

The French President's Visit to Southeast Asia and the Policy of Soft Diplomacy

(Translated)

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Macron visited Southeast Asia, Vietnam, Indonesia, Singapore, from May 25 to 30, 2025, as part of France's "Indo-Pacific Strategy," officially launched in 2018 in response to geopolitical developments in the region. These include the AUKUS agreement, which excluded France, and cost it a submarine deal with Australia, and the ASEAN bloc, which represents a significant economic force in the region. These developments prompted Paris to reshape its approach, with a strategy aimed at securing its economic, military, and political interests, and reinforcing its geopolitical presence in a region that is the epicenter of global competition between the US and China. This is especially after Trump's rise to power and his threats of a trade war in the region. This led Paris to believe that the time was more ripe than ever to activate its strategy and secure its influence.

Southeast Asia, with its strategic location in the Indo-Pacific region, its economic resources, and its Muslim-majority countries like Indonesia, has become a major arena of competition between the United States, which leads alliances such as AUKUS and the Quad, China through its Belt and Road Initiative, and France, which seeks to offer a third option outside the US-China rivalry through what is known as the "balance of power" policy. This is pursued through soft diplomacy, namely by establishing alternative economic and military partnerships, especially in the aftermath of Britain's exit from the European Union, and the decline of French influence in Africa due to ongoing American pressure.

Macron began his tour in Vietnam, a former French colony and a long-standing strategic partner, where he met on May 26 with President Lương Cường and the Secretary-General of the Communist Party, Tô Lâm. The visit focused on cooperation in the fields of clean energy and infrastructure. He then traveled to Jakarta, the region's largest economy and a founding member of ASEAN, where he met with Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto and awarded him the French Legion of Honor during a military ceremony at the Military Academy in Magelang, Java, on May 29, 2025. He discussed arms deals and joint naval exercises, and addressed with Indonesia the issue of mutual recognition between the Jewish entity and the Palestinian Authority, in preparation for an international conference co-sponsored by France and Saudi Arabia in June 2025.

The tour concluded in Singapore on May 30, 2025, where Macron delivered a speech at the opening of the Shangri-La Dialogue security forum. He warned against the risk of Taiwan becoming the next Ukraine, if China were to seize control, urging all sides to avoid military escalation. He also stated that recognizing the state of Palestine is "a moral duty and a political necessity," while conditioning it on disarming Hamas, and excluding it from governance. Additionally, discussions were held on technological cooperation, particularly in the areas of cybersecurity and artificial intelligence.

It is worth noting that Macron held a phone call with Chinese President Xi Jinping on May 22 2025, during which he called for fair competition, and the defense of international trade rules. This was in response to US President Trump's threats to impose tariffs on numerous countries, particularly China and Europe. In essence, France is extending a hand to China, to counter American arrogance, if Trump proceeds with his policy of open trade war. At the same time, France is presenting itself to countries in the region as a reliable partner. Macron stated, "It is truly a new page being written between our two countries ... a desire to write an even more ambitious page of the relationship between Vietnam and France, between ASEAN and the European Union."

Despite France's success in signing numerous agreements with countries in the region and its repeated attempts to position itself as a guardian, such as its participation in recent military exercises in Indonesia, these agreements remain limited to commercial and security aspects. They do not impact America's political influence in the region.

The United States maintains a firm grip over these countries and has a strategic partnership with Indonesia, through which it works to strengthen its influence over the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Its goal is to control ASEAN's decisions, as the bloc includes several countries that are not fully under US dominance. This strategy aims to use ASEAN as a counterweight to China, or to influence it, in order to prevent China from asserting its dominance over the South China Sea region.

Macron's visit to Southeast Asia reflects France's ambition to rebuild its image as an influential global major power, compensating for its declining influence in Africa, and asserting its role in a multipolar world order. France seeks to capitalize on the rising tensions between China and the United States. However, the so-called French "third path" that France and behind it, Europe, is trying to promote, falls short of achieving its goal of a balanced power strategy and establishing an international order that secures its influence and protects its interests. The soft diplomacy policy adopted by Macron will only further weaken France and Europe's position on the global stage, because when it comes to the United States, only a strategy of effective deterrence proves useful.

Perhaps the growing tension, competition, and eventual conflict among major powers opens the door for the emergence of a new global force that brings forth thoughts and systems capable of achieving real stability, sparing humanity the devastation of ongoing conflicts that threaten widespread harm. This is especially as the world's leading power, the US, is increasingly being eaten away from within, with no signs indicating the possibility of its resurgence. On the contrary, things are deteriorating across all sectors. What delays its collapse into the abyss is merely the absence of a real and influential competitor on the global stage, since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1990. This underscores the inevitability of the establishment of the Khilafah (Caliphate) to fill the strategic vacuum, and to form a new international order that spreads justice and security.