



MINISTÈRE DE LA DÉFENSE (DEFENCE MINISTRY)

**Mr. Jean-Yves Le Drian,
DEFENCE MINISTER**

Shangri-La Dialogue

Singapore, Sunday 5 June 2016

– Check against delivery –

Dear John,

Dear Minister Ng,

My dear colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen, friends,

First, please allow me to thank the International Institute of Strategic Studies for its perfect organisation of this 15th edition of the Shangri-La Dialogue, and of course also the Singapore government for its warm hospitality. It is an honour for France to be present at this vital meeting for security in Asia. For me personally, it's the 4th time that I have had the pleasure of being here in this room, and I am proud to have established the continuity of France's attendance here, as a reflection of our interest and implication in security matters in the Asia-Pacific.

France is a European power, but it has territories that are geographically and politically in Asia and Oceania. Today, 85% of our exclusive economic zone of eleven million square kilometres, the second largest in the world, is in the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

More than one million six hundred French citizens live in this zone. We maintain a permanent military presence of eight thousand men and women, who are responsible for the protection and security of the French territories and for the control of our exclusive economic zones. These forces take part in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief

operations for local populations, in the fight against illicit trafficking and in the naval missions of the French state, as well as in defence cooperation activities with our many allies and partners, in every domain.

Being at the heart of this area, Asia is a key engine of economic dynamism, demographic growth and technological innovation and is of decisive importance for global prosperity. But at the same time it has vulnerabilities.

Therefore, for me as Defence Minister, the question of Asia-Pacific stability is not a theoretical issue. It is a concrete concern that mobilises entire parts of my ministry, in the fields of strategic analysis, regional assessments, dialogue and cooperation with our partners, intelligence, planning and operations.

Thinking about the conflicts in the Asia-Pacific and their resolution means thinking about the conditions under which stability in this region is possible. I can see two main conditions, which I would like to discuss with you: order and change.

Stability depends on a political order. This order is the fruit of a historical process that translates into the architectures, institutions and legal and political arrangements that guarantee an enduring framework for human activities. But this order is not static. It can evolve.

That is why the second essential condition for stability is - paradoxically - change. Or, to be more precise, adaptation - in other words the process by which change can take place without generating catastrophic instability.

For change and stability to go well together, various basic ingredients have to be combined. Three seem to me to be of primordial importance.

Firstly, a rules-based order, i.e. the rule of law. This aspect is of particular importance when considering the challenges of regional maritime security. The principle of freedom of navigation, whether at sea or in the air, to which France is deeply attached, constitutes a crucial issue. Last week, the heads of state or government of the G7 underlined their attachment to a maritime order founded on clear rules and conforming to international law, as stipulated in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. This question is of the utmost importance, and not only for stability and security in the region: if the law of the sea is not respected today in the China seas, it will be threatened tomorrow in the Arctic, the Mediterranean or elsewhere. In order to continue to contain the risks of conflict, we must defend law and defend ourselves by means of law.

This is a message that France will continue to repeat in international

institutions. It is a message that France will continue to put into practice, by sailing her ships and flying her aircraft wherever international law allows and operational needs require. Several times a year, French Navy vessels sail the waters of this region, and this will continue. Since the beginning of this year, the French navy has already deployed three times through the South China Sea. We do this to defend our national interests and our security, to implement our defence partnerships and to contribute to regional and international peace and security.

The second indispensable ingredient is dialogue and the peaceful settlement of disputes, based on mutual trust. The establishment of dialogue between countries with opposing territorial claims is more than necessary. On this point, France, like many other countries in this room today, regrets that in recent years there has been no substantial progress on the South China Sea Code of Conduct between the countries concerned.

Finally, the third key ingredient for effective management of change is firmness. We must remain firm in the face of actions that undermine the rules-based order, firm vis à vis those who refuse international law and dialogue. As the Defence Minister of a country whose armed forces are engaged on a large number of overseas theatres, I can assure you that this firmness comes at a price, but we have no choice if we wish to preserve order and security. This resolve is firstly a question

of political will. It applies to transnational terrorism, which is not only rife in the Levant and in Europe but also affects Asia. In addition, in the case of Asia, resolve and political will are called for in dealing with North Korea, whose actions constitute a threat to international peace and security.

The corollary of this principle of firmness, for France, is reliability. In the same way that we are a reliable and rigorous ally for our allies in Central and Eastern Europe, in the context of the crisis that Russia brought on in 2014, playing our full part in the reassurance measures and in the future enhanced forward presence on Europe's eastern frontier.

In exactly the same way we stand alongside our main partners in this region of the world: with India, of course, which has been our main strategic partner in Asia since 1997; with Malaysia, which is a historic partner in South-East Asia; with Singapore, a recognized anchor of stability in this part of the world; and with Australia, with whom our defence cooperation will be considerably expanded in the years and decades to come, both in the naval domain but also beyond. In this regard, I would like to add that the reinforcement of our defence relations with Australia rests upon an increasing convergence of interests, as demonstrated by our joint presence in a number of operational theatres.

In this globalised world of ours, there are no local or regional challenges, only shared challenges of varying intensity. France, by giving itself the means to defend its interests and by playing an ambitious security role, intends to contribute to maintaining stability in the Asia-Pacific. To be effective, this contribution can only be conceived in a logic of complementarity, side by side with our partners, in particular India, Australia, the United States, Singapore, Malaysia and Japan - among others. France wishes to develop more meaningful defence relationships with all ASEAN countries, and I will actually be flying off to Vietnam this afternoon, to enhance our defence cooperation.

France is a European Union country. And the conditions that I have stated, namely respect for the rule of law, the quest for dialogue and firmness when the rule of law is violated, are at the heart of the "responsible multilateralism" that, in the eyes of France, should characterise the actions of the European Union. That is why, for instance, the situation in the South China Sea directly concerns the European Union – and not only because we have an economic interest in maintaining the freedom of shipping.

Therefore, could we not have European navies coordinate in order to ensure as regular and as visible a presence as possible in the maritime areas of Asia? I will soon detail this proposal to my European counterparts, and I hope that we will be able to measure progress

made, together, at the next edition of the Shangri-La.

France is well-placed to know that international crises that are developing directly affect our security. The Indopacific area is lucky to be, on the whole, preserved from open conflict. France will play its full part in our collective responsibility to preserve and to reinforce security in this region.

Thank you for your attention.