



MINISTÈRE DES ARMÉES

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Shangri-La Dialogue

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– Seul le prononcé fait foi –

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Dr. Chipman,
Minister Ng,
Dear colleagues, fellow ministers, excellences, my dear friends,

It is an honor for me to attend the famous Shangri-La Dialogue for the first time. I had been told of the privilege it was to address such an audience, but the reality exceeds the warning of course. I would like to thank IISS – one of the very best think tanks on the marketplace – for the fantastic organization.

I would also like to thank Singapore, our host. Singapore is a friend and a distinguished strategic partner in the region. We have a cooperation that far exceeds what most people know. Among others, in just a few days, we will celebrate 20 years of an intense partnership between our air forces.

It is also my particular pleasure to sit side by side with my friend Gavin on this panel. Yes, Gavin and I bicker every now and then over Brexit; the exchange goes something like this: “Florence, we broke free”: and I : “Gavin you freely broke”. But despite this minute difference, I cannot restate enough that Britain is our friend, our neighbor, our partner, our ally. And that when we meet here in Asia, we may no longer be part of the same European club, but we still share something of very deep significance: vision, strength, values, and a willingness to project them.

This is not only a statement, it is a reality. Those who saw our joint strikes in Syria can testify. This, also, will become self-evident in this region, when you see our maritime task group with British helicopters, and indeed British ships in it, sail together through certain areas. I mean, those areas where, at some point, a stern voice intrudes into the transponder, and tells us to sail away from supposedly territorial waters; but our commander then calmly replies that he will sail forth, because these, under international law, are indeed international waters.

I am also delighted to be here, because this region, for us too, is home. It is good to remind that France has 9 million square kilometers of exclusive economic zone in the Indo-Pacific area; 1.5 million citizen in our five overseas territories, 200.000 expatriates, different sets of permanent military forces, and vital economic interests in the region.

Now: “Raising the bar for regional cooperation”. There couldn’t be a more fitting topic today. Actually, an observer who would have come here today and read hastily the title might have understood: “raising the bar for regional competition”. That might have been, sadly, a better reflection of some of the dynamics at stake. Fortunately, there are also some promising elements of cooperation, and I will dwell upon them.

Last year, one of the issues that dominated the debates was the situation in the South China Sea. True enough, this will, and should, remain a key concern this year. But there is more. We are convening here in this very place, Singapore, just ten days before a ground-breaking summit involving North Korea will take place. Or won’t take place. Or will take place. Or won’t. Or we are no longer sure. Anyway, surprise is part of the “art of the deal”, so we should let ourselves be surprised. And eventually, we all hope the summit will take place if

the right conditions are met.

There is a good reason for this. **Seen from a French angle, we see three overarching security challenges in the region.**

Yes, first, I would mention nuclear proliferation. The development of the North Korean nuclear programme has long been a serious threat, and it has accelerated dramatically in the last few years. Meanwhile, international pressure was really struggling to keep up. France, as a member of the P5, has always had a very strong stance on this issue, as on all proliferation cases. We have been at the forefront of UN and EU sanctions. Of course, we have observed with great interest the recent moments of enthusiasm on the Inter-Korean dialogue, and the gestures made by Pyongyang. But experience from the past on DPRK suggests that if you want to deal with this issue, you must be ready to endure regularly a cold shower. There was one at almost each important juncture. So when Pyongyang recently gave the impression that, after all, the DPRK might not be really ready to embark on what specialists call “CVID”, Complete, Verifiable, Irreversible Denuclearization, then someone pressed the button and here was the cold shower again. Ever since, it seems that an army of distinguished plumbers have been at work on both sides of the Pacific Ocean to restart the heater, and maybe it will be warm again. That is definitely what we hope.

The second challenge I see is the respect of international maritime law. Everyone knows that some of the waterways are crucial for the economic security of a number of states in the region. They are actually essential for the economic security of many states outside the region, too. Their importance to individual states does not give these states a right to bypass international maritime law. France is not part of the territorial disputes in the area; nor will it be. But we insist on two tenets of the rule-based international order: disputes should be resolved by legal means and negotiation, not by *fait accompli*, and freedom of navigation must be upheld.

The third challenge I see is terrorism. Terror has struck France and Europe repeatedly over the last few years and has not spared the Indo-Pacific. South and South-East Asia have been badly hit, too. The recent attacks in Afghanistan and Indonesia are a tragic reminder that terrorism still hurts and kills everywhere over the globe. Facing the same threat, we should work together, deepen our cooperation and send a strong message: there will be no safe haven.

If we take these three challenges – and I hope you will recognize with me that they are really crucial – it would be too easy to see the limits of cooperation.

Yes, there is cooperation on the North Korean case. But how tight is it? Are sanctions always scrupulously enforced? It seems that North Korean tankers are regularly having nightly rendez-vous with tankers of unknown origins, after which they come back...loaded, is the least I can say. Also, in the diplomatic extravaganza we have seen lately, with delegations traveling to more places in a few weeks than they have in decades, how much is cooperation and how much is competition between contending visions and interests?

The same goes with upholding international maritime law. As we see profound asymmetries developing in the region, we see that non-cooperative solutions are becoming ever more likely.

This should be a cause to ponder, and to worry. Just because the floodlights are on Panmunjon right now doesn't mean that the South China Sea issue will go away. Recent events have alerted us to that.

The fight against terror is no exception. Here also cooperation has been wanting. No one had really anticipated the incredible storming of Marawi. When addressing this phenomenon, we must also reckon with different perspectives in the region. Sure, everyone has their terrorists, but they're not always the same. That is a serious limit on cooperation. What's a Taliban? If you ask me, in most cases it's a terrorist. Ask someone else, it might be some kind of freedom fighter - or maybe even a proxy. Where's the space for cooperation then?

But we can't be satisfied with that. Take a longer view, and consider the future of the region. I don't like to muse with the infamous Thucydides Trap, but there is a truth in this: when the balance of power changes, it is not the power we lose, but the balance. And the risks are too big for us to passively accept them.

The government I represent today passionately believes in multilateralism. Not in some kind of blue-eyed wishful thinking, but rather a single-minded effort, backed if necessary by robust measures and a sense of reciprocity, to address issues through patient negotiation. This was the message President Macron delivered when he spoke in the US Congress, and more recently, when he travelled to Australia early May.

How does this apply to the region?

Let me start with upholding the rule of law in maritime matters. France fully supports a code of conduct in the South China Sea which should be legally binding, comprehensive, effective, and consistent with international law. We believe negotiations are the way to go. Meanwhile, we should be very clear that the *fait accompli* is not a *fait accepté*. I mentioned British helicopters and ships joining our task group when it sails through the South China Sea. No less than five French ships sailed in this region in 2017. Europeans have started to mobilize more widely in support of this endeavour. German observers have embarked on our ships too. I believe we should broaden this effort even further.

But the same logic applies to the fight against terror, crime, trafficking. The circumstances of France's recent history have given us the dubious benefit of having a lot of experience with fighting terror – be it on our own soil, in the Near East or in Africa. We are eager to share our best practice with partners. We play an active role in operations against illegal trafficking and we have made a particular effort in the establishment of a network of maritime surveillance. And we pursue a remarkable cooperation with Australia and New Zealand in the South Pacific, in relation to the United States and the Quadrilateral Defense Coordination Group, and in concertation with small island states like Fiji, PNG and Tonga in the framework of the South Pacific Defense Ministers Meeting.

Regarding North Korea, France will continue to play a major role in the United Nations Security Council and within the European Union to avoid any increase of instability and any escalation, in relations with our partners in the region, especially South Korea and Japan. We welcome the signs of openness and the new priority put forward by the DPRK on economic

development. Sanctions targeting North Korea's illicit activities have produced their effects. But we won't be naïve. We will not lower the guard. Opposite, we should make sure the implementation of sanctions is absolutely robust, until COVID, that barbarous acronym, can be finally achieved.

But we should look beyond all these traditional man-made calamities, and anticipate further risks. I am talking of another kind of man-made calamity: climate change. Its security consequences could be huge. In the Indo-Pacific, the risks are significant that some countries could disappear in a few decades because of the sea level rising. Ever more frequent extreme weather events will create new security vulnerabilities.

France is seeking to work with all the countries of the Indo-Pacific on an innovative approach to reduce the impact of climate change by anticipating the risks and setting up preventive measures. This will be a collaborative endeavor, and we look forward to working with all of you on this.

A final word on partnership now. To address such pressing, such grave issues, partnership needs to be rooted in solid ground. I mean, friendship, values, democracy. As for France, we have started to build a very strong Indo-Pacific partnership. It is based on our fantastic relationships with Australia and India. With Delhi and Canberra, we have a community of vision, a security partnership, and a commitment to multilateralism. I should also mention Japan, with whom our strategic interest are aligned and we share an exceptional bond. Narrowing down the focus to South East Asia, France has developed partnerships with our wonderful host Singapore, based on trust and fueled by technological cooperation, but also with Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam and other countries. And of course we embrace the important regional institutions such as ASEAN, whose centrality is a key geostrategic parameter, and bodies like the Asian Defence Minister Meeting +, with which France is hoping to increase its cooperation . In our mind, all those partnerships have to be inclusive.

So as a matter of conclusion, I would like to recall a former prominent American politician who once said: "there is no limit to what a man can achieve if he doesn't care who gets the credit". This, in a sense, is how we see the challenges in the region. Faced with so many gathering clouds, only a patient, collective, yes, a selfless effort, can rein in the passions, prove Thucydides wrong, uphold rules, disarm the climate, and show that, yes, we can raise the bar, rather than the flag.

Thank you.