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FLORENCE PARLY

MINISTER OF THE ARMED FORCES, FRANCE

Florence Parly, Minister of the Armed Forces, France

Dear Dr Chipman, dear Penny Mordaunt, dear Mat Sabu, dear colleagues, fellow ministers, excellencies and friends, I am delighted to be here with you this morning. I would like also to thank IISS for the fantastic quality of whatever they do, and of course our host. Singapore is a key strategic partner for France, as highlighted by Prime Minister Lee's visit to France last July as guest of honour of President Macron for the French National Day.

It is a particular pleasure to share this stage with my friends Mat Sabu, whom I met here last year for the first time, and Penny Mordant. It must be a measure of the Shangri-La's attraction that I meet Penny for the first time 10,000 kilometres away from our respective homes.

I have to say though that I did not come alone, as you mentioned, Dr Chipman. Last year we had a bit of competition with your predecessor, Penny, as to which of our two countries sent more free aid to the Indo-Pacific area. Gavin Williamson argued a bit over whether it was two or three per year, so today I upped my game and I came with a full carrier strike group, complete with aircraft carrier, destroyers, tankers, 20 Rafale, Hawkei and helicopters, hoping that you would be kind enough not to reciprocate. Jokes aside, this mighty instrument of power projection, berthed only a few miles from here, means a lot to me.

A year ago, President Macron delivered an important speech at Garden Island in Australia and made a case for the emergence of an Indo-Pacific axis with France, India and Australia as its backbone, but with a strong cooperation with other countries in the region and with Europeans, of course. What better incarnation of such a project than this carrier strike group? As she sailed away from France, she participated in the campaign to eradicate ISIS in Syria, where our British and Australian friends are key partners alongside the United States. Once in the Indian Ocean, she took part in a series of advance exercises with the Indian Navy and did the same a few days ago with the Australian and the Japanese navies. She will participate in the coming days in joint exercises with the Singaporean navy and air force. In this deployment, the carrier strike group will have integrated Danish, British, American, Italian, Australian and Portuguese vessels and officers from many other countries. This to me is policy in action.

India and Australia, those two great democratic nations, have just renewed their leaderships by electing the incumbent, something my government is looking at with no small measure of self-interest. Our relationships with the newly elected leaders are already very strong and we will do our utmost to strengthen them even further.

This cooperation is more necessary than ever, given Asia's evolving security order and its challenges. It takes no Kissinger to see the building blocks of a global confrontation taking shape here in Asia. We see it in trade wars, tech wars, currency wars, wars of words and the occasional brush between two aircraft or two ships. And this is only the beginning.

What is the position of France in all of this? Mat, one of your predecessors once joked to me that France and the US were nice with their talk of freedom of navigation and rules-based order, but the bottom line was the Westerners came and then went back to the safety of Honolulu while we – me and you – are stuck here with our bulky neighbours.

I challenge this assertion. France is not going anywhere, because we are part of the region. We have territories here; we have more than 1.6 million inhabitants, several islands with different statutes, vast exclusive economic zones and the responsibility that goes with the territory. The evolving security order affects us too. We have just completed our Indo-Pacific strategy, and its assessment of the dynamics in the region is not particularly uplifting. I mentioned the growing strategic competition. Multilateralism is receding and its core values – like sovereign equality, non-interference, respect of borders – are on the wane. Speed, tech and reach are reducing the geo-strategic space. Djibouti illustrates this; with its balcony on the Indian Ocean, it has become a sort of Babylon on the Horn, a place of French, Chinese, American, Japanese, German and even Italian accents. A reduced space is a space where frictions will happen faster and more often, but the Indo-Pacific is also an area of harder military capabilities, of unpredictability, where coercion can take place without drawn swords.

Faced with this reality, we have identified five main priorities in our action. First, we will protect our sovereign interest, our nationals, our territories and our exclusive economic zone in the region. Our forces will be ready to face any kind of threats, whether from terrorism, organised crime, and any attempts to undermine French sovereignty. Some of these threats are straightforward, some are insidious; we will confront them anyway. We will organise our presence, our pre-positioned forces, our temporary deployments to ensure robust defence of our interests. It will rest on five military commands, three sovereign bases and more than 7,000 military personnel in the area. We will not only keep aggressors at bay; we will also disrupt traffickers. In 2018 only, our forces seized 15 tonnes of drugs in the Indian Ocean – enough to dope all the region's sharks into oblivion.

Second, we will contribute to regional stability through our military and security cooperation. I mentioned India and Australia as partners of choice, obviously, but we have other key partners in the region and I would like to single out, in particular, Malaysia. Mat, last time I visited your country I was fascinated by the extent of our cooperation with your magnificent fleet of Airbus 400s and submarines and all the things our military do together. France supports the building of a regional security architecture and the centrality of ASEAN. We have taken steps to work closer to ASEAN in different structures, in particular the ADMM-Plus, where France would bring its operational knowhow.

Third, we will preserve, with our partners, free and open access to maritime lines of communication. This is normally where I was the elephant in the room. What is at stake goes beyond the prosperity of Europe and the preservation of trade links that are vital to the world. This is a question of principle. Where rules are no longer the boundary of ambition, what security can there be for smaller states in the region? What is the meaning of sovereign equality, that cardinal principle of the United Nations? As for us, we will go about this issue in our own steady, non-confrontational but obstinate way. We will continue to sail more than twice a year in the South China Sea. There will be objections, there will be dubious manoeuvres at sea, but we will not be intimidated into accepting any *fait accompli*, because what international law condemns, how could we condone? We will also call for all those who share this view to join in, as have several European offices and, indeed, British helicopters on our ships when we sail through the South China Sea.

Fourth, we will contribute to strategic stability through multilateral action – think nuclear proliferation, in particular. One way to solve this is to fall in love with Kim Jong-un and engage in summitry. As for us, we support love among nations and are in favour of diplomatic efforts. We just

hope they will lead to complete, verifiable, irreversible nuclear disarmament. Our contribution, however, will be in the implementation of sanctions. We have, for instance, deployed important air assets in Japan and in the Republic of Korea, as well as frigates, to monitor the nightly rendezvous of tankers doing illegal trans-shipments.

Fifth, and last, we will drive the lessons of the incredible accumulation of catastrophic climate events that happened recently in the region. Our forces were often involved in them, whether to help – as we did by deploying an Airbus 400 to Indonesia during a typhoon last year; or to be helped – as when our Rafale aircraft had to be diverted towards the same welcoming Indonesia this year because of terrible weather. This should send alarm bells. Smaller island states are at serious risk and armed forces have capabilities that can help. We should join forces. France will be launching a programme to improve our anticipation and mitigation of risks to the environment and we hope to cooperate with as many partners as possible.

Having vastly exceeded my time, I will now conclude. I have tried to outline some of the region's challenges and how my country fits in the picture. History is replete with big power competition. The Punic Wars started when Rome and Carthage fought over an island in a strait. What ensued was 100 years of war, followed by 500 years of domination. That was 2,000 years ago and the island was called Sicily. The slowly assembling parts of a tragedy do not mean that a tragedy is inevitable, but pretending to ignore what looms does not help. As for us, we believe we can chart our own way, avoid confrontation and carry a distinctive voice. We believe that we can rally our friends and all the people of goodwill who want to join us in the defence of the rules-based international system. With this, in a peaceful, multilateral but robust way, we hope to accompany the vast rebalancing that is taking place in the region.

Thank you very much.

Dr John Chipman, Director-General and Chief Executive, IISS

Florence, if I may, thank you very much for that detailed and – I use your word – robust statement, whose theme I think can be summarised as follows: that France is a resident power in the Asia-Pacific and therefore your Indo-Pacific strategy is part of France's national security policy, which I think is what leads to your wanting to continue to carry a distinctive voice in this region.