino archipelago and French overseas territories in the Pacific.
- An enhanced maritime cooperation should be global and comprehensive, addressing key issues concerning the environment, climate change and biodiversity, as well as the blue economy, maritime security and defense.
- A priority area for cooperation is maritime domain awareness (MDA), which is essential for enhancing maritime security, addressing biodiversity conservation, combating illegal fishing, and reinforcing sovereignty.

## Introduction

France and the Philippines are two Indo-Pacific maritime nations, or “blue nations”.<sup>1</sup> France has the second largest exclusive economic zone (EEZ), 90% of which is in the Indo-Pacific, while the Philippines, an archipelago strategically located at the barycenter of this vast region, has 36,000 km of coastline, ranking sixth in the world. Both nations hold key positions in terms of coral biodiversity, with the Philippines ranking third and France fourth. Moreover, they are crucial players in the fisheries sector, presenting them with shared opportunities and challenges in managing marine resources and maintaining maritime security.

The authors<sup>2</sup> of this memo are making the case to reinforce maritime cooperation between France and the Philippines. Such a cooperation would build on their shared values, such as adherence to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), a commitment to freedom of navigation, and support for a multilateral rules-based international order. The purpose of this paper is to outline the strategic rationale and explore operational areas where both countries can align and cooperate. This is timely, as France will host the third UN Ocean Conference in Nice in June 2025.

## Strategic convergence: France and the Philippines as maritime nations

Two maritime nations of the Indo-Pacific, France and Philippines share similar principles, responsibilities and challenges. France is a resident country of the Indo-Pacific, and was the first European country to adopt a dedicated strategy, back in 2019.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, French overseas territories are located in both the Indian Ocean (the islands of Mayotte and La Réunion, the Scattered Islands, and the French Southern and Antarctic Territories) and in the Pacific Ocean (New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, French Polynesia, and Clipperton Island), close to 2 million citizens, and a vast EEZ.

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1. “Launch of the Blue Nations Initiative: France and Philippines partners for the Oceans”, June 5, 2024, Embassy of France in the Philippines, available at: [www.ph.ambafrance.org](http://www.ph.ambafrance.org).

2. The French author wishes to express her deepest gratitude to Dr. Rej Torrecampo, with whom she began developing this idea somewhere in the South China Sea. His valuable insights and thought-provoking discussions greatly contributed to shaping the concept presented here.

3. “France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy”, Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Paris, February 2022, available at: [www.diplomatie.gouv.fr](http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr).

## Map of Oceania



Source: © Shutterstock.com.

The Philippines, an archipelago consisting of 7,641 islands, with a land area of 300,000 km<sup>2</sup> and an EEZ spanning over 2.2 million km<sup>2</sup>, is bordered by the Philippine Sea and the Pacific Ocean to the east, the West Philippine Sea (WPS)/South China Sea (SCS)<sup>4</sup> to the west, the Luzon Strait to the north, and the Celebes Sea to the south. It forms the apex of the Coral Triangle, renowned as the heart of the world's marine biodiversity, home to 76% of the world's coral species.

The Philippines is positioned at the heart of one of the world's most strategically vital maritime regions. The SCS holds immense strategic and economic importance, facilitating one-third of global trade and containing significant fishery resources and hydrocarbon deposits. However, it is also a highly contentious area, with China asserting sweeping claims over 80% of the sea, including a significant part of the Philippines EEZ, and militarizing several disputed islets in both the Paracels and Spratly Islands.

4. The West Philippine Sea (WPS) refers to the part of the South China Sea (SCS) that falls within the Philippines' EEZ, as designated by the Philippine government. The South China Sea (SCS) is a larger body of water that includes the WPS.

## **Commitment to the Rule of Law at Sea**

Paris and Manila share a strong commitment to international law, particularly UNCLOS. Facing repeated aggressive actions from China, which has sought to alter the status quo by force, the Philippines advocates for the resolution of disputes in accordance with international law. Manila challenged Beijing by bringing a case before the Arbitral

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**Disruption of the vital maritime routes would be dramatic for European economic security**

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Tribunal in The Hague. In its landmark 2016 ruling,<sup>5</sup> the Tribunal invalidated China's extensive "nine-dash line" claims based on so-called "historic rights" as incompatible with UNCLOS provisions. This decision set a crucial precedent, despite China's refusal to accept the ruling. The Marcos administration has emphasized the primacy of international law in

asserting Philippine sovereignty in the WPS<sup>6</sup> and ramped up efforts to assert the nation's rights and publicly expose Chinese maneuvers within its EEZ.

France is equally concerned by the situation in the SCS, as the freedom of maritime and aerial circulation and the respect of international law lie at the core of France's principle-based approach in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, any disruption of the vital maritime routes would be dramatic for European economic and trade security.<sup>8</sup> French navy ships regularly transit through the SCS to exercise freedom of navigation and concretely uphold international maritime law.<sup>9</sup>

## **Diversification of strategic partners**

With limited capacities of its own, the Philippines relies on a partnership-based approach to effectively address complex maritime issues and advance a rules-based order in Southeast Asia.<sup>10</sup> In particular, relations between Manila and Washington have undergone a remarkable revitalization in recent years, driven by mutual interests in countering China's influence.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, the Philippines remains cautious about relying solely on the US for security, wary of potential response gaps, especially with differing priorities on SCS conflicts versus a Taiwan contingency. To mitigate these concerns and strengthen its

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5. R. D. Williams, "Tribunal Issues Landmark Ruling in South China Sea Arbitration", *Lawfare*, July 12, 2016, available at: [www.lawfaremedia.org](http://www.lawfaremedia.org).

6. Keynote Address of President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. for the 21<sup>st</sup> IISS Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, May 31, 2024, available at: [www.pco.gov.ph](http://www.pco.gov.ph).

7. Note Verbale, UK NV No. 162/20, New York, September 16, 2020, available at: [www.un.org](http://www.un.org).

8. "France' Indo-Pacific Strategy", op. cit., p. 10.

9. M. Julienne and C. Pajon, "Deployment of the French Frigate Bretagne in the Indo-Pacific: Implementing French Strategy in the Region", *Ifri Memos*, Ifri, September 2, 2024, available at: [www.ifri.org](http://www.ifri.org).

10. M. Vanbaelinghem, "La sécurité des Philippines. Coopération de défense et alliances", Étude No. 106, IRSEM, avril 2023, available at: [www.irsem.fr](http://www.irsem.fr).

11. A major expansion to the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) in 2023 resulted in the US gaining access to a total of nine Philippine military bases.

resilience, the Philippines has actively expanded security ties with regional like-minded players such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia.

The Philippines' objectives align well with France's Indo-Pacific strategy, which aims to strengthen regional stability through multilateral solutions and the promotion of multipolarity. France diversifies its partnerships, providing comprehensive support for maritime capacity-building to address power asymmetries and uphold strategic autonomy amid Sino-U.S. rivalry.<sup>12</sup> This distinct approach to a multipolar, multilateral, rules-based, and inclusive Indo-Pacific closely aligns with ASEAN's priorities.

### ***Shared challenges in the Pacific***

France is responsible for monitoring, managing, and protecting the vast maritime domains of its Pacific overseas territories—New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and Wallis and Futuna. Like the Philippines, these territories also rely heavily on marine and coastal ecosystems for economic activities like tourism and fisheries, which are highly sensitive to climate impacts, including rising sea levels, stronger cyclones, and biodiversity loss.<sup>13</sup> This paves the way for fruitful, two-way exchanges about best practices, innovative approaches and coordination of maritime policies among local and national authorities.

As the Philippines is interested to work more with Pacific Island nations on security, environmental sustainability, and regional stability,<sup>14</sup> including with regional organizations like the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA), France can play a significant role in supporting these initiatives, particularly through its territories in the Pacific.

France's strong regional foothold, bolstered by its overseas territories, supports a long-term strategic commitment to the relations with the Philippines. The following section outlines specific areas where this partnership could flourish.

## **Operational Framework: Prioritizing Issues and Capacity Needs**

A maritime cooperation should be global and comprehensive, reflecting the multidimensional aspect of maritime issues. Preliminary discussions could be organized into three interconnected pillars, fitting into the 'Blue nations initiative'<sup>15</sup> priorities: first,

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12. "France's Partnerships in the Indo-Pacific", Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, April 2021, available at: [www.diplomatie.gouv.fr](http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr).

13. M. Srinivasan, D. Kaullysing, R. Bhagooli and S. Pratt, "Marine Tourism and the Blue Economy: Perspectives from the Mascarene and Pacific Islands", in E. R. Urban and V. Ittekkot (eds.), *Blue Economy*, Springer, 2022, available at: [www.link.springer.com](http://www.link.springer.com).

14. Keynote Address of President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. for the 21<sup>st</sup> IISS Shangri-La Dialogue, op. cit.

15. "Blue Nations Initiative: France and Philippines Partners for the Oceans", Speech of the Ambassador of France Marie Fontanel, Embassy of France in the Philippines, June 5, 2024, available at: [www.ph.ambafrance.org](http://www.ph.ambafrance.org).

environment, climate, and biodiversity; second, the blue economy; third, maritime security and defense. These issues are all closely tied to food insecurity, a priority for Manila, as it affects around 50 million Filipinos.<sup>16</sup>

## ***Environment, climate, and biodiversity***

### Addressing plastic pollution

The Philippines is the leading source of ocean plastic pollution, with more than 350,000 metric tons leaking into the ocean annually—about 35% of the global total.<sup>17</sup> The Philippines government and local authorities have proactively addressed waste management issue through stricter regulations and public awareness campaigns, supported by non-governmental organizations (NGO) and civil society. One notable success is Siquijor Island, which significantly reduced its waste output following a 2018 decree that limited plastic use and enhanced waste disposal practices.<sup>18</sup>

Bilateral cooperation in this area has already begun, with Expertise France leading the implementation of the EU-funded "Green Economy Program in the Philippines"<sup>19</sup> to support transition towards a circular economy, aligning with the broader European Global Gateway initiative. This EU initiative, aimed at promoting sustainable infrastructure and green growth through secure investments and shared environmental and social standards, creates a favorable framework for French contributions to the region.

### Tackling IUU fishing and protecting biodiversity

IUU (Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated) fishing is a pervasive issue in Indo-Pacific. The Philippines loses an estimated 27 to 40% of total annual fishing catches with both local and foreign actors operating illegally within its EEZ.<sup>20</sup> France faces similar challenges in its extensive Pacific maritime area. Constant patrols by armed forces stationed in Noumea and Papeete, complemented by satellite monitoring, made cases of IUU fishing in France's EEZ are rare.<sup>21</sup>

Hence, the two countries could benefit from cooperation on several fronts: strengthening monitoring, surveillance and implementation of Rule of Law at sea (see below) and designing a policy and legal framework to regulate fishing activities.

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16. M. I. U. Catilogo, "UN Says 51 Million Filipinos 'Food Insecure'", *The Inquirer*, July 27, 2024, available at: [www.globalnation.inquirer.net](http://www.globalnation.inquirer.net).

17. L. Zorzi, "How to Defeat the Plastic Tide Threatening the ASEAN Region's Green Growth", World Economic Forum, October 10, 2023, available at: [www.weforum.org](http://www.weforum.org).

18. "Siquijor: Beacon in Global Fight Against Plastic Waste", *Sunstar*, November 18, 2023, available at: [www.sunstar.com.ph](http://www.sunstar.com.ph).

19. "Green Economy Program in the Philippines", Expertise France, July 31, 2024, available at: [www.expertisefrance.fr](http://www.expertisefrance.fr)

20. D. Fallin *et al.*, "Oceans of Opportunity: Southeast Asia's Shared Maritime Challenges", CSIS, December 10, 2021, available at: [www.csis.org](http://www.csis.org).

21. "Tackling Illegal Fishing in the EEZ", *Maritime Crimes*, June 8, 2021, available at: [www.maritimescrimes.com](http://www.maritimescrimes.com).

The Philippines has pioneered a community-based approach to Marine Protected Areas (MPA) management since 1974. It has thus gained valuable experience and insights to implement inclusive, education-driven, and economically sensitive zones.<sup>22</sup> However, while some MPAs are highly successful, such as the Pilar Municipal Marine Park, others face challenges in ensuring a comprehensive ecosystem protection.<sup>23</sup> France faces the same issue.<sup>24</sup> The Philippine system is very fragmented, with more than 1,500 MPAs across the country,<sup>25</sup> many of which operate under local jurisdiction without a unified national framework. A more integrated approach would help bolster regulations and support efforts to build a legal case against China for coral destruction in the WPS.<sup>26</sup>

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The Philippines has pioneered a community-based approach to Marine Protected Areas

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France, a global leader in marine conservation, is at the forefront of global regimes such as the 30x30 initiative, which aims to protect 30% of the world's oceans by 2030. In line with this goal, the French Global Environment Facility has granted funds, through the French development assistance agency, to the Sulu-based Foundation Sulubaai in Palawan to establish an MPA, among other activities. In French Polynesia, local authorities have come with the original model of “managed marine areas” to reconcile protection and responsible exploitation.<sup>27</sup> An exchange of best practices could thus be highly beneficial, also in promoting an environmentally conscious tourism, showcased in the Filipino case by the successful rehabilitation of the Boracay Island.<sup>28</sup>

### Addressing climate change

The Philippines, one of the nations most affected by global warming, faces severe risks from ocean acidification, rising temperatures, and sea levels increasing three to four times faster than the global average.<sup>29</sup> These threats endanger coastal communities and intensify extreme weather events. French overseas territories share similar challenges, with several

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22. L. Chavez, “With Growing Pressures, Can the Philippines Sustain Its Marine Reserves?”, *Mongabay*, June 30, 2021, available at: [www.news.mongabay.com](http://www.news.mongabay.com).

23. L. Chavez, “Sustaining the Philippine Marine Reserves: Issues and Concerns”, *Fish for the People*, Vol. 19, No. 3, 2022, pp. 33-39, available at: [www.repository.seafdec.org](http://www.repository.seafdec.org).

24. “Marine Protected Areas: Only a Third Are Effective”, CNRS, May 9, 2024, available at: [www.cnrs.fr](http://www.cnrs.fr).

25. M. Gutierrez et al., “Estimating the Impact of Irregular and Unsustainable Fishing of Distant-water Fishing Fleets in the Philippines”, Policy Paper, ODI, 2024, available at: [www.odi.org](http://www.odi.org).

26. Efforts to build a legal case against China for coral destruction in the West Philippine Sea are underway, supported by scientific assessments of the damage. See “PCG exec: Damaged WPS Resources Strengthen Case Build-up vs. China”, *Philippines News Agency*, May 4, 2024, available at: [www.pna.gov.ph](http://www.pna.gov.ph).

27. “Un nouveau plan de gestion pour Tainui Atea”, Office français pour la biodiversité, May 2, 2023, available at: [www.ofb.gouv.fr](http://www.ofb.gouv.fr).

28. C. Sabandal and G. Gumban, “Environmentally Conscious Tourism: Lessons from the Successful Rehabilitation of Boracay Island”, *Journal of Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Vol. 2, No. 8, 2024, pp. 175-188, available at: [www.doi.org](http://www.doi.org).

29. The Philippines lies at an altitude of 442 meters above sea level. See F.P. Siringan et al., “Sea Level Rise and Coastal Erosion in the Philippines: Impacts and Adaptation Strategies for Coastal Communities”, in K. B. Berse, J. M. Pulhin, A. G. M. La Viña (eds.), *Climate Emergency in the Philippines. Disaster Risk Reduction*, Springer, 2024, available at: [www.doi.org](http://www.doi.org).

Polynesian atolls at risk of submersion.

The Philippines plays a leading role in advancing the climate-ocean nexus on a global scale and is a valuable partner for France in promoting multilateral efforts. Manila and Paris also call for the regulation of deep-sea mineral extraction.<sup>30</sup>

## ***Blue economy***

In August 2024, the Filipino Senate approved the Blue Economy Act, aiming to promote sustainable use and management of ocean resources, balancing economic growth with environmental protection.<sup>31</sup>

### Building a Resilient Fisheries Sector

In the Philippines, the sea provides livelihood and natural resources to 1.9 million registered small-scale fishers and their families who rely on the waters for income and food. While this sector is of vital importance, the blue economy's share of GDP was only 3.9% in 2023.<sup>32</sup>

A sustainable fisheries sector starts with supporting decent livelihoods for fishermen and coastal communities. This requires improving infrastructure for processing, transport, and storage, ensuring equitable benefits across the supply chain, and facilitating access to European and international markets for sustainably sourced seafood. In 2023, the EU began providing technical assistance to the Philippines to enhance its education, training, and certification systems for seafarers.<sup>33</sup> France could join this initiative.

French overseas territories in the Pacific have faced similar challenges. In 2022, French Polynesia – where the blue economy contributes over 5% of GDP – launched a 2030 Innovation Strategy focusing on sustainable and inclusive development, particularly in the blue sector.<sup>34</sup>

### Enhancing maritime infrastructure

The Philippines needs to modernize its maritime infrastructure to address port congestion and meet international standards. Since 2022, a French technical expert has been assisting the Philippine Maritime Industry Authority (MARINA) in supporting the

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30. "PH Urges World Leaders to Adopt Ocean-climate Solutions to Safeguard Marine Ecosystems; Creation of Rules to Govern Deep-sea Mining", Department of Environment and Natural Resources, December 3, 2023, available at: [www.denr.gov.ph](http://www.denr.gov.ph).

31. "Senate Approves Blue Economy Act", Senate of the Philippines, August 19, 2024, available at: [www.legacy.senate.gov.ph](http://www.legacy.senate.gov.ph).

32. "Ocean-based Industries Expand by 9.9 Percent in 2023, Accounted for 3.9 Percent of GDP", Philippines Statistics Authority, October 24, 2024, available at: [www.psa.gov.ph](http://www.psa.gov.ph).

33. Philippines: First Subcommittee on Maritime Cooperation with the European Union Takes Place in Brussels, European Union External Action Service, September 27, 2023, available at: [www.eeas.europa.eu](http://www.eeas.europa.eu).

34. *Stratégie de l'innovation 2030 de la Polynésie française pour son développement durable et inclusif*, May 2022, available at: [www.service-public.pf](http://www.service-public.pf).



modernization of the shipbuilding sector and domestic fleet. This includes developing new maritime routes for freight transport, promoting Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) in domestic freight infrastructure, and ensuring compliance with international standards.<sup>35</sup> Further cooperation in green infrastructure development could be explored under the EU's Global Gateway initiative.

### Developing scientific cooperation

Access to scientific data is crucial for effective maritime management. The European Copernicus Marine Service offers free access to marine data, real-time ocean monitoring, and climate prediction services that could enhance the Philippines' capacities.<sup>36</sup>

France's extensive network of research institutes in the region, notably Institute of Research for Development (IRD) and French Research Institute for Exploitation of the Sea (IFREMER), could develop ties with Filipino counterparts, such as the University of the Philippines Maritime Sciences Institute or decentralized institutions, such as marine research stations set up by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR).<sup>37</sup> Filipino scientists' breakthroughs in coral recovery could significantly aid preservation and restoration efforts in French overseas territories.<sup>38</sup>

## ***Maritime security and defense***

### Enhancing Maritime Domain Awareness

Strengthening Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) is crucial for enhancing maritime posture, enabling better monitoring, detection, and response to threats. The Maritime Situational Awareness System (MSAS) in the Philippines, designed to create a unified view of the maritime environment, remains inadequate, while Manila faces a pressing need to enhance MDA capacities, not only to monitor Chinese activities in the WPS but also to address the often-overlooked Eastern coast. This increasingly busy area is critical, especially given Manila's request to the UN for an extension of its continental shelf and its potential as an alternative route in case of crises in the SCS or the Taiwan Strait.

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35. "Arrival of a French Expert to the Philippine Maritime Industry Authority (MARINA)", Embassy of France in the Philippines and in Micronesia, June 22, 2024, available at: [www.ph.ambafrance.org](http://www.ph.ambafrance.org).

36. See the website of the Copernicus Marine Service: [www.marine.copernicus.eu](http://www.marine.copernicus.eu).

37. Z. Hernandez, "Philippine Role in 2025 UN Ocean Conference 'Significant', Says French Envoy", *ABS-CBN News*, June 5, 2024, available at: [www.news.abs-cbn.com](http://www.news.abs-cbn.com).

38. A. B. See, "Filipino Marine Scientist Discovers Technique to Raise Corals Faster", *Benar News*, December 19, 2022, available at: [www.benarnews.org](http://www.benarnews.org); I. Gozum, "Filipino Scientist Ushers in New Era of Coral Restoration in the Philippines", *Rappler*, June 25, 2024, available at: [www.rappler.com](http://www.rappler.com).

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## A bilateral agreement on white shipping could greatly benefit both countries

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The French MICA Center model that relies on the voluntary cooperation of ship owners to collect information on maritime security and disseminate it to relevant authorities could thus be appealing.<sup>39</sup> A bilateral agreement on white shipping between the Philippines and France could greatly benefit both countries. It would enhance the security of Filipino seafarers navigating an increasingly perilous global environment while also strengthening French understanding of maritime dynamics in the SCS.<sup>40</sup>

This deal could be combined with the use of EU-promoted Indo-Pacific Regional Information Sharing (IORIS) system<sup>41</sup> to improve information sharing on maritime threats and enhance collaborative capabilities.

France is also participating in EU-led initiatives such as Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia (ESIWA) or Critical Maritime Routes Indo-Pacific (CRIMARIO) to boost maritime security and capacity-building in the Philippines.<sup>42</sup>

### Improving governance for maritime security

Crucially, an efficient MDA and maritime security model requires a unified vision and an effective coordination between the various law enforcement agencies, such as the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG), the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) and the Philippine National Police Maritime Group (PNP-MG).

In the Philippines, the centralization of information and command remains fragmented.<sup>43</sup> In March 2024, a National Maritime Council (NMC) was established to "formulate policies and strategies for a unified, coordinated, and effective governance framework for the country's maritime security and domain awareness."<sup>44</sup> This council, placed under the responsibility of the Office of the President, is empowered to accept foreign grants and donations.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, the Presidential Assistant for Maritime Concerns, acting as the Secretariat for the NMC, provides direct reports to the President

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39. "What Is the MICA Center?", Website of the Maritime Information Cooperation & Awareness Center (MICA Center), available at: [www.mica-center.org](http://www.mica-center.org).

40. L. Lagniton, "Philippines Acts to Enhance Maritime Security & Ship Safety", Maritime Fairtrade, April 1, 2024, available at: [www.maritimefairtrade.org](http://www.maritimefairtrade.org).

41. Indo-Pacific Regional Information Sharing (IORIS) Platform, EEAS, February 8, 2024, available at: [www.eeas.europa.eu](http://www.eeas.europa.eu).

42. ESIWA – Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia, EEAS, February 8, 2024, available at: [www.eeas.europa.eu](http://www.eeas.europa.eu). Philippine agencies work together to enhance national inter-agency coordination and information sharing on securing safe seas, CRIMARIO, December 7, 2023, available at: [www.crimario.eu](http://www.crimario.eu).

43. L. M. Palma and M. G. Alano, "A Step in the Right Direction: Advancing the Philippines' Maritime Priorities", AMTI Update, CSIS, October 4, 2023, available at: [www.amti.csis.org](http://www.amti.csis.org).

44. Executive Order No. 57, by the President of the Philippines, March 25, 2024, available at: [www.lawphil.net](http://www.lawphil.net).

45. "Philippines Reshuffles Its Maritime Security Command Structure", The Maritime Executive, March 31, 2024, available at: [www.maritime-executive.com](http://www.maritime-executive.com).

on urgent maritime matters.<sup>46</sup>

France has a specific model in terms of maritime security governance that could be a model to streamline activities of the various agencies in the Philippines.<sup>47</sup> Agencies such as the French Navy, customs, and maritime affairs, which collectively handle coast guard responsibilities, operate under a single regional, centralized command (*Préfet maritime*).<sup>48</sup> The Secretary General for the Sea (Secrétaire général de la mer - SGMer) ultimately oversees and coordinates the activities of these agencies.

### Building naval capacities

The Philippines' focus on internal security due to historical challenges has prioritized land forces over the air force and navy. The 2012 Armed Forces Modernization Act provides significant funding for the Navy to acquire new equipment, and the 2023 National Security Strategy prioritizes strengthening border and coastal defense in response to growing regional tensions.<sup>49</sup> The March 2024 Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept (CADC) aims to enhance capabilities for protecting not only territorial waters but the entire EEZ.

As a result, Manila is actively investing in its naval capacities, including by diversifying its defense partnerships with countries like India, South Korea and Japan. French company Ocea has contributed five patrol boats to the Philippine Coast Guard, and Naval Group is one of the world's leading suppliers of submarines. Additionally, as allowed by the recent bill on the revitalization of the Self Reliance Defense Posture Program signed into law by President Marcos last October, the Philippines seek to develop its own defense industry through joint development featuring technology transfer and local manufacturing.<sup>50</sup> The actions of the Defense procurement agency (Direction Générale de l'Armement – DGA) are considered as an inspiring model for streamlining defense procurement and development.

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Manila is actively investing in its naval capacities, including by diversifying its defense partnerships

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## Conclusion

An enhanced maritime cooperation should prioritize achievable goals to maintain momentum in the bilateral partnership. Strengthening MDA is essential for improving the country's comprehensive maritime security, addressing biodiversity conservation,

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46. J. Rocamora, "Centino Defends Foreign Aid Provision in EO 57", *Philippines News Agency*, April 2, 2024, available at: [www.pna.gov.ph](http://www.pna.gov.ph).

47. E. Frécon, "France's Third Path" for the Indo-Pacific? Credentials and Challenges", *ISEAS Perspective*, December 2022, available at: [www.iseas.edu.sg](http://www.iseas.edu.sg).

48. "Action de l'État en mer", Secrétariat général de la Mer, available at: [www.info.gouv.fr](http://www.info.gouv.fr).

49. National Security Policy 2023-2028, Government of the Philippines, August 2023, available at: [www.nsc.gov.ph](http://www.nsc.gov.ph).

50. L. Lagniton, "Philippines Boosts Military Self-sufficiency with New Defense Law", *Maritime Fairtrade*, October 9, 2024, available at: [www.maritimefairtrade.org](http://www.maritimefairtrade.org).

combating IUU fishing, and reinforcing sovereignty. This presents a promising entry point.

Stepping up the cooperation in the maritime domain should be made in a sustainable, people-centric, concrete, and result-oriented way to build credibility. It is essential to engage industries, civil society, and local communities in the process. Establishing an institutional framework with a clear roadmap for cooperation is key. A joint maritime cooperation committee, supported by specialized working groups on various topics, could drive this effort and lead to ad hoc training programs. Additionally, launching a Track 1.5 dialogue would be a vital step to sustain the strategic partnership between the two countries.

This initiative is not just timely but crucial, given the strategic convergence and complementary needs of France and the Philippines. By establishing robust maritime cooperation, both nations can capitalize on their strengths and deepen their ties for mutual benefit in the Indo-Pacific.

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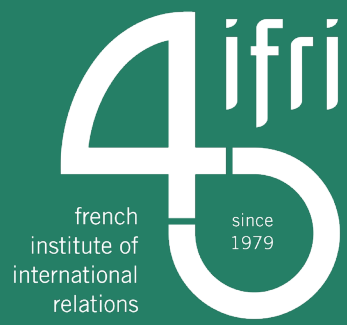
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