

France Starts Power Demonstration in its Indo-Pacific Strategy

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On October 12, 2021, Florence Parly, the Defense Minister of France, went to the French Senate (Sénat) and the National Assembly (Assemblée nationale) for a hearing on the discontinuation announced in September of the Franco-Australian agreement to build 12 Shortfin Barracuda-class long-range diesel-electric submarines. In response to a question from Senator Olivier Cadic of the Senate Defense and Foreign Affairs Committee on “whether France would send a message to Taiwan stating that the country will contribute to the defense of the Taiwan Strait as an ‘espace de droit’”, Parly responded: “To address the tensions in the Taiwan Strait, France’s actions will

include sending the Navy to demonstrate our commitment to international law and freedom of navigation, for example, through the presence of naval vessels such as the “Dupuy-de-Lôme” recon ship in the Taiwan Strait.”¹

If the February 8, 2021, cruise of the nuclear-powered attack submarine (Sous-Marin nucléaire d'Attaque, SNA) “Émeraude” and the support ship (Bâtiments de Soutien et d'Assistance, BSAM) “Seine” is taken into account,² it’s the second time this year that French officials released its Navy’s activities in the Western Pacific, and the first time to publicly confirm their activities in the

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1. For more information about Senator Cadic's hearings, please see his official YouTube channel at <https://ppt.cc/fvMYdx>.
 2. “Two French Warships Patrol Far into the South China Sea to Demonstrate a Common Position with The US, Australia and Japan” , *Central News Agency*, February 8, 2021, <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/aopl/202102090090.aspx>.

Taiwan Strait. In addition to stressing the importance of intelligence gathering in the Western Pacific to France and to further challenging China's assertions in the region, Parly's remarks also implicitly show Paris' desire to strengthen its credibility in the region through a "power demonstration" in order to turn the tide for its Indo-Pacific dilemma.

France values intelligence gathering in Western Pacific

The main mission of the Dupuy-de-Lôme is to intercept communications and collect intelligence through its radio signal and satellite antennas; after analysis performed by the 80 experts on board, the information is transmitted back to the Direction du Renseignement Militaire (DRM) of the French Ministry of Defense via the "Inmarsat" maritime intelligence satellite or the "Syracuse III" military intelligence satellite transmission system for further use.

Although Parly did not further elaborate on the timing of Dupuy-de-Lôme's activities in the Taiwan Strait, it can be inferred from the fact that the ship was under Russian surveillance in the Strait of Tartary between the Sea of Okhotsk and the Sea of Japan on July 5, 2021,³ so her time in the Taiwan Strait should have been around this point.⁴

After all, France is now paying more and more attention to the intelligence from the Western Pacific. In fact, it is quite rare for the Dupuy-de-Lôme to be dispatched to this area, as it used to operate almost exclusively in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. On the other hand, the cruise of the Émeraude and Seine in the South China Sea has also helped Paris to grasp the hydrographic data there, which echoes Parly's words "to improve our understanding of the (Indo-Pacific) region."

3. "Russian Defense Watching French Armored cruiser," *TeleTrader*, July 6, 2021, <https://ppt.cc/fIK8vx>.

4. In August 2021, there was news of a French ship staying off the Fang Yuan Township water of Changhua County. Although the news was denied by Taiwan and the French Ministry of Defense at the time, many wondered if there is a connection with the Dupuy-de-Lôme. See Zeng Tingxuan's "French Warships Stayed Off Changhua Shore, French MoD states 'No Ships Sent to Taiwan Strait' report" . *Central News Agency*, August 12, 2021. <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/firstnews/202108120311.aspx>.

From “transit” to “presence” : France elevates its challenge vs Chinese assertion

In terms of terminology, the French said that their warships usually “transit” the Taiwan Strait once a year, such as the patrol ship Vendémiaire passing through the Strait in April 2019.⁵ This time, Parly used the term “présence” to describe the activities of the Dupuy-de-Lôme in the Strait, a term that was also used by Parly later in the Assemblée Nationale hearings to describe France’s relationship with New Caledonia, its collectivité sui generis (“special administration regions”) in the Southeast Pacific. This application not only confirms France’s long-standing stake in the Indo-Pacific region, but also indicates that the French Navy has the right to operate in the Taiwan Strait, and reveals the possibility that Dupuy-de-Lôme had stayed in the Strait for some time.

Reinforcing credibility of France's Indo-Pacific strategy

France was not invited to join AUKUS (an Australia-UK-US trilateral

security alliance aimed at countering China) when it was announced on September 15, 2021. The exclusion of Paris seemed to show that France’s role in the Indo-Pacific region seemed to be inferior to that of Australia and the UK, which was a major blow to France’s Indo-Pacific strategy that emphasizes multilateralism and cooperation with regional countries such as the US and Australia. Even so, France still tried to convey a message to the Indo-Pacific countries that Paris was not naive to Beijing’s intentions by actively revealing the activities of French ships in the Taiwan Strait. This also helped to restore the confidence of other countries in France and reduce the negative impact from the establishment of AUKUS and the discontinuation of the Franco-Australian submarine agreement on France’s Indo-Pacific strategy.

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5. “Déroit de Taïwan: Incident Naval Entre la France et la Chine,” *La Croix*, April 25, 2019, <https://ppt.cc/fNcaZx>.