

# SPECIAL REPORT

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## Maritime Opportunities Await the India-Japan-France Trilateral

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# ABSTRACT

**T**he Indo-Pacific, often regarded as the ‘maritime underbelly’ of Asia, has emerged as the world’s economic “centre of gravity”.<sup>1</sup> The home of vast geo-economic opportunities, and facing manifold security challenges at the same time, this maritime domain has attracted the keen attention of global powers in recent years. This births prospects for multilateral collaborations in maritime security, and justifies the significance of a ‘free and open’ ocean realm.<sup>2</sup> This report builds

on the insights shared during the India-Japan-France workshop on the Indo-Pacific held on a virtual platform in January 2021.<sup>a</sup> The discussions explored the prospects in the partnership between the three countries which, despite their disparate geographical identities, have analogous interests in the Indo-Pacific.

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# INTRODUCTION

**C**hina's growing economic and strategic footprint has caused anxiety in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>3</sup> The Chinese Navy, apart from creating friendly relations with the littoral states using maritime diplomacy, is a frequent guest at the ports of Karachi, Colombo and many Southeast Asian countries. It conducts exercises beyond its traditional sphere of influence, indicating a clear intent on China's part to become a major player in this region. Its expanding naval fleet and its pursuit of new naval technologies demonstrate China's aims to exert influence in these spaces.<sup>4</sup> As its base in Djibouti is utilised to host aircraft carriers, places like Gwadar, Hambantota and Maldives have also started functioning dually for both commercial and military purposes.<sup>5</sup>

Addressing the China challenge—including the concomitant, non-traditional security issues—calls on stakeholders to move from expression of interest to active conversation. For India, Japan and France, who aim to work together in the region, this necessitates clarifying capacities and commitment in four areas of cooperation: (1) leveraging logistics agreements between the three, and more involvement between their navies; (2) all three collaborating in the setting up of underwater sensors in the Andaman Islands, which can help create a better understanding of the maritime domain; (3) cooperation on defence technology; and (4) acknowledging each other's limitations, especially on the issue of China.<sup>6</sup>

# THE VIEWS FROM THE THREE PARTNERS

**T**he Indo-Pacific is a key theatre for both competitive and convergent security interests of the central actors in the region like the United States, Australia, Japan, France, India and China. Countries have often opted for trilateral partnerships in the region because such relationship effectively fulfills their mutual goals.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, partnerships like the India-Japan-France trilateral are crucial. After all, the vision of a “free and open” Indo-Pacific cannot be achieved by a single country and requires collective efforts of like-minded countries that value freedom, openness and inclusivity.<sup>8</sup> The following paragraphs outline the stakes of each of the three countries in the region.

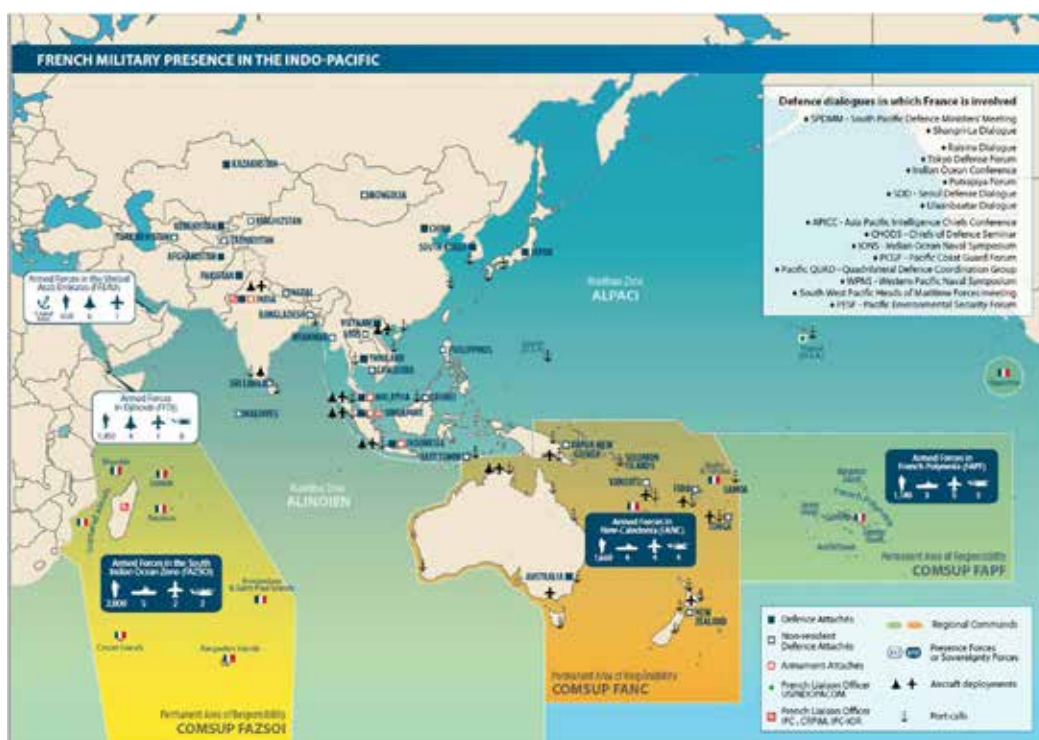
## France

France envisions itself as a key player in the Indo-Pacific region. In 2018, in a speech at the Garden Island Military base in Sydney, French President Emmanuel Macron declared the inclusion of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ in the country’s foreign policy.<sup>9</sup> France’s military deployment in the region is at around 7,000 personnel – 4,100 in the Indian Ocean and 2,900 in the Pacific Ocean—tasked to ensure protection of the French territories, surveillance of the Exclusive Economic Zones, and HADR operations.<sup>b,10</sup>

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b Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief.

# Map 1: French military presence in the Indo-Pacific



Source: Ministry of Defense, France <sup>11</sup>

French EEZs measure some 4.5 million sq km, or 8 percent of the world's total EEZs. A massive 90 percent of these French EEZs are located in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>12</sup> Such presence gives France naval and economic advantages, which are in turn crucial to ensuring its continued presence in overseas territories like Mayotte and La Réunion Islands, Scattered Island, the French Southern and Antarctic lands in the southern Indian Ocean, and New Caledonia, Wallis-and-Futuna, French Polynesia, and Clipperton in the Pacific Ocean.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, as the first member of the European Union (EU) to espouse the idea of an 'Indo-Pacific' region, France has always looked out for the security of the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) passing through the region. These SLOCs allow France to tap into the wealth of a rising Asia through trade and economic relations with the regional markets, especially in arms.<sup>14</sup> In this regard, the Suez Canal, the Bab-el-Mandeb, the Mozambique Channel and the Cape of Good

“A massive 90 percent of France’s EEZs are located in the Indo-Pacific region.”

Hope are vital chokepoints of French interest.<sup>15</sup> While France’s presence in Djibouti helps it to keep an eye on the Suez Canal and the Bab-el-Mandeb, its territories of Reunion and Mayotte serve as bases for the country’s naval patrols in the Mozambique Channel.<sup>16</sup>

France advocates for a stable, law-based multipolar order, especially amidst the changing seascape and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic that has altered global geographic and geoeconomic realities.<sup>17</sup> It places itself as a “stabilising power” in the region, and works with like-minded countries that share similar values of democracy.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, France realises its gaps in financing capabilities.<sup>19</sup> In this regard, it appreciates the presence of India and Japan, along with channels like the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) that can finance initiatives for improving maritime domain awareness and deliberate upon working towards “interoperability”<sup>20</sup> along with regional organisations like ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association).

## Japan

Japan was one of the first countries to ideate the notion of an “open and free” Indo-Pacific region. In 2007, then Prime Minister Shinzo Abe called this zone the “seas of prosperity”, governed by “freedom, rule of law, and the market economy”, and that would be “free from force or coercion.”<sup>21</sup>

At the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD VI) held on 27 August 2016 in Kenya,<sup>22</sup> the then Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe, unveiled the ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) Vision—one that would ensure that principles such as a stable legal framework, freedom of navigation and free trade are firmly upheld with a “coordinated whole-of government approach.”<sup>23</sup> The main aim is shared prosperity, which necessitates improving connectivity through infrastructure projects, along with maintaining peace and stability.<sup>24</sup> The current government of Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga continues to emphasise on the FOIP vision. He is set to become the first foreign leader to visit the United States under the Biden administration, in April 2021; one of their talking points is the Indo-Pacific agenda.<sup>25</sup>

To be sure, Tokyo has been pursuing a strategy of “multi-layered multilateral hedging” in the Indo-Pacific, as some analysts argue.<sup>26</sup> These same analysts say Japan is trying to protect its interests

in the East China Sea against repeated intrusions by China around its claimed Diaoyu Islands. This area, which Japan claims as its Senkaku Islands, also hosts the Sea of Japan spread across to the Pacific Ocean and the Pacific Coast of the US and Canada. It has a significant volume of commercial and military traffic and is an important SLOC for Japan. The Strait of Malacca, a critical passage between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, has often been regarded as a ‘vital lifeline’ for Japan’s international trade.

In order to keep these lanes free and open to sustain trade, Japan aims to build a network of the US allies, despite the former US administration under Trump’s withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The TPP is part of Abe’s economic policy of getting Japan to combat deflation with

private investment.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, Japan has also been focusing on its pivotal connectivity projects in the region.<sup>28</sup> (See Table 1)

India is considered an indispensable partner in Japan’s FOIP vision owing to their shared goals; to begin with, the two are Asian maritime powers: Japan in the Pacific Ocean, and India in the Indian Ocean.<sup>29</sup> The two countries therefore are strengthening cooperation in areas such as maritime security, connectivity, and HADR; they are also two of the four stakeholders in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue forum or Quad.<sup>30</sup>

**Table 1:  
Japan’s Key Connectivity Projects**

<b>East Africa</b>	Northern Corridor Master Plan- connecting the countries of East Africa from Kenya with its Port of Mombasa to landlocked Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo; The Nacala Corridor in Mozambique
<b>South Asia</b>	The Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor in India; The Bay of Bengal Industrial Growth Belt in Bangladesh. Japan’s High Speed Railways (HSR or the Shinkansen) was introduced on the Mumbai-Ahmedabad route in 2015; the Delhi Mass Rapid Transport System Project in India was also announced
<b>Southeast Asia</b>	The Yangon-Mandalay Railway in Myanmar; the East West Economic Corridor connecting Vietnam, Laos and Myanmar and the Southern Economic Corridor connecting Vietnam and Cambodia. Tsubasa Bridge in Cambodia, a strategic part of the economic corridor linking Phnom Penh and Ho Chi Minh; cooperation in the Port of Yangon, Myanmar for freight inspection; technical cooperation under the ‘Project for Improvement of Road Management Capability’ in Vietnam; Japan-Mekong Connectivity Initiative’. In July the same year at the Japan-Mekong Foreign Ministers’ Meeting, this initiative was formally launched with the support of all countries in the Mekong region; Nhat Tan Bridge (Vietnam-Japan Friendship Bridge) Construction Project in Vietnam.

Source: Author’s own, using various open sources

French President Emmanuel Macron travelled to Japan in June 2019 for a bilateral visit and for the 14th G20 summit. A new joint roadmap was adopted there, for the years 2019 to 2024. Macron received the then Japanese PM Abe in October 2018 and again in April 2019, and the two met on the sidelines of the G7 summit in Biarritz in August 2019. The Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Jean-Yves Le Drian, also visited Japan in January 2018 for the “2+2” political and military dialogue and the strategic dialogue. The two dialogues included various issues: strengthening multilateralism, counterterrorism, regional crises, protecting an international maritime order based on law, climate change, and international development cooperation.<sup>31</sup> They are reinforcing cooperation in the Indo-Pacific through the Japan-France Comprehensive Maritime Dialogue that encompasses three main pillars: (a) maritime security; (b) climate change, the environment and biodiversity; and (c) infrastructure.<sup>32</sup> There are also discussions through other frameworks such as the Japan-France Indo-Pacific Working Group,<sup>33</sup> and the Japan and France Two Plus Two ministerial meetings.<sup>34</sup> The two countries joined the La Crosse Naval exercises in the Indian Ocean, along with Australia and the US in Cambodia in 2019.<sup>35</sup> The French Embassy and JICA co-organised a forum on waste disposal and climate change, and Japan hosted the Quad foreign ministers’ meeting right after the inauguration of the current administration.<sup>36</sup>

## India

Indian Foreign Secretary H.V. Shringla, at the Quad Summit held in March 2021 said that while navigating through political and security concerns along with ensuring stability and peace in the Indo-Pacific, India has not just mainstreamed the concept but has also encouraged others to do the

same.<sup>37</sup> The SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) vision, launched in 2019 during the East Asia Summit in Bangkok,<sup>38</sup> is testimony to India’s commitment to the building of a rules-based regional architecture. Such a framework rests on seven pillars: maritime security; maritime resources capacity building and resource sharing; disaster risk reduction and management; science and technology; academic cooperation; state connectivity; and maritime transit.<sup>39</sup>

India seeks to uphold freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific and to serve as net security provider in the region.<sup>40</sup> The country’s relationships with partners across the region illustrate the nature of India’s role: its participation in networks such as the Quad; as well as trilateral arrangements between India-US-Japan, India-France-Australia, and India-Indonesia-Australia.<sup>41</sup>

India has been working to develop multilateral partnerships – including maritime security partnerships with countries that equally have stakes in the region. Table 2 lists India’s partnerships with Japan and France, in the maritime domain.

It is clear that India, France and Japan are all aiming to become leading stakeholders in the Indo-Pacific region. Working with one another, and with other countries outside of this trilateral as well, they have taken on the difficult task of ensuring that the Indo-Pacific remains open and peaceful, so that opportunities for prosperity can thrive.



## Table 2: India-France and India-Japan maritime security partnerships

India-France
Joint naval exercise, 'Varuna,' in Goa in 2019 to enhance maritime domain awareness
The White Shipping Agreement was signed in January 2017, in New Delhi, during the second round of their maritime security dialogue, to help monitor the vessels across the region and exchange information on maritime traffic.
Cooperation in multilateral institutions in the region, such as the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium and the Indian Ocean Rim Association; cooperation in the Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region where India hosts a French Liaison Officer; cooperation with regard to the French Navy's proposal to conduct the first IONS (Indian Ocean Naval Symposium) HADR Joint Exercise as France recently joined as a full-time member of the IONS.
A Vision Document—Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation—was signed in March 2018, with President Emmanuel Macron in New Delhi focusing on the emerging challenges of the IOR including security of maritime traffic, terrorism, and piracy, especially in the Horn of Africa; and climate change.
Memorandum of Understanding between Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) and the Centre national d'etudes spatiales (CNES- National Centre for Space Studies) of France aimed at co-developing a maritime surveillance satellite system focused on the Indian Ocean and related data fusion mechanisms.
Both the countries had also agreed on Provision of Reciprocal Logistics Support Agreement, in 2019, which seeks to “extend logistical support on reciprocal access to respective facilities for the Indian and French armed forces.”
India-Japan
“Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement” (ACSA) (28-29 October 2018) between India and Japan focuses on sharing of military logistics for greater interoperability
India-Japan bilateral Maritime Exercise- JIMEX is conducted biennially between the Indian Navy and the Japanese Maritime Self -Defense Force (JMSDF), which commenced in 2012. The most recent exercise was held from 26-28 September 2020, in North Arabian Sea.
Japan is now a permanent member of the Malabar exercise with India and the US and has also conducted the MINEX- mine-countermeasures exercise- as a part of its naval wargaming drills.
Japan is also a participant in the MILAN multilateral naval exercise hosted by the Naval Wing of the Andaman and Nicobar Command. Japan has undertaken a project in Andaman and Nicobar to assemble undersea cable systems that connect the group of islands to Chennai on the East coast of India.
India and Japan have joint investments in Sri Lanka to develop the East Container Terminal of the Colombo Port
“Agreement Concerning Transfer of Defence Equipment and Technology Cooperation” and “Agreement Concerning Security Measures for the Protection of Classified Military Information” signed in December 2015
Both India and Japan are considering incorporation of Anti-Submarine Warfare Training (ASW) training and exchanges by ASW aviation units such as P-3C in addition to MCM training. What is visible in all these are common interests converging into a security-oriented strategy for countering China in the maritime domain of Asia-Pacific.

Source: Author's own using various open sources

# PROSPECTS FOR THE TRILATERAL PARTNERSHIP

With the Indo-Pacific being a geographic translation of a strategic concept, India, Japan and France agree to its basic line of construction and share a common vision. However, the synergies between the three potential partner countries are still amorphous at this point.

The challenge in maritime security is to articulate internal and external coordination in a coherent framework where one country can look for areas in which they can achieve maximum impact. Maritime security is not just about political issues, after all, but about identifying spheres where the entire region can be mobilised, especially since all the countries are committed to multilateralism.<sup>42</sup>

This may be achieved by understanding the leverage of working together in the maritime domain to sustain a “safe and secure” maritime and marine environment along with a stable Indo-Pacific. The “three Cs— “Confluence, Crisis and the Convenient”—<sup>43</sup> can help in the understanding. Until perhaps a decade ago, the amalgamation of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific region made little strategic sense. Today there is ‘Confluence’: a convergence of interest has occurred, which extends to a “confluence of thought” or an “alignment of mental maps”. For example, the security

partnership that India had developed with Japan and France stands out due to the absence of differences between them. To be sure, however, not many solutions have been found so far for non-traditional threats such as illegal fishing or climate change migration.<sup>44</sup> Altering this scenario should begin with the exchange of information in the maritime domain.<sup>45</sup>

Forums like IORA deserve a mention in this regard, as a recent example where India is a founding member, France recently became a member, and Japan is an observer. It is one of the forums that can be relied upon to give pragmatic results. Similar coordination can be done in capacity building, particularly in Africa where there is a clear need and the situation is fast evolving.<sup>46</sup> A key trilateral partnership can be created if Japan and India supported France’s candidacy to become a member of the Heads of Asian Coast Guard Agencies Meeting (HACGAM)— an apex-level forum for facilitating the coast guard agencies of the countries in Asia. Similarly, France also expects Japanese backing to enter multilateral security cooperation forums in East Asia, such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM+). The latest joint

“Until a decade ago, the amalgamation of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific region made little strategic sense.”

statements between Japan and France also show a desire to enter into a long-term security relationship by expanding cooperation in fields such as outer space,<sup>c</sup> space-based maritime surveillance, and cyberspace.<sup>47</sup>

There is also the possibility of extending the longstanding coast guard cooperation between India and Japan, to France, at least on a case-to-case basis. The need to focus on thematic issues with a strong potential political impact—for instance, fisheries—should be priority for everyone.<sup>48</sup> Fisheries is a strategic area where exploration can be made with overlapping naval consideration and economics. This is also an issue which overlaps with others, and offers the greatest opportunity for political mobilisation.<sup>49</sup>

China contributes to the problem not only with its fleet size and tonnage but also its fishing practices. It is a country that has instrumentalised fishing to pursue its geostrategic interests. While it is not the only country that conducts Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing (IUU) fishing operations, it is the only one which connects its geostrategic interests and uses its fleet as a proxy for its navy.<sup>50</sup>

Japan and France can also maximise their HADR operations and incorporate India in the domain. In July 2018, an acquisition and cross-servicing agreement (ACSA) was signed that allowed the sharing of defence supplies and services—it is an important step for HADR and peacekeeping that can pave the way for more ambitious joint exercises between the three in the future; after all, India is an internationally recognised provider of disaster aid as well.<sup>51</sup> The creation of a coordination mechanism between the three countries would allow them to coordinate, avoid duplication of efforts, and maximise impact. The three countries could further develop projects within forums like the IORA as they are ideal for discussing the more technical, normative and developmental aspects of an issue.

Another aspect may be the inclusion of the United States. The US’ National Defense Strategy Commission, a bipartisan group of high-level defence experts, commented in 2018: “The Commission assesses unequivocally that the NDS is not adequately resourced... available resources are clearly insufficient to fulfil the strategy’s ambitious goals.”<sup>52</sup> What comes across as a potential solution are multilateral collaborations and partnerships, along with joint exercises. The US Navy’s Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC), Air Force’s Red Flag and Pacific Multi Domain Training and Experimentation Capability with integrated coalition networks could be helpful steps towards achieving partnerships.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>c</sup> A Japanese X-band defence communication satellite was launched from French Guiana in March 2018.

# CONCLUSION

The idea of ‘minilateralism’ has gained traction in recent years. It is a narrower—and usually informal—initiative to address specific problems with fewer states sharing the same interest; they are in essence, “task-oriented.” The “tasks” are often regionally focused, making them “less threatening” to states that see themselves as the target of bilateral alliances. Thus, minilateralism can overcome barriers to collective action problems by insisting on fewer actors and a narrower convergence of interests, identity or power.

Policymakers find minilateralism appealing because of its inherent flexibility, lower transaction costs, and voluntary commitments.<sup>54</sup> The India-France-Japan trilateral partnership narrative is a collaborative framework that can help foster greater ‘Asian informality’ and thereby help strengthen cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. However, despite their shared concern about China’s belligerence, the biggest bottleneck in the India-Japan-France partnership lies in certain bilateral contradictions. For this trilateral to succeed, it has to be founded on a consultative character and promote capacity building, connectivity, and sustainable infrastructure development.<sup>55</sup>

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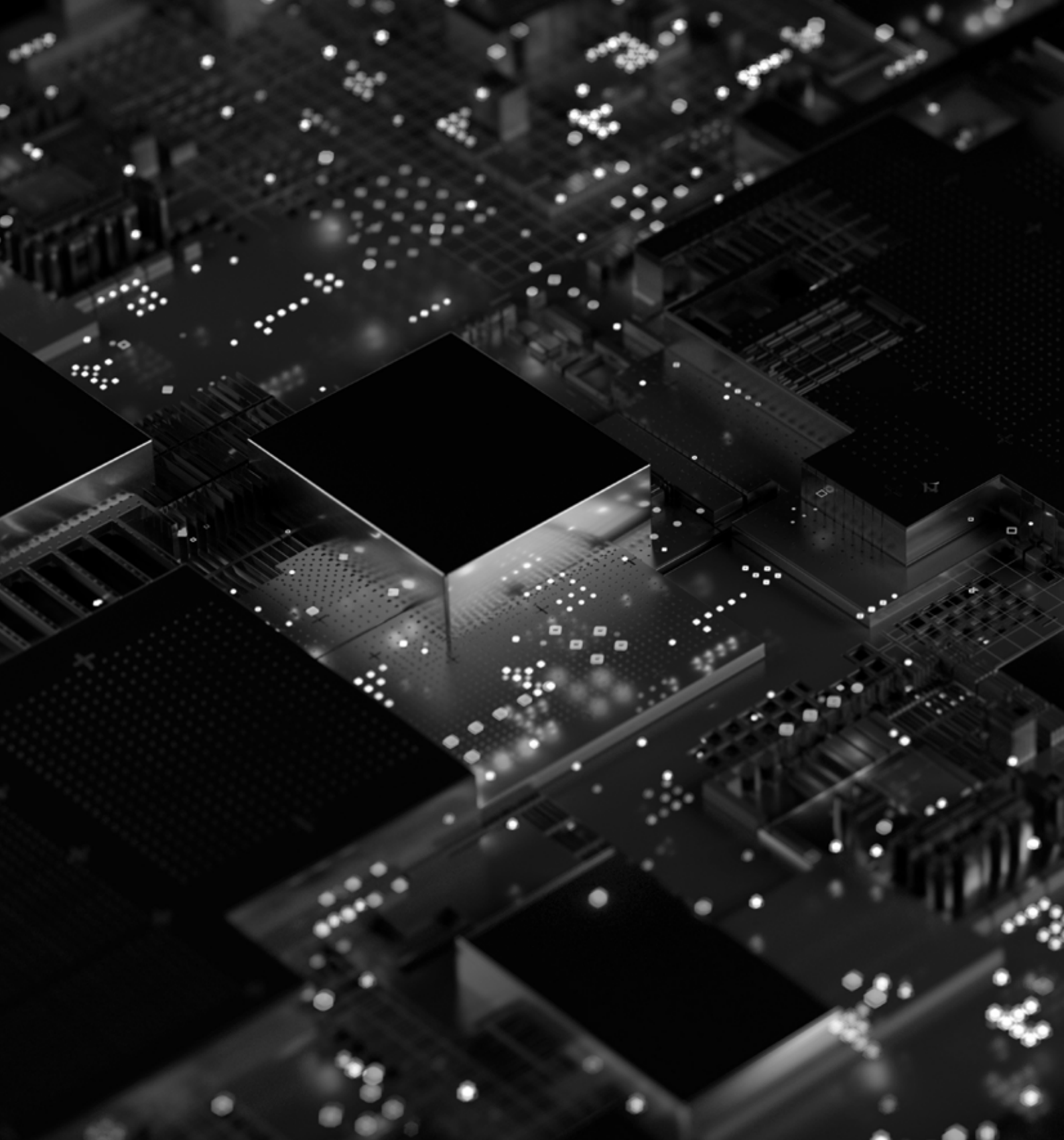
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