From the French Compagnie des Indes to France in the Indo-Pacific

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Since Antiquity, geographers have divided the world into various regions, often corresponding with the continents—Herodotus partitioned the globe into the three continents of Europe, Asia and what he called Libya—though there have been many other categories, including transcontinental ones and larger ensembles, such as the four hemispheres and 'Eurasia'.[1] Such partitions, and the names that have been applied, are a matter of metageography and toponymy, but not surprisingly perspectives and labels have been influenced by exploration and 'discoveries', and by commercial, political and cultural interests and stakes. The divisions, especially when based on non-physical features, are highly inflected by views of history, society and culture, and they change over time and from country to country. They also pass in and out of fashion; phrases such as the 'Near East' and the 'Levant', for example, were once familiar but are seldom heard today.

Needless to say, the terms commonly used in English or French reveal a European view of the world, a particular standpoint, cartography and cosmology, as with words such as the 'Orient', the 'East' and the 'Far East'.

To cite this article: Aldrich, Robert, 'From the French Compagnie des Indes to France in the Indo-Pacific': *The French Australian Review*, no. 70 (Winter 2021: 4–19).

[1] This is an adapted version of a keynote address given at the Institute for the Study of French Australian Relations conference on 'Australia and France in a Regional and Global Context: Past Engagements and Future Research Directions', 8–9 April 2021.

It is telling that in French and in English, *les Indes* or the Indies (in the plural) was frequently used to cover unknown territory in Asia (though the Dutch applied the word more specifically to their Southeastern Asian colony that is now Indonesia); First Nations peoples in the Americas and even South Pacific Islanders were branded 'Indians'. New words were coined to refer to specific regions around which the French or others drew lines, including *Insulinde* (which dropped out of usage) and *Indochine* (which lost its currency with decolonisation). For Oceania, we still talk about three regions—Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia, which were rather arbitrarily separated by those who devised these names—as well as Australasia, which occasionally extended to Pacific islands.

The 'Pacific' has been an omnipresent term, though exactly what the 'Pacific' covers differs according to the commentator, sometimes meaning largely the northern or, conversely, southern Pacific or just the islands in the ocean. In the early 1980s, the Paris-based Institut du Pacifique promoted the idea, rather questionably in my view, of a 'Pacific' that encompassed all of the islands of the ocean and all of the countries with a Pacific littoral, from Russia to Chile, Australia to Canada.[2] Then the 'Asia-Pacific' became popular as a designation, particularly in an Australia eager to position itself as part of the dynamic commercial and political sphere of East and Southeast Asia, and to recognise that its major trading partners and strategic interests lay in the 'far north'. Most recently, in Australia, France and elsewhere, there has been talk of the 'Indo-Pacific'.

The political and commercial idea of an 'Indo-Pacific', it seems, came to attention with a statement by the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2007, then was taken up by US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton in 2010.[3] In 2013, the idea appeared in the Australian Defence White Paper.

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2 Institut du Pacifique, *Le Pacifique, 'nouveau centre du monde'* (Paris: Berger-Lavrault/Boréal Express, 1983). See Robert Aldrich, 'Rediscovering the Pacific: A critique of French geopolitical analysis', *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, no. 87 (1989):57–71.

3 Gurpreet S. Khurana, 'The "Indo-Pacific" Concept: Retrospect and Prospect', National Maritime Foundation, last modified February 2, 2017, https://maritimeindia.org/indopacific/.

Five years later, in a speech at Garden Island in Sydney, President Emmanuel Macron evoked the Indo-Pacific and said that he wanted to create a 'strong Indo-Pacific axis to build on our economic interests as well as our security interests'.[4] There was also talk of a France-India-Australia axis, and there have been several meetings between officials of those countries to develop the trilateral relationship.[5] 'Indo-Pacific' held a prominent position in France's 2018 Defence White Paper, which defined the region as comprising 'the Indian, Pacific and Southern Oceans' and states that it 'forms a security continuum spreading from the East African coastline to the Western American seaboard'. The paper noted that France controls nine million square kilometres of exclusive economic zone in the region, counts 1.6 million French citizens in French overseas departments and territories plus at least 200,000 French nationals in Indo-Pacific states, and stations 7,000 troops in the region. The white paper spoke, too, of France's substantial trade and aid in the Indo-Pacific.[6]

Although criticised and even derided as a concept by some commentators—both academics and officials—the 'Indo-Pacific' has been championed as the new locus for the future of the world. In the words of Prime Minister Scott Morrison, at the virtual meeting of the Quadrilateral group of powers of the region—Australia, the United States, Japan and India, though not including France—held in March 2021: 'It is the Indo-Pacific that will now shape the destiny of our world in the 21st Century'.[7] Morrison has reiterated that point, and it has been echoed by other world leaders in similar language, with Josep Borrell, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, for instance,

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[4] Ben Doherty, 'France and Australia can be heart of new Indo-Pacific axis, Macron says', *Guardian*, May 2, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/02/france-and-australia-can-be-heart-of-new-indo-pacific-axis-macron-says .

[5] See Frédéric Grare, 'Exploring Indo-Pacific Convergences: The Australia-France-India Trilateral Dialogue', *Washington Quarterly* 43, no. 4, (2020): 155–170, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0163660X.2020.1850004 .

[6] *France and Security in the Indo-Pacific*, Defence White Paper, 2018 edition, updated in May 2019, https://www.defense.gouv.fr/portail/rubriques-complementaires/recherche-avancee?searchText=France+and+Security+in+the+Indo-Pacific .

[7] https://www.skynews.com.au/details/_6239739515001 .

saying in an interview in May 2021: 'The Indo-Pacific will be the place where the history of this century will be written'.[8]

My intention here is not to discuss nomenclature or the validity of these designations and the concepts that underpin them, or their pertinence for current international policy-making. (There exist a number of articles, largely by political scientists, strategic specialists or media commentators on the general notion and, specifically, on France in the contemporary Indo-Pacific.[9]) Rather, as an historian, and a specialist on the history of France and French colonialism, I would like to reflect on some of the continuities in France's presence in the Indo-Pacific, which I am indeed thinking of here as the vast territory from the Indian subcontinent to southeastern and eastern Asia, Australia and the islands of the South Pacific. It is always difficult to say exactly where any such expansive region begins or ends, and as a caveat, I should add that I do have reservations about combining such extraordinarily diverse lands and peoples under that one hyphenated rubric of 'Indo-Pacific'. I would nevertheless like to suggest several particular traits that have marked French actions in that very large part of the globe over the centuries, and which remain part of today's discourse and, perhaps, today's policy.

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[8] *O Público* (Lisbon), May 8, 2021.

[9] Among others with particular relevance to France: Andrea Gilli, 'France's new *raison d'être* in the Pacific', *Report: Mind the Gap: National Views of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific,* 9 (April 1, 2019), www.jstor.com/stable/resrep21474.6; Françoise Nicolas, 'France's Indo-Pacific strategy: inclusive and principled', *EastAsiaForum,* December 12, 2019; Frédéric Grare, 'France, the Other Indo-Pacific Power', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/10/21/france-other-indo-pacific-power-pub-83000 ; Kim Beng Phar and Clementine Bizot, 'Is France Capable of Being an Indo-Pacific Power?', *Diplomat*, (December 24, 2020); Denise Fisher, 'The Crowded and Complex Pacific: Lessons from France's Pacific Experience', *Security Challenges* 16, no. 1 (2020): 37–43; Li Siang Ng, 'The Limits to French Grandeur in the Indo-Pacific', Lowy Institute, July 6, 2019, www. lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/limits-french-ambition-indo-pacific ; Pierre Morcos, 'France: A Bridge between Europe and the Indo-Pacific', *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, April 1, 2021, https://www.csis.org/search?search_api_views_fulltext=a%20bridge%20between%20Europe%20and%20the%20Indo-pacific&sort_by=search_api_relevance .

There are, roughly, three broad periods of French engagement with the *Extrême-Orient* (the term generally used in France for places from India further east) since the 1600s, though French knowledge of and various undertakings in the countries of the East goes back much further: the early modern period from the 1400s through the 1700s, the late modern period of the 'long' nineteenth and early twentieth century, and the now lengthy period since the end of European empires. Initiated with the Iberian voyages of exploration at the end of the 1400s and the early 1500s—Bartolomeu Dias and Vasco Da Gama among the most famous navigators—the coastlines of Africa, the Indian Ocean, and then maritime Asia increasingly became areas in which the Atlantic powers sought commercial, religious and political advantage: to trade, to preach Christianity and to gain territorial beachheads and alliances that would provide leverage against European rivals and allow further expansion and development of their interests overseas. In the early years of the 1600s, as Portugal was eclipsed in Asia, the United Provinces (roughly, today's the Netherlands and parts of Belgium), in the form of the United East India Company, or VOC, became the leading force in this eastward movement, quickly followed by the English East India Company. The Dutch and English companies became the most widespread business enterprises in the world, though they were challenged by the French, if tardily, and by other European companies. After several not very successful early efforts, Louis XIV established a new Compagnie française pour le commerce des Indes Orientales in 1664. For the king's senior minister, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, who promoted the formation of the company, mercantilist economic theories placed a priority on trade, and the power of the Sun King resided in his ability to gain a place in the sun in foreign parts.[10]

Spices such as pepper, nutmeg and cinnamon, porcelain, silk and tea were some of the most important commodities, of course, in this trade between Europe and the 'Indies', and they represented highly precious and desirable commodities on the European market. There was also potential for plantation crops, notably sugar, subsoil products including gemstones, and many other sources of profit, including trade in enslaved people from Africa and elsewhere. France established outposts along the west African coast,

[10] A good introduction is Philippe Haudrère and Gérard Le Bouëdic, *Les Compagnies des Indes* (Rennes: Éditions Ouest-France, 2001).

in the Mascarene islands of the Indian Ocean—including the Île de France (now Mauritius) and the Île Bourbon (renamed La Réunion)—and in India. India, indeed, was one of the greatest magnets (and most enticing fantasies), and France engaged in a near-century long contest with the British during the 1700s to carve out an empire on the sub-continent. Sailing further eastwards, the French had already sent several missions to Ayutthaya, the capital of Siam, from the late 1600s (and received Siamese delegations to Versailles in return); the accounts by the French and the Thai make especially interesting reading about these early encounters. Still earlier, a French Jesuit missionary, Alexandre de Rhodes, arrived in Vietnam.

Yet the French reach in Asia was greater than its grasp, and the British got the lion's share, especially of India, where France's aspirations for a large colonial territory were scuppered in the 1790s. However, France claimed—and hung on to until the 1950s—five *comptoirs* in India, small discontinuous enclaves along the Coromandel and Malabar coasts: Pondichéry, Chandernagore, Mahé, Karikal and Yanaon. Napoleon dreamed of reversing the late eighteenth-century near eviction of France from the subcontinent, but that was not to be, and in 1810 the French even lost the Île de France, though it kept La Réunion. The central Indian Ocean had become, for all practical purposes, a British lake, though France did eventually gain more territory than it possessed at the end of the disastrous Napoleonic wars.

Britain had meanwhile pushed onwards, taking over Penang Island in 1786, the eastern coast of Australia two years later, Singapore in 1819. France, for its part, still had no toehold in southeastern Asia or in Oceania until the second period of French engagement in the Indo-Pacific, which might be dated from the 1840s and 1850s. France began to search for new lands to conquer, though hopes to gain a base in the Sulu archipelago south of the Philippines or in another maritime area of Southeast Asia initially came to nought. So France turned its attentions to Vietnam. French missionaries, as mentioned, had been present there since the early 1600s, sent by Jesuits and the Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris, established in the late 1650s. (Note the concordance between 'commerce and Christianity' in the foundation of the Paris missionary society and the French East Indies Company under the reign of Louis XIV). Relations between the French and the Vietnamese did not always run smoothly as there were periodic reactions

against the foreigners, but the Europeans were considered useful trading partners and allies. In 1787, the seven-year-old crown prince of Vietnam, Nguyen Phu Canh, visited the court of Louis XVI, in the company of a missionary chaperone. He became a celebrity in the *salons* of the capital and had his portrait beautifully painted. Those who sent him hoped to effect a formal alliance with the French in the midst of domestic rivalries for the throne of Vietnam, but the late 1780s proved an inauspicious time for French royal alliances.

Jumping ahead to the end of the 1850s, under Napoleon III—no less ambitious in international conquest and intervention than the earlier Napoleon—the French sent in the gunboats to attack the Vietnamese. They forced the Vietnamese emperor to cede several provinces along the Mekong Delta—the area near Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City)—which became the French colony of Cochinchina. The French also became involved in a European attack on China during the so-called Second Opium War in the late 1850s, participating with the British in the sacking and pillage of the imperial summer palace, which provided booty for Empress Eugénie's Musée Chinois at Fontainebleau. That military action forced open trade for Europeans in China, and whetted more interest in Asia from shippers, Lyon silk merchants, colonial lobbyists and France's rulers. China, then as now, was seen as the great prize for trade and influence because of its huge territory and population, and the valuable trade goods available there. Furthermore, Napoleon III renewed acquaintance with the Siamese when he received a grand delegation sent to France by the Siamese king in 1861. In 1863, the French established a protectorate over Cambodia, in the 1870s by dint of warfare, they took over central Vietnam (Annam) and in the 1880s northern Vietnam (Tonkin). The French even fought a battle in Taiwan in 1884 in the context of their Southeast Asian expansion. They also harboured designs on Burma in the 1880s, but the British managed to secure colonial control over that country. In the 1890s, the French took over Laos; Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos would be administered as Indochine Française until 1953–54.[11] As is often not recognised, the French made overtures and

[11] Among the large number of works on French Indochina, Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858–1954* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009) is a good starting point for further reading.

inroads elsewhere—in Indonesia, Korea, Singapore and the Philippines, for example,—though without obtaining colonies there.[12] The French were also much involved with ship-building and engineering works in Japan during the last decades of the shogun's regime before the Meiji restoration of 1868, and French fascination with Japan—including the artistic current of *japonisme*—continued long afterwards, with the Franco-Japanese fascination proving mutual.[13] On the Asian mainland, France obtained an outpost in China, the Shanghai concession, in 1849, though it took decades for it to be developed and technically it was not a colony; that enclave provided France with a base for trade and allowed extraterritorial legal and administrative privileges. Later, the French and other foreign countries obtained concessions elsewhere along the Chinese coast, and France took over a small and rather neglected colonial territory, Guangzhouwan, on the south coast.[14] France, in short, though an Indian Ocean power only with very limited territory, became a significant colonial and international power in Asia, though decidedly second to Britain.

Meanwhile, the French had moved into the Pacific islands, as had the British and, ultimately, the Germans and Americans (and, still later, the Japanese). Paris took over Tahiti and a swathe of archipelagos in eastern

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[12] Bernard Dorléans, *Les Français et l'Indonésie du XVIe au XXe siècle* (Paris: Éditions Kailash, 2001); Maxime Pilon and Danièle Weiler, *The French in Singapore: An Illustrated History (1819–Today)* (Singapore: Éditions Didier Millet, 2011); Jean-Marie Thiébaud, *La Présence française en Corée de la fin du XVIIIème siècle à nos jours* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005); Denis Nardin Cruz, *France and the Philippines: from the beginning to the end of the Spanish regime* (Manila: National Historical Institute, 1989).

[13] Elisabeth de Touchet, *Quand les Français armaient le Japon: la création de l'arsenal de Yokosuka, 1865–1882* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2003); Richard Sims, *French Policy Towards the Bakufu and Meiji Japan, 1854–95* (London: Routledge, 1998); Brigitte Koyama-Richard, *Le Japon à Paris: Japonais et japonisants de l'ère Meiji aux années 1930* (Paris: Nouvelles éditions Scala, 2018), among other works.

[14] Bernard Brizay, *La France en Chine : Du XVIIe siècle à nos jours* (Paris: Perrin, 2013); J. Weber and F. de Sesmaisons (eds), *La France en Chine, 1843–1943* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2013); Nicole Bensacq-Tixier, *La France en Chine de Sun Yat-sen à Mao Zedong, 1918–1953* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2014).

Polynesia from 1842, New Caledonia in 1856, and Wallis and Futuna towards the end of the century; there was also the Anglo-French condominium in the New Hebrides. These represented a substantial stake in Oceania, providing ports for trans-Pacific trade, mines for nickel and phosphate, tropical agriculture, the penal colony in New Caledonia, land for settlement and, in the late twentieth century, a site for nuclear testing.[15]

France's historical and contemporary ties with Australia and New Zealand are well known to all readers of this journal, whose articles over the past years have demonstrated how wide-ranging and influential those links have been. These encompassed the French exploration of the South Seas in the era of Bougainville, La Pérouse and Baudin, the unsuccessful attempt of a French group to establish a colony on Akaroa peninsula of New Zealand, the importance of the French as traders, settlers and cultural figures in Australasia from the nineteenth century forwards, and the solidarity and comradeship of Anzacs and French soldiers in the First World War. These manifold connections are very interestingly analysed in new books by Alexis Bergantz and Alistair Watts.[16] Finally, mention should be made of French activities in Antarctica and the sub-Antarctic islands (the Terres australes et antarctiques françaises), which extended French presence to the southern polar regions—and indeed, making Australia and France neighbours in Antarctica.

By 1900, in short, France indeed had an extensive formal Indo-Pacific empire stretching from Djibouti, on the Horn of Africa, the Comoros Islands, and Madagascar in the far west of the Indian Ocean, all the way to unoccupied Clipperton Island off the coast of Mexico in the far east of the Pacific Ocean. And France had a wider sphere of influence through

[15] Robert Aldrich, *The French Presence in the South Pacific, 1842–1945* (London: Macmillan, 1990); John Dunmore, *Visions & Realities: France in the Pacific, 1695–1995* (Waikanae, NZ: Heritage Press Limited, 1997); and Matt K. Matsuda, *Empire of Love: Histories of France and the Pacific* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), which also contains chapters on Panama, Indochina and Japan. For an astute analysis of the contemporary situation, see Denise Fisher, *France in the South Pacific: Power and Politics* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2013).

[16] Alexis Bergantz, *French Connection: Australia's Quest to Become a Cosmopolitan Nation* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2021); Alistair Watts, *New Zealand's France: A Different View of 1835–1935* (New Zealand: Aykay Publishing, 2021).

its diplomatic, commercial and cultural initiatives. France was an Indo-Pacific power before that phrase became common, and before countries like China emerged as major actors in international affairs—and in recent years, imperialistic and neo-colonialist policies —rather than as subjects for Western imperialist intervention.

The French conquests of Southeast Asian and South Pacific colonies, and the dates at which they occurred, take us into the so-called 'new imperialism' of the late nineteenth century—though it was not really so new in many respects—and the formation of insular and continental empires of unparalleled extent, backed by new geopolitical theories, economic calculations in the age of industrial and finance capitalism, racial (and in fact, racist) perspectives on human societies, and not a few great dreams, fantasies and adventures. That period lasted until the middle of the twentieth century.

The next chapter in the history of France in the Indo-Pacific, is that of the era of decolonisation and its aftermath: the Indochinese war and the independence of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, and the Indian takeover of the French *comptoirs de l'Inde* in the 1950s. Nevertheless, with the exception of the New Hebrides, which became independent as Vanuatu in 1980, France continued to administer its South Pacific territories even as many other island colonies gained independence. I do not propose, however, to dwell on the decades after the Second World War or more recent history, as I would like to move away from the chronology, and suggest some enduring key traits of the *longue durée* of French involvement in the Indo-Pacific.

First, there was and is a globalising vision of the 'East', the idea of a near limitless, if ill-defined territory of the world that offered untold riches that Europeans hoped to tap, from the spices of the 1600s to the rubber harvested and the coal mined in Indochina by the early twentieth century, and on to the high-tech goods and inexpensive manufactured consumer items of the twenty-first. The East also offered exotic cultures to explore, as seen in the works of novelists from Pierre Loti and Victor Segalen to André Malraux and Marguerite Duras, among others. Representations in literature, art and cinema, it should be emphasised, were vital, in both reflecting and creating perspectives, fanciful or more accurate, of foreign places. With regularly renewed tropes, the imagery—even in such quotidian forms as travel brochures and other sorts of advertising—remains powerful

in conveying messages about the allure and value of overseas colonies or spheres of influence.

Colonies were not conquered in a clearly planned way as much was contingent and opportunistic in European expansion, and justifications for possession and plans for *mise en valeur* (wide-ranging and large-scale development) often followed *prises de possession*. *La France des cinq parties du monde*, as one book published in 1927 had it,[17] or 'greater France' (*la plus grande France*), at least for the authors of propaganda and policy, however, showed a globe-encircling idea of France's position and, it was said, its vocation. This was true at the time of the Compagnie des Indies and other chartered companies, as the French tried to take their share of the new worlds of the East and the West. It was similarly true in the second half of the 1800s when political theorists already heralded the Pacific as the new 'centre of the world' with the opening of Japan and China, new technologies, forms of communication and trade routes, and plans for a canal to be built through the isthmus of central America. According to those commentators, the Pacific was rapidly displacing the Atlantic as the centre of gravity in world economic and political affairs, just as the Atlantic had displaced the Mediterranean in the 1500s. France's national interests demanded that it be present in the Pacific and an active participant in its affairs. Such ideas widely circulated in the last decades of the nineteenth century in academic texts, newspapers and the literature produced by the colonial lobby, and they have been perennially revived since that time, often in almost the same words and with the same arguments.[18]

A concomitant of this globalising view was the way that regions, and the colonial or quasi-colonial outposts that provided the key French bases, were tied together, in real as well as in theoretical fashion, as evidenced by the routes of French shipping companies such as the Messageries Maritimes. Some fairly random examples will give an idea of how 'Indo' was joined to 'Pacific', beginning in the early modern period. Sailing ships bound for the Far East called at the Île de France and the Île Bourbon en route.

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[17] Octave Homberg, *La France des cinq parties du monde* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1927).

[18] Robert Aldrich, 'Le Lobby colonial de l'Océanie française', *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer* 76, (1989): 284–285, 411–424.

The aptly named Pierre Poivre, a scientist and Enlightenment figure—a fascinating character who was a senior official in the French Mascarene Islands in the late 1700s—spirited away spices and plants from the Dutch East Indies, in contravention of Dutch efforts to retain a monopoly on their production, to try to acclimatise them in the French Indian Ocean islands.[19] France peopled the Île de France and Île Bourbon with slaves from Africa and Madagascar, and after the end of slavery, labourers from India. Connections around the Indian Ocean and between the Indian Ocean, Asia and the Pacific islands continued in a later period: Tahiti and New Caledonia from the mid-1800s were seen as important bridges across the Pacific connecting to Asia, providing port facilities and provisions as sailing ships and then steamships made their way from the Americas to Asia and Australasia. In the 1860s, the French recruited Chinese to develop cotton plantations in Tahiti when the Civil War in the United States created new opportunities for selling cotton, and then the French imported labourers from northern Vietnam, Japan and the Dutch East Indies for the nickel mines of New Caledonia. There was a significant migration from the Indian *comptoir* of Pondichéry to Vietnam in the early 1900s, just as earlier there had been a smaller-scale migration of Frenchmen from La Réunion to New Caledonia.[20] The French exiled two emperors of Vietnam, Duy Tan and Thanh Thai, to La Réunion, one in 1907, the other in 1916, and some later Vietnamese political prisoners were transported to La Réunion and New Caledonia.[21] In the 1920s, there was an idea of *entr'aide coloniale*, in which the richer colonies (like Vietnam), it was argued, should financially aid the poorer ones, such as the South Pacific islands. And, at the time of decolonisation, nationalism in Vietnam had powerful echoes in successful Indian initiatives to regain the French *comptoirs* on the sub-continent. These examples of inter-colonial and trans-oceanic ties across the French Indo-Pacific could be multiplied.

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[19] Louis Malleret, *Pierre Poivre* (Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1974).

[20] Natasha Pairaudeau, *Mobile Citizens: French Indians in Indochina, 1858–1954* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Affairs (NIAS Press), 2016); Karin Speedy, *Colons, Créoles et Coolies : L'immigration réunionnaise en Nouvelle-Calédonie XIXe siècle et le tayo de Saint-Louis* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007).

[21] Robert Aldrich, *Banished Potentates: Dethroning and exiling indigenous monarchs under British and French colonial rule, 1815–1955* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), ch. 4.

Another point to underscore is the importance of French *sovereign* territories—sovereignty, in international law, politics and economics, gave France rights that it could not exercise simply by having spheres of influence. France was a free agent in territories it claimed as colonies or protectorates, in a way that it was not in independent countries. Furthermore, places of sovereignty provided stepping-stones: New Caledonia (especially with its sandalwood much valued on the Chinese market in the mid-1800s and its nickel of great interest to industrial Japan in the early 1900s) was a stepping-stone to Asia. Vietnam, early colonialists hoped, would be a pathway to the riches of China. The Mekong, much to their disappointment, proved not to be navigable all the way to China or the river's source, but the French did build a railway from Haiphong to Kunming with the idea of gaining pole position among foreigners in Yunnan and much of southern China. Much earlier, as we have seen, hope that the Mascarene islands would provide a launching-pad for conquest of British India failed, but La Réunion did became the jumping-off spot for French expansion in Madagascar, the Comoros and Djibouti in the late 1800s. A century later, promoters of the *départements et territoires d'outre-mer* talked about the importance of the Pacific territories as an *entrée* to Asia, as well as the significance of such sovereign territories for French global military interests and nuclear testing. They also underlined, in theory and policy, the links between French territories from the Caribbean and Atlantic through the Indian Ocean and on to the Pacific and Antarctic.

Since the 1980s, there have been recurring statements about the way in which sovereign territories—including the French sub-Antarctic islands like Kerguelen, as well as Clipperton—give France huge maritime exclusive economic zones valuable for fishing and promoted as possible sites for undersea mining. Even tiny specks of land, like the French Îles Éparses in the Indian Ocean, provide immense ocean areas, though currently more in promise than in profit. The 2019 lightning visit of President Macron to the Île de la Grande Glorieuse, part of an archipelago in the Îles Éparses totalling a mere five square kilometres and with no permanent population, provided an opportunity for the head of state to reaffirm France's sovereignty, speak about partnership with Indian Ocean neighbours, and vaunt France's effort to safeguard against 'predatory exploitation' of the waters of the Îles Éparses

and safeguard the biodiversity of their environments.[22] The language and priorities may change, but talk about the French overseas outposts as '*la chance de la France'* or even '*la chance de l'Europe'*, as the veteran statesman Michel Debré, among others, often referred to them, has owed much to a line of rhetoric going back to the imperialism of the late 1800s and further back to the period of the Compagnie des Indes Orientales.[23] Plus ça change. …

Another point that I'd like to make, and this does bring us close to the present as well, is the way that the Indo-Pacific, and France's sovereign territories and spheres of influence through the region, have formed part of an effort to contest the hegemonic power of France's rivals. France since the early modern age has affirmed itself as not only a European but a global power, in part because of its overseas possessions. In the early 1600s, France's rivals were the Dutch and British, and the British remained a real military foe in the 1700s and early 1800s in the Indian Ocean, then a potential enemy, despite periods of cooperation, down until the signing of the Entente Cordiale in 1904. Japan, in continental Asia and the Pacific, became an increasingly expansive power in the early twentieth century, provoking great concern to France; already in 1905, the *Écho de Paris* warned about a '*péril jaune*'. Japan itself became a colonial power with the takeover of Taiwan and Korea, and it looked even more menacing after the invasion of Manchuria in the 1930s and its alliance with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. Japan effectively and then formally occupied Vietnam during the Second World War. Then from the 1950s, France saw itself, in some ways, as a counterbalance to *les Anglo-Saxons* (that peculiar French notion that hints at some imagined conspiracy of culture and politics among English-speaking peoples!) in the Pacific, and even in Asia and the Indian Ocean; as president, Charles de Gaulle, in particular, showed himself inimical to American ventures in Southeast Asia and amicable to a People's Republic of China still considered something of a pariah in the West.

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[22] *Le Monde,* October 24, 2019.

[23] See Robert Aldrich and John Connell, *France's Overseas Frontier: Départements et territoires d'outre-mer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), and John Connell and Robert Aldrich, *The Ends of Empire: The Last Colonies Revisited* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

French trade and aid, French language-teaching and cultural activities, military exercises and other initiatives sought to contain the United States and its *Anglo-Saxon* allies. Now—no surprise—it is China that seems the new hegemon with its huge commercial clout, repressive actions in Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Tibet, the Belt and Road initiative, commercial and political influence throughout Asia (as well as in Africa and South America), and the militarisation of contested small islands and reefs in the South China Sea. Yet China still also beckons as a market, provider of exports and source of and placement for investments. A famous statement attributed to Napoleon, 'Quand la Chine s'éveillera, le monde tremblera' ('When China awakens, the world will tremble'), seems increasingly pertinent.[24] The French have been avidly engaging in trade, aid, diplomatic moves and cultural missions to try both to maximise the opportunities China presents and to minimise the success of China in becoming the incontrovertible big power of the Indo-Pacific zone. With France's sovereign territories, this campaign can also be presented not just as a French, but as a European, undertaking, especially since France, after Brexit, remains the only member nation of the European Union with sovereign bases in both the Indian Ocean and the South Pacific.

Thus, in this most recent period in the history of France in the Indo-Pacific, there are great continuities with the long-term presence of France in the capacious region now designated by that hyphenated term: a globalising vision of French action in 'the East' and a turn to an 'East' that has long been fantasised about and proclaimed to be the coming centre of the world. There has been the linking of commercial, military, political and cultural objectives across national boundaries as had previously taken place across colonial boundaries, efforts to develop and optimise resources, and an emphasis on the sovereign territories that give France a platform and a justification for its actions in the Indian Ocean, the Pacific and the area of Asia that joins the two. There has been a continuing urge to challenge other old or new, established or emerging, hegemonic powers. In these initiatives, there is predictably something of the search to gain and maintain Gallic *grandeur* even if *la plus grande France* is not what it was in the colonial era.

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[24] The attribution to Napoleon may be apocryphal, but the phrase gained popularity with Alain Peyrefitte's *Quand la Chine s'éveillera* (Paris: Fayard, 1973), followed by *La Chine s'est éveillée* (Paris: Fayard, 1997).

But there is also the mission of inheriting and preserving a legacy—the legacy of the East Indies Company, of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century colonialism and of France's particular style of decolonisation that, among other particularities, has seen a dozen territories, including those located in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, remain integral parts of the French Republic. Heritage does indeed make France a presence, even a power, in the Indo-Pacific, though it cannot predict what France and others will make of that presence.

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