

ISFAR@ 35: Australia and France in a Regional and Global Context: Past Engagements and Future Research Directions

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When the ISFAR@35 Symposium, ‘Australia and France in a Regional and Global Context: Past Engagements and Future Research Directions’, was held in April 2021, the political, diplomatic and cultural relations between France and Australia were arguably the closest they had ever been in peacetime. The contract signed by Australia in 2016 to buy twelve French conventionally powered submarines had been followed by initiatives on both sides to build on this agreement to enhance collaboration in many fields and notably through policies that would enhance cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region—a geopolitical area of increasing focus in international relations and identified as a priority by both the Australian and French governments. The Australian policy to ‘Step Up’ in the Pacific region and to ‘pivot’ to the Indo-Pacific was mirrored by the declarations of Emmanuel Macron naming the Indo-Pacific region as ‘at the heart of France’s vision of a stable, law-based, multipolar order’ with Australia an essential strategic partner in this goal.¹

Writing an overview of the evolution of French Australian relations in 2015, Emeritus Professor Colin Nettelbeck, one of the founders of ISFAR and long-time president, pointed to the 2012 Joint Declaration between France and Australia, concluding on an optimistic note:

¹ President Macron set out the French strategy in the Indo-Pacific in his speech at Garden Island naval base in Sydney on May 2, 2018, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/asia-and-oceania/the-indo-pacific-region-a-priority-for-france/#sommaire_2.

The spirit of shared commitment to high ideals represented in the 2012 Declaration would seem to be a good chronological end point of the narrative. If both sides hold up their part of the bargain, it will make for a splendid conclusion to a dramatic story, and one that, while giving due place to the shadows that have sometimes darkened the relationship between Australia and France, opens optimistically onto the future.²

This qualified optimism seemed well placed as further initiatives aimed at strengthening and deepening this relationship followed the submarine agreement. The 2017 ‘Joint Statement of Enhanced Strategic Partnership between France and Australia’ listed amongst its priority areas, ‘Cooperation in the Indian and Pacific Oceans’, not only in defence and security matters but in ‘Education, Science, Technology and Culture’.³ In 2019 New Caledonia opened a delegation in Australia that, in collaboration with DFAT’s Pacific Branch, was to focus on the drafting of a Joint Cooperation Plan between New Caledonia and Australia to enhance institutional relations in the areas of culture and science, and to develop trade opportunities and educational exchanges. In 2020, the Australian Senate held an inquiry titled ‘Opportunities for strengthening Australia’s relations with the Republic of France’, to which ISFAR and other associations and individuals made submissions. Its report made wide-ranging recommendations for the pursuit of cooperation on many levels that included measures to increase the opportunities for the exchange of students and researchers, a policy for which ISFAR had argued.⁴

This series of agreements between the two countries indicated a significant rapprochement and one that Paul Soyeux sought to explain in his recent study *Australia and France’s Mutual Empowerment*, a comprehensive and magisterial analysis of the stages by which the two countries had

² Colin Nettelbeck, ‘French-Australian Relations: Towards an Historical Perspective’, *French Australian Review* 57 (Australian Summer 2014–15): 3–25, 20.

³ With customary diplomatic tact, the statement opened by citing the ‘170 years of unbroken friendship between Australia and France’ that dated from the founding of the first French consulate in 1842. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/france-joint-statement-of-strategic-partnership-aus-france.pdf>, accessed March 22, 2022.

⁴ ‘Opportunities for strengthening Australia’s relations with the Republic of France’, https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/France, accessed March 22, 2022.

come to define their common interests and form a strategic partnership, ‘owing to thirty years of diplomatic efforts to overcome ongoing culturally and historically constructed misunderstandings and conflicts’.⁵ Using the metaphor employed by Malcolm Turnbull, who had negotiated the submarine deal, Soyez declared that the ‘marriage took place in 2016’.⁶ But unfortunately for the thrust of Soyez’s argument, though not for the value of his wide-ranging analysis of the factors that had underpinned the rapprochement, one of the partners was secretly contemplating a divorce.

In September 2021 came the stunning announcement of the decision by the Australian government to renege on the agreement to purchase the submarines from France and, instead, to enter into an as yet ill-defined purchase of nuclear submarines from the United States or the United Kingdom. The intended purchase was only one aspect of a far-reaching AUKUS pact between the US, the UK and Australia that reset the direction of Australian security and military policy back towards closer alignment with America, confounding French expectations of closer cooperation with Australia in the Pacific region. Moreover, the decision had come, the French claimed, it seems with reason, as a total surprise to them, with no prior warning to suggest that the purchase agreement was in doubt or that technical challenges could not be resolved. The Australian government’s actions were described by Malcolm Turnbull, and by many commentators, as a ‘diplomatic debacle’ that seriously undermined trust and jeopardised for the immediate future the prospects for enhanced collaboration.⁷

This latest episode should not, however, be seen as an entirely unprecedented worsening of relations between France and Australia. On the contrary, only twenty-five years or so ago we witnessed another period of heightened tension, the culmination of opposition to thirty years of French nuclear testing on Moruroa and Fangataufa in French Polynesia.

⁵ Paul Soyez, *Australia and France’s Mutual Empowerment: Middle Powers’ Strategies for Pacific and Global Challenges* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, Studies in Diplomacy and International Relations, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-13449-5>.

⁶ Soyez, *Mutual Empowerment*, 1.

⁷ ‘Malcolm Turnbull slams the “diplomatic debacle” with French submarine deal’, ABC 7.30 report, February 3, 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/7.30/malcolm-turnbull-slams-the-‘diplomatic-debacle’/13740378>, accessed April 5, 2022.

When newly elected French president Jacques Chirac announced in June 1995 the recommencement of the tests after a three-year moratorium, society-wide protests, including an arson attack on the French consulate in Perth and widespread boycotts targeting French firms and restaurants, forced the Australian government to take a range of measures that included recalling the Australian Ambassador to France and freezing defence collaboration. Ivan Barko and Colin Nettelbeck have written that ‘Arguably the ... thirty years, until the cessation of the nuclear tests in 1996, were the most traumatic period in the history of French-Australian relations’.⁸

Just as the tensions provoked by nuclear testing were followed by the quite rapid improvement in relations noted by Colin Nettelbeck, so we can expect that shared interests, views and history will soon bring France and Australia back into positive dialogue and cooperation, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. Visiting Australia for the first time in two years because of the Covid-19 epidemic, Anne Genetet, the parliamentary representative for overseas French nationals in the eleventh circonscription, that includes Australia, gave an interview in late March to *Le Courrier australien*. In it she expressed her confidence in the importance Australians attach to the relationship:

Une parlementaire libérale australienne me disait combien ils comptent sur nous pour être présents dans la région. Il y a eu cette rupture de contrat mais en même temps ils reconnaissent qu’ils ont besoin que la France, avec d’autres, soit présente dans l’Indo-Pacifique.

(A Liberal Australian Member of Parliament told me how much they are counting on us to be present in the region. There has been this contract cancellation but at the same time they acknowledge that they need France, along with other countries, to be present in the Indo-Pacific.)⁹

⁸ Ivan Barko and Colin Nettelbeck, ‘Afterword’, *French Lives in Australia*, ed. Ivan Barko and Eric Berti (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2015), 433–439, 434.

⁹ François Vantomme, ‘Entretien avec Anne Genetet: la relation franco-australienne, le conflit en Ukraine, les élections présidentielles’, *Le Courrier australien*, April 4, 2022. https://www.lecourrieraustralien.com/entretien-avec-anne-genetet-la-relation-franco-australienne-le-conflit-en-ukraine-les-elections-presidentielles/?goal=0_db5d1942a5-9ce2420c65-99490249&mc_cid=9ce2420c65&mc_eid=ceffce38e9.

Since Genetet's visit the election of a Labor government has been greeted positively by the French President. After a twenty-minute phone conversation, Macron and Albanese agreed to 'rebâtir une relation bilatérale fondée sur la confiance et le respect mutuel pour surmonter ensemble les enjeux globaux'.¹⁰

What is strikingly revealed by these recent episodes and indeed in looking back over the last two centuries of relations between the two countries, is both their volatility and their intensity. The significance of this relationship for both countries, on so many levels of national life and international relations, results in turn in the richness, depth and complexity of the field that is the study of French Australian relations and that ISFAR has for thirty-seven years played a central role in recording and analysing. The unique and valuable contribution of the Institute and its journal *The French Australian Review* (formerly *Explorations*), now at issue 72, lies in its comprehensive coverage of over two hundred years of shared history, along the many planes of activity—cultural, political, literary, diplomatic, military and scientific—that have characterised it and to which the past issues of the journal, available online, bear witness.¹¹

Moreover, the editors and contributors to *The French Australian Review* (*FAR*) can pride themselves on having in effect pre-empted the turn to transnational and transimperial history that broadly dates from the early 2000s. A recent discussion of the transnational approach summarised it as:

... focused on the circulation of notions, images, things, living beings, capital, and practices across various cultures and societies around the globe and the creation/disruption of relations and spaces that shape the perception and reality of individuals.¹²

¹⁰ 'Entretien téléphonique avec le Premier ministre d'Australie, Anthony Albanese', May 26, 2022,

Translation: Macron and Albanese agreed to rebuild a bilateral relationship founded on confidence and mutual respect in order to overcome global challenges together. <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2022/05/26/entretien-telephonique-avec-le-premier-ministre-daustralie-anthony-albanese> .

¹¹ <https://www.isfar.org.au/journal/> .

¹² 'The Yearbook of Transnational History', November 2016, <https://networks.h-net.org/node/35008/discussions/130965/cfp-yearbook-transnational-history-november-2016> .

The mission of ISFAR from its very inception has been to work at a transnational level, focusing, in the case of France and Australia, on the profound and reciprocal impact that such movements across national boundaries have had on each nation, and on the individuals who traversed and shaped such boundaries, across the many fields of their interaction—social, cultural, scientific and political. For example, Barbara Santich’s article in this issue explores the links between the French and Australian vini- and viticulture industries: if this influence was rather uni-directional in the early years, as the exchanges of people, goods and knowledge gathered pace, both countries profited from the sharing of expertise and techniques, a mutual benefit that continues to the present day.¹³

The focus of *FAR*, moreover, has never been solely on the inter-relationships between the two nations, but has recognised the significance of the broader regional and international relations within which these necessarily played out and which, until at least the mid-twentieth century, must be considered in the light of the coexistence and rivalry of the French and British empires. Hence the relevance for the field of French Australian studies of the transimperial turn of recent years.

Transimperial history is about the movements of people, knowledge and goods across empires and about the formation of imperial alliances as well as anti-imperial networks and exchanges. Thus, transimperial history can be applied to both the macro and the micro level, to state or individual actors, from top down and bottom up.¹⁴

Several articles in this issue of *FAR* have a transimperial focus: Elizabeth Rechniewski’s article recounts the remarkable story of Beatrice Grimshaw whose fiction, travel writing and political advocacy were deeply enmeshed in the ideology and reality of Australian imperial outreach and Franco-British imperial rivalry. Grimshaw’s negative portrayal of the neighbouring Pacific islands under French colonisation, New Caledonia and the New

¹³ The French Australian Wine Project (FAW), ISFAR, <https://www.isfar.org.au/france-australia-wine/>.

¹⁴ Daniel Hedinger and Nadin Heé, ‘Transimperial History: Connectivity, Cooperation and Competition’, *Journal of Modern European History*, Forum, November 2018, 429–452, 439, <https://doi.org/10.17104/1611-8944-2018-4-429>.

Hebrides, reflected and contributed to the general distrust with which Australia viewed France's pretensions in the region and justified imperial expansion at a critical time in nation formation and in the context of the White Australia racial policy.

Extending the field

The recent World War One centenary led to a renewed focus on and re-examination of the relations between France and Australia during wartime—on both the military and civilian fronts—for which issues of the *French Australian Review* (FAR 56, 59, 68, 69) provided an extended platform. Nicole Townsend's article in this issue continues that focus with her exploration of the complexity of those relations during the Allied invasion of Lebanon and Syria in 1941, when Australian soldiers found themselves fighting alongside Free French troops against the Vichy French. At the same time, at the diplomatic level, the Australian government continued to maintain relations with both Free and Vichy France until well into 1942.

Another area in which the *Review* has fostered research is that of comparative sociolinguistics. Chantal Crozet, citing the polarised debates in France over how far the French language should change to become more inclusive of the feminine as well as essaying new neutral gender forms, explores those debates from both a linguistic and a feminist perspective. Highlighting and questioning the complexity involved in the feminisation and neutralisation of the French language compared with English, Crozet asks whether the recent language wars in France are a marker of the unique relationship the French entertain with their language, long the repository of national pride and identity and therefore the object of particular and close scrutiny and attention.

This sociolinguistic focus continues with Kerry Mullan's article in this issue which seeks to explain the causes of the AUKUS 'misunderstanding', suggesting they result in part from the clash of underlying cultural values and assumptions reflected in the (mis)communication between Scott Morrison and Emmanuel Macron. This analysis is important for its implication that future dialogue between French and Australian representatives may meet with similar miscomprehension unless the different starting points and modes of expression are recognised.

The relationship between France and Australia, as our introduction laid out, has known many periods of high tension but is fundamentally too important to both countries for them to remain long in conflict. That is more than ever true as Australian and French governments, like others in the region and beyond, have to reckon with an increased Chinese presence in the Pacific and perhaps contemplate the lessons contained in the willingness of many island nations to increase their economic, military and diplomatic ties with China. Since Australia's geographical position affords ISFAR a close window onto its Pacific neighbourhood, ISFAR and *FAR* are uniquely placed to play a crucial role in providing the historical and contemporary perspectives from which to evaluate and document French Australian relations in this region. The unfinished business of New Caledonia's referenda on independence is another 'local' issue that has deservedly received and will continue to receive ISFAR's attention, as illustrated in the recent articles on New Caledonia in the journal (*FAR* 64, 65) and papers on the topic of New Caledonia and Australia given at the Symposium.

The next 35 years?

All these developments—the extension of the field of study, the new approaches adopted, the many projects and publications—illustrate the flourishing state of French Australian Studies today, that the work of ISFAR and its journal reflects and fosters. Under a series of outstanding editors, including notably the current team of Elaine Lewis and Jane Gilmour, the journal has been transformed from the modest review *Explorations*, founded in 1985, to the biannual peer-reviewed journal of today, uniquely placed to account for the manifold and varied facets of the close but at times fraught relationship between France and Australia. One of the major aims of ISFAR is to continue building the journal's profile, so that it gains the wider recognition it deserves for its original and topical contribution to this important field of research and international relations.

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