Silenced Voices in the Indo-Pacific: Reflections on Australia, France and Regionalism in the Age of AUKUS

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Introduction

As she stood before the UN General Assembly in September 2022, Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong proclaimed that ‘as Foreign Minister, I am determined to see First Nations perspectives at the heart of Australian foreign policy’.  

In the year after that speech, Wong travelled to every Pacific island country and territory, seeking to rebuild regional relations badly damaged by Australia’s laggard policies on climate change under the previous Coalition government. Wong’s itinerary included visits to the French Pacific collectivities, opening a new consulate in Papeete in October 2022 and becoming the first Australian Foreign Minister to address the Congress of New Caledonia in April 2023.

Wong’s commitment to a First Nations foreign policy has resonated in New Caledonia, Bougainville and West Papua, given that the central
principle of First Nations advocacy—and international human rights law—is the right to self-determination. Despite this, the Australian government is reluctant to publicly advocate for decolonisation and the sovereignty of colonised peoples in the region. For a government seeking to balance global geopolitics and regional partnerships, it’s a complex dance. Pacific neighbours are charting their own pathways, attempting to avoid a choice between China and the United States, while focusing international attention on the main security threat to the region, the climate emergency.2

Australia’s First Nations policy has also been undercut by the result of an October 2023 referendum on a proposed change to the Australian constitution. A majority of voters rejected a proposal to establish a Voice to Parliament—an advisory body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islands representatives to advise government on policy affecting their communities—a result that shocked many Pacific church, community and political leaders.

This essay, based on a presentation to the April 2023 ISFAR symposium, flags some of the contradictions for Australia and France, as they seek to rebuild their strategic partnership, at the same time as extending their engagement with Pacific island states. It is beyond the scope of the essay to detail the complex domestic politics of the three French collectivities, and this essay will focus on their role on the regional and international stage.

Rebuilding ties with Paris

Even before their electoral victory in May 2022, key members of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) were seeking to rebuild Australia’s battered strategic partnership with the French state, disrupted by the announcement of the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) partnership the previous September. In April 2022, ALP deputy leader Richard Marles praised Emmanuel Macron’s re-election as French President, noting, ‘France is our neighbour. France is a Pacific country. And as such, France deeply matters to Australia’.3

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2 The Boe Declaration, adopted by the Pacific Islands Forum at its 2018 summit in Nauru, says that climate change is ‘the greatest single threat to the livelihoods, well-being and security of Pacific peoples’.

After its electoral victory, the new ALP government reached out to its francophone neighbours, as part of a broader engagement across the Pacific islands’ region. As Senator Wong prepared to travel to Noumea in April 2023, the President of New Caledonia Louis Mapou told the author that he was eager to welcome the Australian minister, to strengthen ties with a close partner around trade, investment and people-to-people engagement. He also diplomatically highlighted some policy differences, concerning Australia’s commitment to purchase nuclear submarines, in closer alignment with United States under the AUKUS partnership:

The independence movement of New Caledonia—of which I’m a member—is in favour of non-alignment. We regularly attend the summits of the Non-Aligned Movement. From the earliest days, we have supported a nuclear free Pacific—that’s even set out in the preamble of the draft Constitution of Kanaky that we submitted to the United Nations in 1986. When Australia decides to align itself with the United States in the framework of AUKUS to acquire nuclear submarines, it raises the question: if it starts here, where will it end? How does this impact the Treaty of Rarotonga and the Boe Declaration on security?\(^4\)

Perspectives like this highlight the challenge for the Australian government in balancing the competing agendas of Washington, Paris and London on defence procurement and regional diplomatic ties. Since it came to office in mid-2022, the Australian government has held a series of meetings with French President Emmanuel Macron and key ministers to rebuild relations disrupted by AUKUS.\(^5\)

But can Australia rebuild a strategic partnership with France at the same time as independence activists in its closest neighbours are seeking a new political status? Australia’s Minister for International Development and the Pacific Pat Conroy believes it’s possible, stating:


We’re focussed on rebuilding our relationship not just with France, but with all of the Pacific. We want to improve relations with all Pacific countries and territories as well as with the Government of France and we’re confident that we can do both of those.\textsuperscript{6}

One problem is that in both Australia and France, the perspectives and concerns of leading islanders are often disregarded in academic, think tank and media commentary about Indo-Pacific geopolitics. This is particularly true for people from francophone island communities, whose voices are often missing from the public debate about regional development and security.

The invisibility of Kanak, Mā‘ohi and Wallisian perspectives is striking—and many islanders believe their voices are being silenced, rather than simply ignored. This essay is a small contribution to bringing these voices to the fore, at a time when both Australia and France are grappling with their relationship with Indigenous peoples in a complex regional environment.

**Independence movements surge**

The debate over France’s role in the region has been transformed by recent elections in New Caledonia and French Polynesia, which have seen the unprecedented advance of independence politicians into key posts.

Despite the results of three referendums on self-determination in New Caledonia between 2018–2021 (which saw a majority of voters support ongoing ties within France), the independence movement Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS) continues to campaign for a transition to an independent and sovereign nation. In French Polynesia, a new generation of politicians has come to the fore, after decades of administration by pro-French autonomist leaders like Gaston Flosse and Édouard Fritch. They too seek to transform French Polynesia’s 2004 autonomy statute into a pathway to sovereignty.

In July 2021, President Louis Mapou became the first pro-independence Kanak politician to lead the Government of New Caledonia in forty years.\textsuperscript{7}


Members of the FLNKS and the Wallisian party L’Éveil océanien (EO) have maintained a majority in the eleven-member government since then—a major change, given all previous governments since 1999 have been led by opponents of independence. Within New Caledonia’s fifty-four-member Congress, there is currently an ‘islander majority’ (the so-called ‘majorité océanienne’), which has seen long-time independence politician Roch Wamytan re-elected as Congress President in four successive years.

In September 2023, an unprecedented electoral victory saw FLNKS candidate Robert Xowie win a seat in the French Senate in Paris, a first for the independence movement. His second-round defeat of conservative politician Sonia Backès was a major blow to the Loyalist cause. Backès had been publicly endorsed by France’s Overseas Minister Gérald Darmanin, and held multiple posts at the time of her Senate bid, serving as leader of the Les Loyalistes coalition, President of New Caledonia’s Southern Province and Secretary of State for Citizenship in the French government led by Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne. Her defeat as a minister and representative of President Macron’s Renaissance party led to her resignation from the Paris job.

In French Polynesia too, the independence movement Tāvini huiraʻatira nō te ao māʻohi has surged into leadership positions, with long-time leader Oscar Manutahi Temaru now supported by a younger generation.

Māʻohi politician Moetai Brotherson won a seat in the French National Assembly in 2017, the first time the independence movement represented French Polynesia in the national legislature. Then, in June 2022 elections for French Polynesia’s three seats in the National Assembly, Tāvini huiraʻatira made a stunning advance, winning all three seats allocated to French Polynesia. In a symbol of the new generation mobilising in Tahiti, fifty-three-year-old Brotherson was joined in Paris by two younger colleagues Steve Chailloux, aged thirty-six, and Tematai Le Gayic, a twenty-one-

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year-old who is the youngest deputy ever elected to the French legislature (a sharp contrast to ninety-one-year-old Gaston Flosse, and seventy-one-year-old Édouard Fritch).

In March 2023, Brotherson announced his candidacy for the Presidency of French Polynesia, seeking to replace long-serving autonomist politician Édouard Fritch of the Tapura huira‘atira party. The following month, Tavini swept the Fritch government from power in elections for the Assembly of French Polynesia. The outgoing government was sanctioned by many voters angered by its poor management of the COVID-19 pandemic. Others reacted against economic policies that hit working people and farmers, while Tapura was also riven by divisions within its own ranks.

Now, for the first time, both French territories in the Pacific Islands Forum are represented by supporters of independence, which will impact on France’s role in the region.

**Regional diplomacy**

In 2016, both New Caledonia and French Polynesia were made full members of the Forum, the main intergovernmental political organisation for the region (the third French Pacific dependency, Wallis and Futuna, is an observer). The unprecedented membership of the two territories in an organisation of independent and sovereign nations was a diplomatic revolution.

Not long after this decision, the author interviewed then French High Commissioner to New Caledonia, Thierry Lataste, in Noumea. The interview ranged across France’s regional relationships, especially whether the new Forum membership would create opportunities for Paris in the region or prioritise Pacific agendas. (As two analysts later suggested, the French territories could either serve as a ‘Trojan horse or paddles for the Pacific canoe’).

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Lataste envisaged potential synergies between French foreign policy and the presence of then Presidents Philippe Germain of New Caledonia and Édouard Fritch of French Polynesia at the high table of the regional organisation:

On matters such as regional security, one could imagine a local President could be given the mandate as France’s spokesperson … that wouldn’t curb his right to speak, but it’s a way he could carry the views of the French State. The local President could sign agreements on behalf of France, could speak on behalf of France etc. If he were to take positions contrary to the national policies of France, that could become complicated! But I think the politicians here—above all the loyalists, by definition—are not desirous of creating conflict or disorder in the region.\(^{13}\) Fast forward six years. The governments of both New Caledonia and French Polynesia are now led by pro-independence politicians who are seeking to expand diplomatic and trade links with Australia, New Zealand and neighbouring Forum Island countries, instead of privileging ties with Paris.\(^{14}\)

Both Pacific governments have sought to closely align themselves with island perspectives on climate action, the oceans, fisheries and community development, expressed by the Pacific Island Forum ‘2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent’, adopted in July 2022.\(^{15}\) On the international stage, both leaders have also taken initiatives that France publicly supports, but privately attempts to constrain, echoing Lataste’s early concerns over possible ‘positions contrary to the national policies of France’.

Indeed, both leaders have been willing to push the boundaries of the constitutional provisions that leave control of defence and most foreign policy to the French State. One striking example was the decision of the

\(^{13}\) Interview with High Commissioner Thierry Lataste, French High Commission to New Caledonia, Noumea, April 2017. For context, see Nic Maclellan, ‘France and the Blue Pacific’, *Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies* 5, no. 3 (September 2018), 426–441.


\(^{15}\) The ‘Blue Pacific’ framing was first proposed at the 2017 Forum leaders meeting in Apia, but elaborated in the formal ‘2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent’, adopted at the 2022 Pacific Islands Forum in Suva, Fiji.
Assembly of French Polynesia to unanimously pass a resolution in support of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) on September 28, 2023. This humanitarian disarmament treaty is one that France, like other nuclear weapon states, first sought to ignore, then actively oppose. ICAN France notes that ‘while French Polynesia cannot currently access the assistance and rehabilitation outlined in Articles 6 and 7 of the TPNW due to France’s non-ratification, it sends a resounding message in favour of the treaty to Paris’.16

The pro-independence leaders have both been happy to broaden their diplomatic and political ties at international summits as Forum member countries, despite their status as heads of non-self-governing territories. In September 2022, US President Joe Biden welcomed Presidents Mapou and Fritch to the inaugural US-Pacific Islands Countries summit in the White House.17 As the flags of Kanaky and Polynesia flew outside the White House, French diplomats attempted to dissuade the two Pacific leaders from signing the joint US-Pacific communiqué, but were overridden after stern phone calls to the French Foreign Minister.

Both countries had previously joined the ninth Pacific Area Leaders Meeting (PALM) summit in Japan in 2021. President Mapou and newly elected President Broscherson of French Polynesia were also invited to attend the inaugural Korea-Pacific Islands leaders’ summit on May 29 to May 30, 2023, hosted by President Yoon Suk Yeol in Seoul. Both attended the second US-Pacific Islands Forum White House summit in September 2023, and were photographed hobnobbing with US President Biden and Secretary of State Anthony Blinken.

Key Asian powers see the importance of the French Pacific collectivities for trade, security and investment partnerships. As countries look for mineral resources to use in electric vehicle batteries, South Korea’s President has eagerly engaged with President Mapou to encourage further New Caledonian nickel sales to Korean corporation POSCO. (China, followed by Korea, Japan and Taiwan are the largest markets for Melanesian nickel). China looks to the francophone Pacific for natural resources, fisheries and

16 ICAN France, ‘French Polynesia wants France to join the TPNW’, International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, media release, September 29, 2023
tourism opportunities, despite growing Western attempts at containment of Chinese influence in the islands region.\footnote{18}{For case studies of Chinese engagement with the French colonies, see Nic Maclellan: ‘Stable, Democratic and Western: China and French Colonialism in the Pacific’, \textit{The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Island}, edited by Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith (Canberra: ANU Press, 2021).}

In contrast, New Delhi has spurned similar opportunities to engage with the French territories. For example, the Modi government refused an invitation for Presidents Mapou and Brotheron to participate in the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC), held in Papua New Guinea in May 2023. With the diplomatic and financial shock of AUKUS, the battering of Australia-France relations has benefitted India-France ties, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi is more focussed on Paris than Papeete.\footnote{19}{‘India snubs French territories for regional summit’, \textit{Islands Business}, May 17, 2023, \url{https://islandsbusiness.com/news-break/india-snubs-french-territories-for-regional-summit/} .}

The rise to power of pro-independence politicians in New Caledonia and French Polynesia (though not yet Wallis and Futuna) highlights the concern identified by former High Commissioner Lataste: by taking positions contrary to the national policies of France, things are starting to get complicated.

\section*{Challenging the Indo-Pacific strategy}

In May 2018, while visiting Australia and New Caledonia, President Macron announced an ‘India-Australia-France axis’ in the Indo-Pacific region. The A$90 billion Naval Group contract to build submarines for the Australian Defence Force was the centrepiece of this strategic partnership. Over the next few years, India, Australia and France held a series of meetings of officials and ministers to co-ordinate regional policies for the Indo-Pacific. President Macron then launched a formal *Indo-Pacific Strategy* in July 2021, noting that ‘as a fully-fledged Indo-Pacific country, France also wants to be a stabilising force, promoting the values of freedom and rule of law’.

On September 16, 2021, however, the Australia-France submarine contract was scuttled when US President Joe Biden, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced the AUKUS partnership (on the very day the European Union was launching its *EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*).

Post-AUKUS, Paris issued a new version of the *Indo-Pacific Strategy* in February 2022, pointedly demoting Australia from the status of ‘strategic partner’ in the region, while maintaining India and Japan at that rank. The updated strategy noted that:

> Australia’s decision in September 2021, without prior consultation or warning, to break off the partnership of trust with France that included the Future Submarine Program (FSP), has led to a re-evaluation of the past strategic partnership between the two countries.

Today, the Macron administration has a number of objectives in the Asia-Pacific region, now re-branded as the Indo-Pacific. Beyond the rhetoric around ‘stability’, ‘the rule of law’, ‘climate action’ and ‘fair and efficient multilateralism’, there are a range of under-lying geopolitical drivers.

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Firstly, President Macron seeks to reaffirm France’s status as a ‘puissance mondiale moyenne’, a mid-size global power.\textsuperscript{24} Seeking to maintain the glory days of empire, Macron is enamoured of the trappings of ‘la gloire’, following the path of all Fifth Republic presidents. His strategic agenda draws on France’s status as a nuclear weapons state, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and a nation with colonial possessions in every ocean of the world.

Secondly, the renewed focus on the region identifies the Pacific islands as a crucial arena for French military and corporate interests in the oceans in the twenty-first century.\textsuperscript{25} France’s far-flung colonial empire gains it significant advantages under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. In Europe, it has only a small exclusive economic zone (EEZ), but its overseas dependencies add eleven million square kilometres of EEZ worldwide (more than seven million in the Pacific alone). As a 2014 French Senate report noted, ‘Present in both hemispheres and at all points of the compass, the French EEZ is the only one on which the sun never sets’.\textsuperscript{26}

Thirdly, the strategy sees the Pacific as a laboratory for French techno-fantasies. Just as French Polynesia served as a laboratory for nuclear testing in the twentieth century, its vast EEZ serves as an arena for French research and resource development in the twenty-first. In a 2014 parliamentary debate, then Overseas Minister George Pau-Langevin stressed:

France has been a world leader in the strategic domains of nuclear power, nuclear weapons, aeronautics and space technology, and telecommunications. It must be, and the government shares and promotes this ambition, a leader around oceans policy … on renewable offshore energy, offshore exploration for hydrocarbons, deep water seabed mineral resources, blue biotechnologies and more.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{24} The concept has been elaborated since the 1980s in works such as Institut de Paris, \textit{Le Pacifique : Nouveau centre du monde} (Paris: Berger Levrault, 1983). For discussion, see Jean Chesneaux and Nic Maclellan, \textit{La France dans le Pacifique : de Bougainville à Moruroa} (Paris : Editions La Découverte, 1992).

\textsuperscript{25} Nic Maclellan, ‘France and the Blue Pacific’, 428–432.


\textsuperscript{27} George Pau-Langevin, Speech to French Senate Debate on ‘les Zones Économiques Exclusives Ultramarines’, Wednesday June 18, 2014.
In his ‘France 2030’ agenda, President Macron allocated more than €1 billion of research funding for the oceans. Many Islanders are worried, however, that the so-called ‘vast, empty spaces’ of the Pacific will suffer environmental devastation from deep sea mining, climate geo-engineering or the patenting of marine lifeforms, just as the Māʻohi people were left with the radioactive legacy of 193 French nuclear tests at Moruroa and Fangataufa atolls.

Finally, a central pillar of France’s Indo-Pacific strategy is gun-running, as President Macron has sought to expand arms sales to regional partners. The centrepiece of this work was the ill-fated Naval Group submarine contract, blown out of the water by former Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison and his AUKUS partners. But Paris has other customers, in Japan, Jakarta and especially New Delhi.

On July 14, 2023, President Macron invited Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Paris as the guest of honour at France’s National Day parade on Bastille Day. The state visit came as the countries discussed the proposed sale of more French Rafale military aircraft to the Indian armed forces.²⁸ In September 2016, India and France had signed a €7.87 billion agreement for thirty-six Rafale multi-role fighter jets (a deal still dogged by allegations of corruption by the French arms manufacturer Dassault).²⁹ Paris is also hoping that India will purchase another twenty-six Dassault Rafale-Maritime fighters to operate from India’s newly commissioned aircraft carrier INS Vikrant.

**Questioning the Indo-Pacific**

One common element in much Western academic and media commentary on the Indo-Pacific is the framing of regional affairs through the geopolitical interests of major powers, denying the agency and perspectives of people living in the region. This is especially true for Pacific Island nations.

Some island governments are wary of the new Indo-Pacific framework, seeing it as a Western perspective that downplays the region’s priorities

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²⁹ ‘Dassault Aviation used false invoices to bribe middleman for sale of Rafale jets’, *The Times of India*, November 8, 2021.
and concerns. In 2018, then Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi told the UN General Assembly:

The renewed vigor with which a ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy’ is being advocated and pursued leaves us with much uncertainty. For the Pacific, there is a real risk of privileging ‘Indo’ over the ‘Pacific’.

France’s new Indo-Pacific Strategy has been frankly critiqued by leaders of its Pacific dependencies. As President of New Caledonia Louis Mapou attended his first Pacific Islands Forum meeting in July 2022, he told the author:

We are at the crossroads between those who advance France’s strategic interests and our desire as New Caledonians—especially in a government headed by an independence leader—to seek greater integration in our region. There is no doubt that France needs New Caledonia and French Polynesia for its Indo-Pacific strategy, facing other major powers in the region. But this is not our project—we want to integrate with our neighbours in the Pacific region.

In a later interview, Mapou reiterated his concern about the place of New Caledonia in the regional strategy, echoing the concern outlined years before by Samoa’s Tuilaepa:

On the Indo-Pacific, I don’t know about ‘Indo’, I’m focussed on the Pacific. I’m preoccupied with our integration within the Pacific region, which has been delayed for far too long. The future of New Caledonia is here. How does this fit into France’s Indo-Pacific strategy? That’s the big question. Our current political arrangements don’t give us the flexibility and means to advance our agenda. On the contrary, I’ve been blocked on many aspects by the central government in Paris.

Other Kanak independence leaders are less diplomatic. Daniel Goa, President of the Union Calédonienne party and FLNKS spokesperson, says

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31 Interview with President Louis Mapou, Suva, July 2022. See ‘We want to engage with our neighbours’, Islands Business, July 2022.
32 Interview with President of New Caledonia Louis Mapou, Noumea, April 2023.
bluntly: ‘Kanaky-New Caledonia is not a French land as some people think, but a land of Oceania. We no longer want to be stooges of “France Pacific” and the nebulous Indo-Pacific axis’.  

Pierre-Chanel Tutugoro, Secretary General of the largest independence party Union Calédonienne, highlights the challenge posed to France’s global strategic interests from anti-colonial movements in the Pacific:

France can’t be considered as a stabilising force in the Pacific zone while its presence is contested in the territories that it has colonised, Kanaky-New Caledonia, Mā‘ohi Nui/French Polynesia and Uvea mo Futuna [Wallis and Futuna]. In terms of the Indo-Pacific strategy, we’re more interested in engagement with the peoples of the Pacific. We are not focussed on the dynamic of relations with India etc. Today, I’m not sure that France has the latitude to maintain the pretence that it’s a power for peace. Today, Macron’s Indo-Pacific axis is more about replacing what they lost in Africa, but the retreat of the French military is also the retreat of French multinational corporations.  

The President of New Caledonia’s Congress Roch Wamytan agrees:

We don’t want to be the point of the spear in Mr Macron’s Indo-Pacific strategy or in his geopolitical axis. We want to address the interests of New Caledonians. We’re the ones who live in the Pacific, not them. If anyone is going to be invaded by China, it’s us, not them! They shouldn’t impose their Indo-Pacific strategy on us.  

This imposition of France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy on island nations was openly acknowledged in a January 2023 report from the French Senate. The Senate critique of the strategy noted it was developed without input from France’s colonial dependencies, the ‘Départements, Régions et Collectivités d’Outre-mer’:

Elected officials from the DROM-COM were not consulted by the metropolitan executive power prior to the adoption of the strategy, or,

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33 Interview with Union Calédonienne President Daniel Goa, Noumea, March 12, 2022.
34 Interview with Pierre-Chanel Tutugoro, Secretary General, Union Calédonienne, Noumea, April 6, 2023.
35 Interview with the President of New Caledonia’s Congress Roch Wamytan, Noumea, April 18, 2023.
more recently, the deployment of military forces on their territories as part of the French Indo-Pacific strategy.\textsuperscript{36}

In August 2022, Mā‘ohi independence politician Moetai Brotherson proclaimed: ‘It’s one thing for France to have an Indo-Pacific strategy, but we are the Pacific … for the moment, this strategy was developed without us’.\textsuperscript{37}

After his election as President in April 2023, Brotherson told the author:

The Pacific region is our natural environment, and we have to put a stronger focus on those relationships. However we are still a French-occupied territory, so we have to be very careful about this Indo-Pacific Strategy. I’ve said to the French High Commissioner here that we understand the concerns of France about China’s strategy and its Silk Road initiatives. We understand that several big players are here in our region, the United States and others, but we don’t want to be pawns on someone else’s chessboard.\textsuperscript{38}

Other autonomist politicians in Tahiti, while supporting ongoing ties to France, have also been critical of the way the Indo-Pacific Strategy constrains their authority. In June 2022, the Assembly of French Polynesia established a parliamentary commission on the Indo-Pacific to analyse the implications of France’s strategy for local development and regional ties.\textsuperscript{39} As the French Senate issued its report on the Indo-Pacific in January 2023, the Assembly’s Indo-Pacific Commission travelled to Noumea for a meeting with Kanak and Wallisian politicians, to discuss the implications for Noumea, Papeete and Mata’utu.

\textsuperscript{36} French Senate (foreign affairs, defence and army), ‘La stratégie française pour l’Indopacifique : des ambitions à la réalité’, information report no. 285, January 25, 2023, 73. DROM-COM (Départements, Régions et Collectivités d’Outre-mer) is the twenty-first century acronym for the old DOM-TOM network of overseas departments and territories, rebadged as ‘overseas collectivities’ after 2003 reforms.

\textsuperscript{37} ‘Une mission de l’APF sur la stratégie française en Indopacifique’, Tahiti Infos (August 24, 2022). At the time, Brotherson was a deputy for French Polynesia in the French National Assembly—today he is President.


Noting that the other delegations ‘all confirmed to us that they had not been consulted’, the President of the Assembly’s Indo-Pacific Commission Philip Schyle said:

Many of the subjects discussed concern the economy, the environment, regional cooperation, scientific research, health. These come under the powers of French Polynesia [under its 2004 autonomy statute], but French Polynesia was not consulted in the development of this document. For example, when we talk about developing regional cooperation, these are things that we already do almost naturally, through the Pacific Islands Forum or conventions passed between our different assemblies.40

**Talking tough in the Indo-Pacific**

At a time of growing international attention on the region, President Macron has sought to present France as an ‘alternative’ in the islands region for countries facing strategic competition between the United States and People’s Republic of China.41

Visiting Vanuatu in July 2023, the French President noted that

there is in the Indo-Pacific, and particularly in Oceania, new imperialism appearing, and a power logic that is threatening the sovereignty of several states—the smallest, often the most fragile. Our Indo-Pacific strategy is above all to defend through partnerships the independence and sovereignty of all states in the region that are ready to work with us.42

But talking tough is not enough. Despite the claim that France provides a bulwark against the ‘new imperialism’ emanating from Beijing (and

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Washington?), the September 2021 AUKUS announcement was a striking dismissal of French pretensions to be a major military force in the Pacific.

To supplement the meagre ‘forces of sovereignty’ deployed at French military bases in New Caledonia and French Polynesia, the French government has begun to deploy new OPV patrol boats to Noumea and Papeete, to replace vessels built in the 1980s. The regular Mission Jeanne d’Arc sees the deployment of naval vessels from Toulon into the Pacific for operations near the South China Sea.

Under Mission Pégase since 2018, France has annually flown Rafale military jets around the world, landing in Papeete and conducting joint military exercises with other Western powers en route. Two of these military aircraft featured in a series of flyovers and photo opportunities during President Macron’s visit to Melanesia in July 2023. In Noumea, Macron pledged another 200 troops and eighteen billion Pacific francs for military investment in New Caledonia, and France will host the South Pacific Defence Ministers Meeting in Noumea in December 2023.

Despite extensive propaganda about these operations, many French defence analysts have questioned whether France really has significant military firepower to contribute to any regional confrontation, or defend its colonial dependencies. In January 2023, the French Senate issued a major report analysing the Indo-Pacific Strategy, expressing concern that ‘Our ambitions to be a balancing power are not in line with our real weight, which raises questions about the very credibility of the strategy’. The report says the capability to monitor the seven million square kilometre EEZ is very weak ‘due to the chronic lack of equipment for the sovereignty forces, the Armed Forces of New Caledonia (FANC) and the Armed Forces in French Polynesia (FAPF)’. 43

Recognising their different policy priorities, the French Senators acknowledged that ‘the President of the Government and the President of the Congress of New Caledonia explained to us that they did not expect much from France but rather from Australia and New Zealand, even questioning the deployment of planes as part of Operation Pegasus’. 44

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Céline Pajon of the Institut français des relations internationales (IFRI) argues that
the presence of Rafale fighter jets from the French Air and Space Force
escorting Macron’s presidential jet to Noumea, following a joint training
exercise with the US Air Force in Guam and Palau, demonstrated
Paris’ capacity to rapidly deploy high-end military assets to the region.
However, it is widely acknowledged that French forces stationed in the
Pacific lack sufficient capability for higher-spectrum missions, despite
their ongoing modernisation.45

Security researcher Stéphane Audrand agrees:

Projecting ten Rafale into the Indo-Pacific is a nice tour de force, but no,
it does not make us a ‘power that counts in the region’. By definition,
this kind of operation is just what it is: a raid, carried out by a micro
force. Such a raid takes a long time to organise, to plan, to achieve and
necessarily a long time to repeat. This is the reality of France in the Indo-
Pacific. …Typically, our capabilities in the region, excluding nuc [lear
weapons], are an intermittent use of the flag and symbolic forces, but
without the ability to deny access to our areas and insufficient control of
maritime spaces. This is the reality of France in the Indo-Pacific.46

From Tahiti, Raihaamana Tevahitua and Jean-Marc Regnault note the
importance of French forces for maritime surveillance and Humanitarian
and Disaster Response (as seen with the deployment of French forces after
cyclones in Vanuatu or the 2023 earthquake in Tonga). However, they
question the capacity of the military forces:

Certainly, Paris can ensure the protection of fisheries resources and
provide humanitarian assistance—including to neighbouring countries—
but episodic demonstrations of force (e.g. deployment of the Rafale
fighters, the mission of the Emeraude nuclear submarine) would not be
enough in the event of a threat of conflict.47

45 Céline Pajon, Institut français des relations internationales (IFRI) ‘Macron is not
giving up France’s role as a Pacific player’, Nikkei Asia, August 4, 2023, https://www.
46 Stéphane Audrand, Tweet on ‘Unpopular opinion’, @AudrandS, July 26, 2023,
https://twitter.com/AudrandS/status/1684091189199360000.
47 Raihaamana Tevahitua and Jean-Marc Regnault, ‘Les Outre-mers dans la
Conclusion

The September 2023 resolution of the Assembly of French Polynesia supporting the 2021 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) is a striking symbol of the new diplomatic initiatives of island governments—initiatives that directly clash with the interests and policies of the French State and the AUKUS partners.

Māʻohi support for TPNW is part of a broader regional trend: ten other Forum island countries have ratified or acceded to the treaty. In contrast, both the French and Australian governments have thus far refused to sign, let alone ratify, the Treaty. However at the August 2023 ALP National Conference in Brisbane, the party re-confirmed its support for signing the TPNW under three restrictive conditions, and agreed to send an observer to the next TPNW Meeting of State Parties in New York. Coming just days after the Assembly of French Polynesia resolution, a front-page story in The Australian newspaper cited an unnamed French diplomat criticising Australia over these tentative moves towards signing TPNW.48

This debate comes in the context where many islanders perceive that Australia is privileging increased integration with US nuclear warfighting strategies. This policy, along with ongoing military cooperation with France, seems more important than the aspirations and demands of communities still living with the health and environmental legacies of more than 315 US, British and French nuclear tests across the region.

In coming months and years, there are likely to be more tensions, as Australia prioritises relations with France and other Western powers, even as it seeks to remain the ‘partner of choice’ for neighbouring Pacific island states. Can it achieve both objectives at the same time? There’s an old political saying—‘if you can’t ride two horses at once, you shouldn’t be in the circus’. But that only works if the horses are heading in the same direction. If their paths diverge, you face a choice—to jump onto one or the other horse, or fall flat on your face.

As paths diverge around development, security and environmental sustainability, in a time of growing geopolitical contest, Australia has made its choice as a member of AUKUS. How will others respond, in a world wracked by the climate emergency?

Melbourne

About the author
Nic Maclellan is a correspondent for Islands Business magazine (Fiji) and a contributor to Pacnews, Inside Story and other regional media. He has published widely on French policy in the Pacific islands and is co-author of La France dans le Pacifique : de Bougainville à Moruroa (Éditions La Découverte, Paris) and After Moruroa: France in the South Pacific (Ocean Press, New York and Melbourne). He was awarded the 2015 Outstanding Contribution to the Sector Award by the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID), and the Walkley Foundation’s 2020 Sean Dorney Grant for Pacific Journalism. His book Grappling with the Bomb (ANU Press, Canberra, 2017)—a history of British nuclear testing in Kiribati—was shortlisted for the Educational Publishing Awards Australia (EPAA) Scholarly Non-fiction Book of the Year Award in 2019.