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**One Among Many:  
Changing Geostrategic Interests and Challenges  
for France in the South Pacific**

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## **One Among Many:**

### **Changing Geostrategic Interests and Challenges for France in the South Pacific** Abstract

France, which is both an external and resident South Pacific power by virtue of its possessions there, pursues, or simply inherits, multiple strategic benefits. But the strategic context has changed in recent years. China's increased presence; consequent changes in the engagement of the US, Japan and Taiwan; and the involvement of other players in the global search for resources, means that France is one of many more with influence and interests in a region considered by some as a backwater. These shifts in a way heighten the value of France's strategic returns, while impacting on France's capacity to exert influence and pursue its own objectives in the region. At the same time, France is dealing with demands for greater autonomy and even independence from its two most valuable overseas possessions on which its influence is based, New Caledonia and French Polynesia. How it responds to these demands will directly shape the nature of its future regional presence, which is a strategic asset.

## **Une puissance parmi d'autres :**

### **évolution des enjeux et défis géostratégiques de la France en Océanie** Résumé

Compte tenu des territoires qu'elle y possède encore, la France est en Océanie une puissance à la fois locale et extérieure. A ce titre, et quand elle ne se contente pas de bénéficier d'avantages hérités, elle poursuit des objectifs stratégiques multiples. Il se trouve cependant que la donne a changé ces dernières années : la présence croissante de la Chine entraîne une modification de l'engagement des Etats-Unis, du Japon et de Taïwan, tandis que de nouveaux acteurs interviennent dans la recherche des ressources à l'échelle planétaire. Finalement, la France est désormais une puissance parmi d'autres dans une région lointaine qui a longtemps été négligée. Ces évolutions influent de manière positive sur les bénéfices stratégiques qu'elle tire de sa présence en Océanie, mais réduisent sa capacité à exercer son influence et à poursuivre ses objectifs. Parallèlement, elle doit faire face à des revendications d'autonomie, voire d'indépendance, des deux principales collectivités que sont la Nouvelle-Calédonie et la Polynésie française, fondements de la légitimité de sa présence dans la région. La réponse que la France apportera à ces demandes aura une influence déterminante sur la nature de sa présence dans la région, qui est son atout stratégique majeur.

## One Among Many: Changing Geostrategic Interests and Challenges for France in the South Pacific

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France is the sole European power with a substantial sovereign presence in the South Pacific. France pursues and derives strategic benefits from its regional presence. This paper will examine those benefits, and consider the recently altered geostrategic environment<sup>1</sup> affecting its pursuit of those interests: principally the increasing engagement of China, entailing changes in other powers' engagement; the entry of numerous new and diverse external commercial partners; and resultant pressures on traditional collective regional approaches to economic and development cooperation. The paper will demonstrate that France is now one of many more players in the region, but one which has a unique advantage by virtue of its sovereignty through its Pacific possessions. It will refer to the relevance, to its continued presence and sovereignty, of delicate issues surrounding demands for greater autonomy and even independence in New Caledonia and French Polynesia.

This paper will focus on the "South Pacific", not the North Pacific nor the Asia-Pacific; specifically, that area generally covered by membership of the 14 member Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and the 22 member Secretariat for the Pacific Community (SPC), the two pre-eminent regional organisations stretching across the Pacific Ocean south of the Equator but also including the small island states and territories just north of the Equator (see Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> The

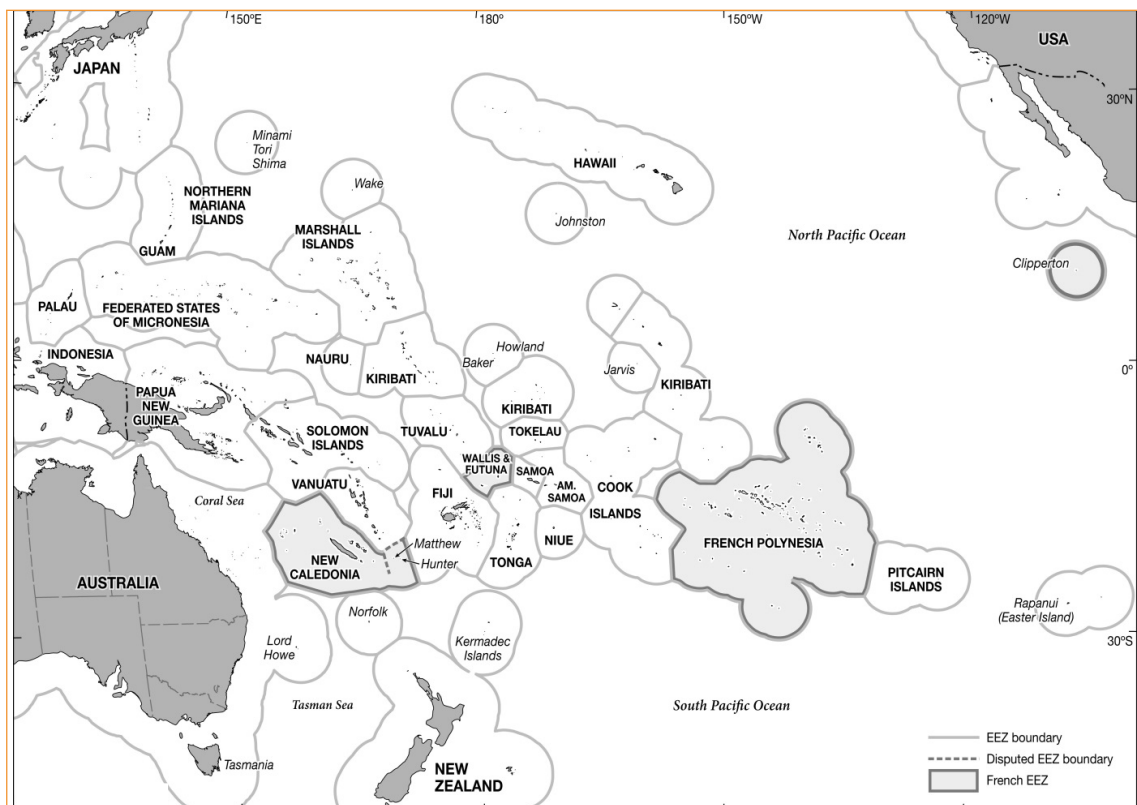
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<sup>1</sup> Definition of the term "geostrategic" has been much debated. I use Zbigniew Brzezinski's marriage of the strategic and geopolitical, "[T]he words geopolitical, strategic, and geostrategic are used to convey the following meanings: geopolitical reflects the combination of geographic and political factors determining the condition of a state or region, and emphasizing the impact of geography on politics; strategic refers to the comprehensive and planned application of measures to achieve a central goal or to vital assets of military significance; and geostrategic merges strategic consideration with geopolitical ones." (Brzezinski 1986: xiv, his emphasis).

<sup>2</sup> The distinction is important, especially when considering a European power present in a broader region where it has wider strategic interests (see comments by Lechervy 2015), and where there is some contention that the "South Pacific" even exists (see for example Mallatrait and Meszaros 2009: 70 and also comments of Rene

term "Pacific islands countries" (PICs) refers to those PIF and SPC island member countries. "The French presence" includes France's three inhabited possessions New Caledonia, French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna which fall within the PIF/SPC region, but also uninhabited Clipperton Island, which lies well beyond it to the east, just off the western coast of Mexico, north of the Equator. The paper also primarily focuses on French and external interests, not Australian or New Zealand interests, though it will touch on these. While Australia and New Zealand share common values and interests with France up to a point, they also face many of the same challenges.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 1**  
**France in the South Pacific**



**Source:** Cartographic and GIS services, Australian National University College of Asia and the Pacific.

Servoise, cited by them). While Pacific island leaders themselves changed the nomenclature of their principal regional bodies from "South Pacific Forum" to "Pacific Islands Forum" in 2000 and from "South Pacific Commission" to "Secretariat for the Pacific Community" in 1998, partly to reflect more accurately the inclusion of some island members north of the Equator, they certainly claim a Pacific island region distinct from broader terms such as "Asia-Pacific", and the term "South Pacific" continues to have wide currency within the region.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Waddell noted in 2008 that France shared with Australia, New Zealand, and the independent Melanesian states, "a convergence of strategic preoccupations, notably the concern to buttress 'failed' island states and the need to protect the region from what are perceived as destabilising forces originating in Asia" (Waddell 2008: 12). Australia's Parliamentary Secretary for Pacific Island Affairs, Duncan Kerr, acknowledged France's contribution in working with Australia on issues of mutual security, defence co-operation, control of illegal fishing, and other areas when he visited New Caledonia in November 2008. Further observation on the coincidence of France's strategic interests with Australia's own is in Anthony Bergin 2014 and Stewart Firth 1989: 87. New Zealand sees the relationship with France as a "key partnership" in the South Pacific with a shared stake in stability and prosperity (NZ MFAT 2015).

France's early interest in the South Pacific was based mainly on national prestige and rivalry with other powers, notably Great Britain; and scientific inquiry; broadening into protection of its nationals as missionaries and then settlers as they arrived.<sup>4</sup> France colonized New Caledonia in 1853 to establish a strategic base and as a centre of deportation for prisoners including, later, Communards.<sup>5</sup> By 1874 nickel was discovered there, and exploited by the French, although until well into the 1960s commercial factors were never key motivators for France's regional presence. New Caledonia and French Polynesia played strategic roles in World War II, with their early recognition of de Gaulle's leadership, and Noumea providing the headquarters for the US presence and allied victory in the western Pacific. French Polynesia overtook New Caledonia in strategic importance after World War II as the site of France's nuclear testing program, which was wound up after considerable regional opposition, in 1996.<sup>6</sup> Since then New Caledonia has assumed the greater strategic role, for the first time lending a commercial edge to France's interests in the South Pacific, with the massive expansion of nickel exploitation and evidence of hydrocarbons offshore. At the same time, France has led exploration off Clipperton Island for hydrocarbons and minerals. But French Polynesia retains strategic importance owing to its location at the centre of the Pacific Ocean, and the vast extent of its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), as will be shown.

Despite regional trends towards decolonization in the 1970s and 1980s, France alone of the former colonial powers has managed to retain a substantial sovereign presence south of the Equator, although Britain retains a presence in its around 50 nationals on tiny Pitcairn Island, and the US maintains its territories north of the Equator.

France's sovereignty has been and is contested, from within its territories: most violently and recently in New Caledonia in the 1980s civil war there, and with ongoing claims to independence from within French Polynesia; and from other countries: historic claims by Mexico to Clipperton, and by Vanuatu to the Mathew and Hunter Islands off New Caledonia (see disputed boundary, Figure 2). France put an end to violence in New Caledonia by negotiating the historic 1988 Matignon and then the 1998 Noumea Accords, by which the French State, pro-independence and pro-France parties agreed to defer long-promised self-determination referendums until around 2018. In French Polynesia, in 2013, over French opposition, pro-independence leaders along with the support of Pacific island countries achieved the re-inscription of French Polynesia as a non-self-governing territory with the UN Decolonisation Committee, in a consensus vote of the UN General Assembly boycotted by France.<sup>7</sup> The resolution of New Caledonia's status in the next few years will be watched by French Polynesia and other French overseas

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<sup>4</sup> See Dunmore 1997 on history of settlement. Aldrich (1996, Ch 4) considers the evolving question of France's protection of its nationals overseas, with De Deckker 2003: 2 and Fisher 2013: 239 note the importance of this responsibility for French officials.

<sup>5</sup> Aldrich 1990: 24.

<sup>6</sup> For background and contemporary French analysis see Mrgudovic 2008 and Mohamed-Gaillard 2010.

<sup>7</sup> The term "reinscription" is used because in 1947 France withdrew its overseas territories from the purview of the United Nations, claiming they were part of France and therefore not "non-self-governing." New Caledonia was reinscribed in 1986, over French opposition, after a long campaign by local leaders and regional Pacific island countries, with a large majority of UN support (89 in favour, 24 against, 34 abstentions). For contemporary French views of UN engagement on French Pacific territories, see Gonschor 2015, Chauchat 2013, and Regnault 2010.

collectivities and seen as a possible option for their own futures. As for Clipperton Island, France has negotiated at least a temporary *modus vivendum* with Mexico by trading fishing rights in return for acquiescence over its continued exercise of its rights there including by ship visits and deep-sea exploration.<sup>8</sup> Similarly France regularly asserts its claims to the Mathews and Hunter Islands by sending vessels there, notwithstanding Vanuatu's taking the matter to the United Nations.<sup>9</sup>

Why has France held on to its possessions in what many see as a Pacific backwater? Why is France still asserting possession in tiny islands like Clipperton, Mathews and Hunter? Why its recent strong reaction against French Polynesia's reinscription as a non-self-governing territory with the United Nations? Why does it also seek to strengthen its foothold in the South Pacific by strongly advocating the regional integration of its territories there?<sup>10</sup>

Some senior French officials discount strategic motivations, and say that France holds on to its presence in the South Pacific region by reflex, or by a sense of responsibility towards its citizens in those places.<sup>11</sup> And French writers have pointed to the difficulty of European countries identifying their interests there, and see the French possessions as assets, but ones that were simply a happy (for them) legacy of history.<sup>12</sup> But its presence costs. In financial terms, France spends around 4 billion USD a year to run its Pacific collectivities.<sup>13</sup> And the presence entails significant diplomatic, military and political investment.

## FRENCH GEOSTRATEGIC INTERESTS IN THE REGION

In the last few years, French leaders have acknowledged the strategic significance of the overseas territories (*Outre-mer*) generally to France, and of the South Pacific possessions specifically. Both President Hollande and his predecessor Nicolas Sarkozy have spoken about the maritime and energy resources of the *Outre-mer*, along with its people, as assets for France; and both have clearly indicated that they want the Pacific collectivities, as all the French *Outre-mer*, to remain French.<sup>14</sup> From 2011, six major government and institutional documents

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<sup>8</sup> Sénat 2014: 103.

<sup>9</sup> France re-stated its claim in a letter to the UN Division of Law of the Sea on 6 December 2010 after Vanuatu had lodged a statement of its own claims under the Maritimes Zones Act n°6.

<sup>10</sup> See Fisher 2015a, and for an extensive review of France's efforts to integrate its Pacific territories into their region, the special Number of the *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, which appeared in 2015 (JSO 2015); also presentations to a session on EU policy and the effect on regional integration of the French Pacific territories, at the annual conference of the European Society for Oceanists in Brussels in June 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Personal communications by senior officials in French Overseas Department 2001-9, Fisher 2013: 239.

<sup>12</sup> See for example Mallatrait and Meszaros 2009: 95, 151.

<sup>13</sup> 1.25 billion USD in New Caledonia (2010) and 1.19 billion USD in French Polynesia (2013), latest figures ISEE and IEOM 2015. It is worth noting that this annual cost of 4 billion USD is less than 0.11 per cent of France's GDP (2,391 billion USD in 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Hollande 2014, 2013; Sarkozy 2010, 2009. Sarkozy drew a "red line" at independence when speaking of



have focused on strategic maritime resources, and specifically on the importance of the South Pacific presence by virtue of its collectivities.<sup>15</sup> One Australian observer has suggested that this activity is part of a self-serving lobbying effort by elements of the French bureaucracy such as the Navy and *Outre-mer* agencies and contracted business organisations.<sup>16</sup> Indeed in 2009 two French researchers conducted an impressive review of the strategic relevance of France's Pacific possessions, concluding with an elaborately argued private enterprise project of funding a satellite surveillance system for the entire Pacific.<sup>17</sup>

But whether or not it has actively acknowledged its strategic goals as it has held on to its sovereignty over the years, France does derive strategic benefits from its resident South Pacific presence. Commanding critical geostrategic weight in the South Pacific underpins France's claims as a global leader, as the world's second most important maritime zone power, as a vested player in the wider Pacific economic hub, with over 25% of the world's nickel reserves, with expertise in space, science, mining and technology, all of which claims accrue to the EU as well through France, and which provide an important demonstration effect for the rest of France's overseas possessions.

## Global Presence Underpinning Global Leadership

France's string of overseas possessions around the globe, including in the Pacific, enables it to claim a presence in "*les trois océans*", a global presence which underpins its claim to special global leadership roles.<sup>18</sup> The days of referring to the "*grandeur*" and "*gloire*" of France vaunted in the postwar period by President De Gaulle and others are over. As China grows in economic power, French leaders no longer describe France even as a "*puissance moyenne mondiale*" as they did up to the 1980s.<sup>19</sup> But France remains one of only five permanent Security Council members in the United Nations, a composition established in the post-war founding years of the United Nations. France retains its status at a time when there are calls for a radical change

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increased autonomy for the French *Outre-mer* (Sarkozy 2010); President Hollande has stated "*l'Outre-mer est dans la République*", and "*Quand la République est présente; pourquoi s'en séparer?*" ("The *Outre-mer* is in the Republic" and "When the Republic is present, why separate from it?" (Hollande 2013).

<sup>15</sup> Affaires étrangères et européennes 2011, Défense 2013, Conseil économique, social et environnemental 2013, Sénat 2012, 2013, and 2014a.

<sup>16</sup> Maclellan 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Mallatrait and Meszaros 2009. Their work has been critically reviewed by Regnault (in 2013: 243-244 and 2011), but remains valuable as a recent brief review of strategic factors for France in its South Pacific presence.

<sup>18</sup> In the mid-1990s and early 2000s, France was seen as maintaining its overseas possessions to add to its strategic weight. Jean Chesneaux wrote (Chesneaux 1987: 5) that France is the only power, apart from the United States, capable of establishing military bases worldwide and a communications network that is firmly based on its sovereign possessions including Noumea and Papeete. See also Doumenge et al 2000: 205: "the French overseas collectivities give France a listening post in all the large regions of the world"; Firth in Howe et al 1994: 302: "France resisted, and continues to resist, the decolonisation of its Pacific territories, because their loss would undermine France's claim to be a world power and create a gap in the global string of French military installations"; Berman 2001: 24: "Continued presence in New Caledonia projects France's status as a global power."

<sup>19</sup> However, the Sénat revived the term in its 2012 report on marimitisation, Sénat 2012: 105.

to the Security Council, for it to be expanded and its composition altered to reflect current global strategic realities, for example, to include Germany and to reduce the number of other Western members to make way for others including India, Brasil, and Asian players such as Japan and emerging Asian economies. So the stakes for France are high to maintain its global bases, in retaining its influence as a permanent member of the UN.

France plays a prominent role in NATO and the EU partly based on its global presence. Its status as a significant western ally of the United States is enhanced by its global military and communications presence and capacity, by virtue of its string of overseas possessions giving it global reach, and specifically in the South Pacific region.

The presence in the South Pacific includes a significant military and communications capacity. Around 3000 military personnel and significant hardware are based there. In 2004, France opened a major new listening station at Tontouta, near Noumea's international airport, and in 2009 announced a consolidation of its Pacific military presence headquarters in Noumea.<sup>20</sup> The presence is important for protection of these and other lines of communication, including underwater optic cable networks, and air and sea links across the Pacific, and for the shipment of strategic products such as New Caledonian nickel, Japanese spent nuclear fuel, South American minerals, and for potential future underwater minerals in the region (see below).

## **Minerals and Exclusive Economic Zones – Strategic Weight and Access to Resources**

By virtue of its global sovereign presence, and specifically its Pacific islands presence, France is the world's second largest maritime nation. It lays claim to sovereignty over the second largest Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) as defined under 1982 Law of the Sea principles, second only to that of the United States, and before that of Australia; and claims its existing and potential resources. Its EEZ is three times larger than that of China, and twenty times the size of France itself.<sup>21</sup> As Jacques Chirac said, "Without the departments and territories overseas, France would be only a little country."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> In New Caledonia, France has 1500 military personnel, in Nouméa, Plum, Tontouta et Nandai, as well as 200 civilian Defense personnel and 250 reservists. Support includes the RIMAP infantry regiment at Plum and Noumea; the Naval base at Chaleix including the surveillance frigate Vendemiaire with an Alouette III helicopter, 2 patrol boats (La Moqueuse and La Glorieuse), a maritime police vessel, two Guardian maritime surveillance aircraft; the Air base at Tontouta with a transport squadron and 2 Casa transport aircrafts and 3 Puma helicopters. In French Polynesia, France has 1000 military personnel from the three forces at Papeete. Support includes the RIMAP land army detachment; the Naval base with the surveillance frigate the Prairial and its helicopter Alouette III, 3 Guardian maritime surveillance aircraft, 2 Dauphin helicopters, the patrol boat Arago; and Air Force support 2 Casa transport aircraft (French Ministry of Defense website [www.defense.gouv.fr](http://www.defense.gouv.fr) posted 29 October 2014, accessed March 2015).

<sup>21</sup> Sénat 2012: 99.

<sup>22</sup> in Aldrich and Connell 1989: 148.



And the contribution of the Pacific French possessions is critical. Specific measurement of the EEZs varies, but one accepted measure shows that the French metropolitan ‘hexagon’ alone represents an EEZ of 340,290 square kilometers.<sup>23</sup> With all of its overseas possessions, France’s total EEZ is 11.57 million square kilometres (m. sq. km.), of which 7.3 m. sq. km. derive from its Pacific possessions and just under 5 m. sq. km. of that, from French Polynesia alone (see Table 1). Thus 97 percent of French maritime territory is composed of the maritime territory of the *Outre-mer* and two thirds by the Pacific collectivities alone.<sup>24</sup> Even the remote uninhabited atoll of Clipperton represents an EEZ of 435,000 sq km, about 1/3 bigger than the hexagon’s. French Polynesia’s EEZ is equal to the size of the whole of Europe.<sup>25</sup> New Caledonia’s EEZ alone exceeds the land mass and EEZ of France.

**Table 1**  
**France’s Maritime Zone**  
**(in millions of square kilometres)**

Global France	11.57
of which Pacific territories	7.30
of which French Polynesia	5.00
Clipperton	0.43
of which Metropolitan France alone	0.34

**Source:** Figures taken from Faberon and Ziller 2007: 8

France’s awareness of the importance of this strategic asset is evident in its research and investment in new resources in its Pacific possessions and offshore. France has lodged a claim to extend its global rights even further, from the existing 200 miles to 350 miles off the continental shelf, under provisions of the Law of the Sea pertaining to the continental shelf, which would add over 500,000 sq km to France’s zone, itself more than the country’s EEZ.<sup>26</sup> The 2014 Sénat report on the EEZs acknowledges the cost of exercising sovereignty in these possessions, but describes the cost as an investment in the future. It made a number of recommendations for streamlining management of France’s extensive EEZ, including establishing a responsible Minister and national steering committee, more research resources, an inventory of resources, updating France’s mining laws to cover offshore activity, and strengthening the role of its overseas territories and the EU.<sup>27</sup>

France’s most significant South Pacific research and investment is focused on New Caledonia’s nickel assets, representing at least 10 percent, possibly 25 percent, of the world’s reserves,<sup>28</sup> and a mineral sought after by China and other emerging powers. France’s interest in New Caledonia

<sup>23</sup> Outre-mer tables in Faberon and Ziller 2007: 8.

<sup>24</sup> Sénat 2012: 133 and Sénat 2013.

<sup>25</sup> Sénat 2012: 99.

<sup>26</sup> See Aymeric in Sénat 2013, Sénat 2012: 46.

<sup>27</sup> Sénat 2014a: 1.

<sup>28</sup> Denègre and Fabre in Sénat 2013, Mallatrait and Meszaros 2009: 29-30.

has been described as a "geopolitical project", which assists in France's global status and access to the potentially rich seabed and its resources.<sup>29</sup> The existing productive processing unit at Doniambo just north of Noumea run by the French-dominated Société le Nickel represents the single largest mine in French territory. France has made major investments in two much larger projects, Goro in the south and Koniambo in the north, each project worth well over 2 billion USD (some estimates for the Koniambo project total 8 billion USD). As a comparison, China's investment in the nickel mine at Ramu in neighbouring Papua New Guinea (PNG) is worth about 1.26 billion USD. Sharing the nickel revenue with New Caledonian authorities has underpinned the compromises of the Noumea Accord and will continue to be a feature of future arrangements in New Caledonia. Still, French metropolitan sources remain the principal beneficiaries (owning around 56%), through the company ERAMET, in which the French state is a major shareholder. The Northern Province authorities have preserved a 51% share in their northern mine under development, and have made deals to supply to South Korean and Chinese companies (Posco and Jinchuan). Thus the mineral is clearly a strategic asset for France.<sup>30</sup> The importance of the mineral is reflected in ambiguities under the Noumea Accord over who retains overall responsibility for minerals. While the Organic Law of 1999 implementing the Noumea Accord stipulates local powers over nickel (the Congress determining regulation, the provinces applying the rules), the mineral is subject to overriding French legislation applying to strategic minerals.<sup>31</sup>

The second valuable asset, located within the South Pacific islands' EEZs, is its hydrocarbons. In the context of diminishing global reserves, the percentage of underwater petroleum resources globally has risen from 10 percent in 1960 to 30 percent in 2010 notwithstanding the high costs of exploitation,<sup>32</sup> suggesting the increasing potential in the future for hitherto unviable reserves. Once again New Caledonia is pre-eminent. There are indicators of the presence of large hydrocarbon and natural gas reserves offshore, within New Caledonia's EEZ and in waters contiguous with Australia's EEZ.<sup>33</sup> French and Australian scientists have conducted numerous prospective assessment surveys and studies in French and Australian waters during the last 10 years (See Figure 2). Some oil companies (Total and Hardman Resources) have shown interest in exploration rights. While the resources are currently unviable, against the background of increasing global energy demand they represent a significant potential viable asset.

The third potential return, from within its Pacific EEZ, arises from seabed resources, for example mineral nodules, an area of considerable French research and exploration. IFREMER (Institut Français de Recherche pour l'Exploitation de la Mer) has recently produced a study of these nodules.<sup>34</sup> France leads the way in its nodule exploration to the west of Clipperton, accompanied by companies from Kiribati, Germany, China, Japan, Belgium, Republic of Korea,

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<sup>29</sup> Rumley et al 2006, Fisher 2013: Chapter 13.

<sup>30</sup> For a detailed analysis of the returns of nickel to France and local and other interests, see Fisher 2013: 124-139.

<sup>31</sup> Reviewed in Fisher 2013: 125-127.

<sup>32</sup> Sénat 2012: 22, Mrgudovic 2008: 95.

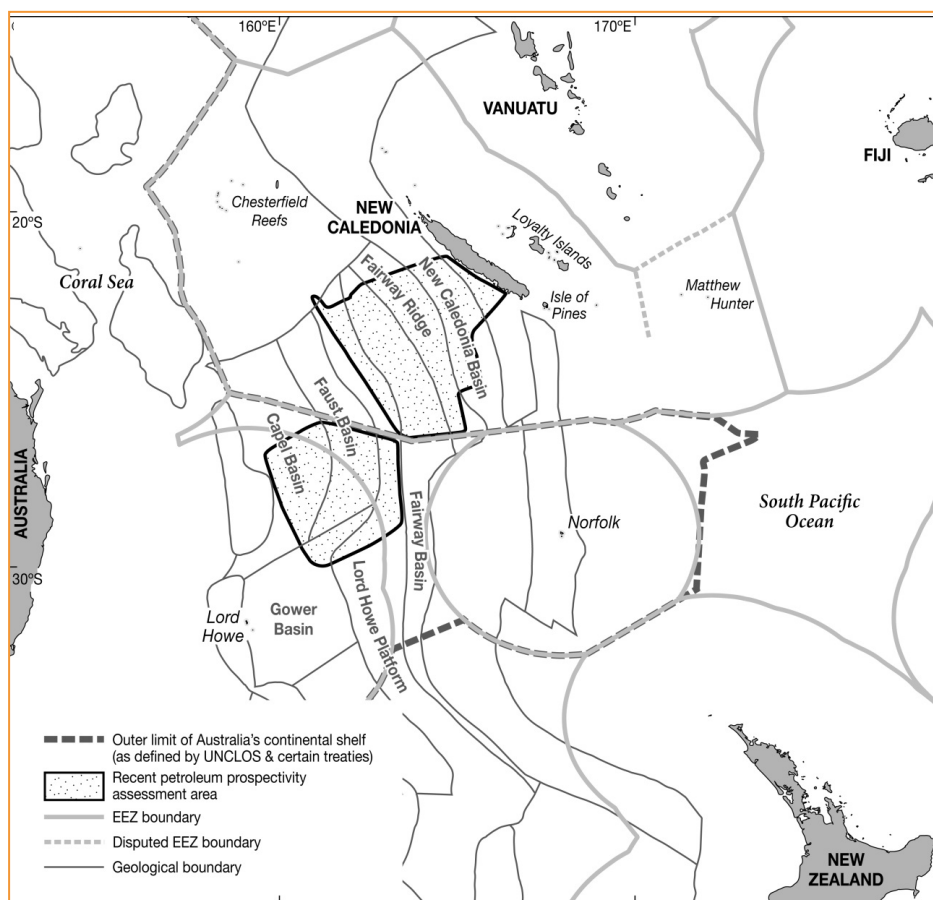
<sup>33</sup> Nouze et al 2009, Vialley et al 2003, Bernardel et al 1999, Symonds and Willcox 1989.

<sup>34</sup> IFREMER 2011.

Bulgaria, Cuba, Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Nauru, Tonga, the United Kingdom and the Russian Federation.<sup>35</sup> Nodules rich in cobalt and platinum have been found off the western coast of French Polynesia;<sup>36</sup> and iron, manganese, cobalt and some gold and silver off New Caledonia.<sup>37</sup>

Research undertaken off Wallis and Futuna has found evidence of rare earth off Wallis and Futuna in a joint public-private French venture involving inter alia IFREMER and Technip;<sup>38</sup> and possible hydrothermal energy resources in research co-funded by IFREMER and private companies.<sup>39</sup>

**Figure 2**  
**Location of Hydrocarbons off New Caledonia**



**Source:** Map prepared by the Cartographic and GIS services, Australian National University College of Asia and the Pacific, based on Nouzé et al 2009 and information from Geoscience Australia

<sup>35</sup> See the map image of the International Seabed Authority available at <https://www.isa.org.jm/polymetallic-nodules-exploration-areas-clarion-clipperton-fracture-zone> accessed 19 May 2015 (International Seabed Authority 2015).

<sup>36</sup> Mercier in Sénat 2013, Sénat 2012: 109.

<sup>37</sup> Sénat 2012: 109.

<sup>38</sup> Lurel, Vichot in Sénat 2013 and Sénat 2012.

<sup>39</sup> Sénat 2012: 110.

## Link with Pacific as New Economic Hub

More broadly, reprising the debate of the 1980s, and an even earlier similar debate of the late 1800s,<sup>40</sup> there is a view that France's presence in the South Pacific region links it to the vibrant economic growth of the northern Pacific. The idea of the importance of having a presence in this hemisphere persists, despite the real differences between strategic, political and economic dynamics of the north Pacific and that of the South.<sup>41</sup> Brigitte Girardin, then *Outre-mer* Minister, wrote that the French Pacific collectivities "enable our country to be present in this ocean which has become in the twenty-first century the other Mediterranean. So the Pacific *Outre-mer* is an opportunity for France: a gangplank to other civilisations, a gateway to a dynamic economic zone".<sup>42</sup> This view was most recently expressed at a French Senate review in 2013.<sup>43</sup>

## Entrée into Space Technology

France's engagement in space technology derives from its overseas presence, and specifically that in the South Pacific. Whereas Guyana has been the launching site for the French *Ariadne* rocket since 1968 and, from 1975, for the European Space Agency, which co-funds the spaceport and launched the European space shuttle *Hermes*, France's extensive presence in the Pacific Ocean facilitates space sensing, monitoring and retrieval. While the nuclear test centre, the Centre d'Expérimentation du Pacifique (Pacific Experimentation Centre, CEP) has closed down, useful infrastructure remains on the French Polynesian islands of Hao and Moruroa, including landing strips on each, some staff, and scientific monitors measuring underground movements on Moruroa.<sup>44</sup> The United States has signed an agreement with France to use the Hao landing strip for the American space shuttle.<sup>45</sup> The value of these assets is represented in the continued retention by France of the islands of Moruroa and Fangataufa which were ceded

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<sup>40</sup> Set out in Aldrich 1988, Lacour 1987: 17, and Ordonnaud et al 1983.

<sup>41</sup> See Mallatrait and Meszaros 2009: 88, 93, and Chesneaux's warning in 1992 on the risks of confusing the two parts of the Pacific within the fashionable concept of it as the new centre of the world, Chesneaux 1992: 102.

<sup>42</sup> In Cadéot 2003: 7, my translation.

<sup>43</sup> By *Outre-mer* Minister Lurel: "Le centre de gravité du monde se déplace vers le Pacifique. Notre diplomatie et notre vision du monde doivent s'y adapter et même anticiper. C'est la raison pour laquelle nous sommes extrêmement attentifs aux dynamiques qui sont à l'œuvre dans cette région du monde. La France est fière et heureuse de compter en son sein ces mondes polynésiens et mélanésiens qui entrent en résonance avec leurs voisins autochtones et maoris. Ils permettent, à travers l'affirmation de leur culture, de leur identité, de leurs coutumes, de rendre la France plus présente, plus diverse et plus riche"; and by Vice Admiral Vichot: "On a dit de ce siècle qu'il sera maritime. C'est aujourd'hui une certitude. On a dit qu'il est celui du Pacifique. C'est aussi une certitude,... Le Pacifique constitue un océan immense où nous sommes présents à travers trois communautés et un atoll", in Sénat 2013.

<sup>44</sup> Personal communications Noumea, March 2009; also Maclellan 2005: 372.

<sup>45</sup> See Mrgudovic 2008: 98.

to the French Republic by French Polynesia in 1964 on the basis that they would be returned after the cessation of nuclear testing there, despite efforts by French Polynesia to reclaim them.<sup>46</sup>

### **Access to Material for Scientific and Technological Expertise**

The wide-ranging presence and activities of specialist French agencies in its Pacific possessions, such as Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD), IFREMER, l'Institut Pasteur, le Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS), l'Institut Louis Malardé, suggest that sovereign residence provides a means by which France can maintain its scientific and technological edge, particularly in biodiversity, marine research, climate change, minerals exploration and other fields of importance in an increasingly competitive global economy. For example, the Pacific Ocean alone represents 65-70 percent of the work of IFREMER.<sup>47</sup> New Caledonia alone represents the second largest global coral reef.<sup>48</sup>

### **EU Asset**

France's Pacific presence delivers all of the above returns not only to France, but to the EU, by virtue of the status of the French possessions as Overseas Collectivities and Territories of the EU (OCTs). The OCTs are not juridically part of the EU but have a special associative status.<sup>49</sup> Thus, the EU benefits from the use of space-related support from within the French Pacific; from the maritime scientific expertise enabled by the French presence there; and from the potential wealth of the extensive EEZ and seabed surrounding the French collectivities. That the EU is well aware of their value is evident in the emphasis in the recent Overseas Association Decision, altering its approach to the OCTs from one of development cooperation to a reciprocal partnership based on their belonging to the same "European family".<sup>50</sup> The thinking underlying the change is spelled out in the European Commission's revised Strategy Paper for the OCTs describing them as "strategic outposts" of the EU.<sup>51</sup> An EU Briefing Paper on Military Installations includes French military assets in its Pacific possessions as EU assets.<sup>52</sup> Beyond the OCTs, the EU clearly sees the Pacific presence as an asset. Reflecting EU interest in seabed mining in the region, it funds programs

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<sup>46</sup> French Polynesian Senator Richard Tuheiava secured Senate support for a law retroceding the islands to French Polynesia in 2012 but the French Government has not progressed the proposed law in the National Assembly.

<sup>47</sup> Lemerrier in Sénat 2013.

<sup>48</sup> Noted in Sénat 2012: 134.

<sup>49</sup> See Fisher 2012b: 5-6 and Faberon and Ziller 2007.

<sup>50</sup> EU Council 2013.

<sup>51</sup> Commission 2006.

<sup>52</sup> EU 2009.

through the key Pacific islands region organisations, the Secretariats for the Pacific Community and for the Regional Environment Program, to develop draft legislation for PICs to regulate seabed mining; and a 4-year regional project hosted by the Geoscience Division of the SPC to assist PICs to develop national deep sea minerals industries in a responsible and sustainable manner. This project includes legal advice and assistance with the drafting of legislation.

### **Demonstration Effect to other French Possessions Around the Globe**

Another important aspect of the French Pacific presence is the demonstration effect of strategic and domestic developments there, for the global chain of French possessions around the globe. New Caledonia with its nickel and potential hydrocarbons resource has been seen as a jewel in the crown of France's overseas entities. Guyana is becoming more strategically significant for France, with new evidence of hydrocarbons there. However, developments in one French territory can now quickly spread to the others, as was shown in 2008-9 when riots in Guyana over the high cost of living speedily spread to other French possessions, firstly Guadeloupe, and then beyond, Martinique and as far away as Réunion, French Polynesia and New Caledonia. Because New Caledonia and French Polynesia are both managing demands for more autonomy and even independence, they are watched by the others and seen as potential models. A loss for France of a foothold in the South region would have implications for its hold in its other territories. Therefore maintaining a positive and supported South Pacific presence is an important element in preserving France's existing global network.

### **Summary of French Strategic Interests**

The foregoing demonstrates that France derives specific strategic benefits from its South Pacific presence that make it unique in the region. Its presence bolsters its claims to a special security role on the international stage, provides it with global EEZ status and access to significant real and potential minerals and resources, a foothold in the growing Asia-Pacific economic powerhouse, support for its unique role in space activities, a base for its scientific and technical expertise, directly contributes to and engages the EU's global and regional status, and provides modelling for the retention of its other possessions around the globe.



## ALTERED STRATEGIC SOUTH PACIFIC REGIONAL CONTEXT

### Context to 2000s

France has been used to working with changing power presences in the South Pacific since its earliest ventures there, competing in its explorations with Spain, the dominant power in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, and, later, with Britain as missionary settlements and then colonization occurred.<sup>53</sup> The region, and the French territories, had little strategic importance during WWI but were directly engaged in WWII after which the region was seen as representing a strategic theatre in its own right.<sup>54</sup> After World War II France joined other powers, Britain, the Netherlands and Australia in the South Pacific Commission of donors, later renamed the Secretariat for the Pacific Community (SPC), the principal regional technical organization. These powers were then joined by the newly independent Pacific island states members. The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) (known originally as the South Pacific Forum) was created as a focus of political discussion in 1971 when France banned all discussion of political matters in the SPC, as criticism of its regional policies mounted.<sup>55</sup> The PIF has become the principal political forum in the region.

The 1970s and 80s saw a deepening of island opposition to France's nuclear testing and management of decolonization issues (first in Vanuatu, where it resisted the former French-British Condominium's independence, and subsequently in New Caledonia and French Polynesia). But by the late 1980s France was seeking to improve its image. It ceased nuclear testing in the Pacific in 1996; and negotiated the Matignon and Noumea Accords of 1988 and 1998, which postponed a controversial independence referendum in New Caledonia to 2018. France has since contributed to aid in the region, currently about 100 million USD per annum; participated in an annual Dialogue Partnership with the PIF from 1989; shares maritime surveillance intelligence and disaster assistance in cooperation with Australia and New Zealand since the 1992 FRANZ arrangement; initiated summits with Pacific island leaders in the triennial France-Oceania Summits from 2003 to 2009; participates in Quadrilateral Defence Coordination talks established in 2009 with the US, Australia and New Zealand, focusing on fisheries protection, and in South Pacific Defence Ministers meetings from 2013 (which include France, Australia, New Zealand, PNG, Tonga and Chile). It conducts a host of defence exercises with ANZ and neighbouring island countries PNG, Tonga, and Vanuatu.

Separately, France has encouraged the participation of its Pacific territories in regional organisations, in some cases under their own names.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> An early example of competition between French and British missionary societies was the Pritchard Affair in Tahiti, see de Deckker's translation of original papers 1983.

<sup>54</sup> Mallatrait and Meszaros 2009: 92.

<sup>55</sup> Dornoy-Vurobaravu 1994: 19.

<sup>56</sup> The three French Pacific islands region territories all participate as full or associate/observer members in the SPC, the PIF, the Pacific Regional Environment Program, the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council, the Pacific Power Association and the Oceanic Customs Organisation; New Caledonia and French Polynesia are also

This activity has been generally well received in the region, although island country leaders have held back from full acceptance of France and its collectivities, reflected in their so far not approving full Member status of the PIF for the French collectivities, pending implementation of Noumea Accord commitments by 2018 in New Caledonia, and acceptable management of independence calls in French Polynesia.<sup>57</sup>

Meanwhile, by the early 2000s, the United Kingdom and the United States had wound down their engagement in the region. The United Kingdom withdrew from the SPC and ceased contributions other than through the EU by 2005, managing its one tiny dependency, Pitcairn, from its mission in New Zealand. It closed its embassies in Kiribati and Vanuatu in 2005 and in Tonga in 2006. Prime Minister Blair claimed in 2006 that "Britain is no longer a player in the Pacific, nor does it want to be. It is the end of an era".<sup>58</sup> The United States, while maintaining a contribution to the SPC, basically saw the South Pacific as the responsibility of its allies Australia and New Zealand.<sup>59</sup> It reduced many aid and development programs; closed its embassies in Solomon Islands and Samoa and maintained diplomatic posts only in PNG and Fiji (apart from its own territories of Marshall Islands and Federated States of Micronesia), but closed its USAID offices even in both those places. It halved its Peace Corps volunteers program from 1995 to 2003 and ended the Fulbright US scholar program there.

Japan, with historical fishing interests and a long presence in Micronesia, had been slow to become re-engaged after the harsh legacy of its actions in World War II. But from the 1980s, it had become a major donor, contributing about 100 million USD a year by 1990.<sup>60</sup> Its renewed presence was soured by its attempt to dump its nuclear waste in the South Pacific in 1981, and the controversial transit through the Pacific of its spent nuclear fuel for treatment in France and Britain from the 1990s, to which island countries were vehemently opposed, declaring their region a nuclear weapons free zone and a zone of protection of natural resources.<sup>61</sup> Japan's exploitation of South Pacific fisheries has also been controversial, including initial negotiation of access fees when EEZs were declared in the 1970s; its driftnet fishing methods threatening species including dolphins; and its flouting of the International Whaling Convention by hunting whales beyond an agreed scientific quota formula.

Japan's efforts to deepen its relationship primarily through the triennial PALM (Pacific Alliance Leaders Meeting) summits held in Japan from 1997, were based on three strategic objectives: resources (fisheries and logging); access to shipping lanes; and securing South Pacific islands political support for UN Security Council reform and specifically for Japan's Permanent

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members or associates of the Secretariat of the Pacific Applied Geoscience and Technology Division, the South Pacific Tourism Organisation, and the Pacific Islands Development Program; and French Polynesia is an observer of the Forum Fisheries Agency.

<sup>57</sup> See Fisher 2013: 225-8, Fisher 2012a.

<sup>58</sup> Cited in Zhang 2007: 376.

<sup>59</sup> See for example Brady and Henderson in Brady 2010: 204, Mallatrait et Meszaros 2009: 76-77.

<sup>60</sup> Alexander 2001: 129 .

<sup>61</sup> This transit continues, and, while remaining a concern, has diminished as a source of contention perhaps because the transport proceeds within strict IAEA regulations. There has been no reported case of accident or leakage despite an active continuing global transport, see <http://www.world-nuclear.org/info/Nuclear-Fuel-Cycle/Transport/Transport-of-Radioactive-Materials/> (accessed 23 November 2015)

Membership, expressed in every PALM triennial public release.<sup>62</sup> There are twelve Pacific island country members of the UN, a significant number when votes are counted.<sup>63</sup> Japan also sees the South Pacific region as a partner in its space objectives, negotiating an agreement with Kiribati, in 2000, for the use of facilities at Christmas Island to support its space activities.<sup>64</sup>

By the early 2000s both the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan had representation in the region, largely based on their competition for international recognition, with both flashing checkbooks to secure the support of as many as possible of the twelve South Pacific island states with UN membership. At the end of the 1990s tensions between China and Taiwan increased, with flashpoints in the South China Sea and the firing of missiles across the Taiwan Strait in 1995 and 1996. There was little subtlety in their checkbook diplomacy, with three states changing recognition from one to the other and then back again according to financial payoffs in the form of aid grants (Kiribati, Nauru and Marshall Islands).<sup>65</sup> In addition Samoa, Tonga, PNG and Vanuatu have all at some stage recognized Taiwan in the past.<sup>66</sup> Of the 14 island countries members of the PIF, 8 now recognise the PRC,<sup>67</sup> but only four have consistently done so (Cook Islands, Niue, Fiji and FSM). China was invited to send a representative to 1988 and 1989 discussions on PIF dialogue status, and has been a Post Forum Dialogue partner from 1999.

So in the late 1990s and early 2000s, with the winding down of US and British interest, the key external players were Japan with serious strategic interests, and Taiwan and China essentially competing for political recognition and votes. The scene was stable, the external actors few, and the general regional architecture and historical alliances provided a privileged, relatively benign place for France from which it could develop its regional links while dealing with independence and autonomy pressures from within its Pacific possessions. France was one of a known few number of players.

In recent years there have been significant changes in this broad strategic context. These have included most importantly, the impact of a rising China, with consequent shifts in the engagement of some of the other Pacific powers; a broader engagement of new players in the Pacific, in the global search for diminishing resources; and at a lower level, change wrought by the PICs in the regional meeting architecture.

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<sup>62</sup> Alexander 2001: 137-8 citing Japanese MFA brochure, and Chung 2010: 104.

<sup>63</sup> Fiji, Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Nauru, Kiribati.

<sup>64</sup> Alexander 2001: 140.

<sup>65</sup> See Lin in Brady 2010: 122; also in other areas Chung 2010: 105.

<sup>66</sup> Brady and Henderson in Brady 2010: 197.

<sup>67</sup> Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Niue, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga, Vanuatu.

## Greater Presence of China

The last ten years has seen a rapid increase in China's regional presence, delivering aid and trade with a different focus and conditions than traditional donors, with strategic implications.

With China's rising economic strength and demand for raw materials, it is not surprising that its presence in the South Pacific has increased substantially in recent years. The South Pacific is not a major priority for China, which allocates about 4% of its aid there, compared to 50% for Africa.<sup>68</sup> But the impact of China's engagement has been enormous on the small island states. By 2006 as indicated, eight PICs recognized the PRC<sup>69</sup> and it had six diplomatic missions in the Pacific island countries<sup>70</sup> as well as an office in Kiribati (which now recognizes Taiwan) and one in French Polynesia, with more diplomats in the South Pacific island region than any other country.<sup>71</sup> For comparison, Japan, second only to Australia in aid to the region in the early 2000s, has only one Embassy in the PICs, in Fiji. France has three (PNG; Fiji and Vanuatu).

China's preferred aid engagement in the region has been bilateral, contrasting with the predominantly regional approach of other traditional donors, and of the PICs themselves. The scale of its involvement has been enormous relative to the size of these micro-states. Whereas its early regional activity focused on out-bidding Taiwan in the political recognition stakes, its contemporary links are deeper and aimed at establishing a long-term presence, including a business presence, and securing new resources.

Aid figures for China are not easily accessible, but a picture has emerged from the academic literature in recent years. Its pledged aid to PICs totaled 33 million USD in 2005 but grew rapidly thereafter, particularly after it convened the first China–Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum (CIPC), in 2006, announcing a substantial aid program, making it the third largest donor overnight.<sup>72</sup> By 2007 China was the second largest donor to the largest Pacific island economy, PNG, and by 2010 it was contributing an estimated 100-150 million USD each year to PICs.<sup>73</sup> Its aid is large-scale, focusing on infrastructure, construction, equipment, government and military assets, and developing natural resources agreements including fisheries; including concessional loans, grants and investment in large projects including new mining projects. Between 2006 and 2011 China disbursed 850 million USD in bilateral aid to the eight countries recognizing it.<sup>74</sup> At the 2013 CIPC alone, in Guangzhou, Vice Premier Wang

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<sup>68</sup> Brant and Dornan 2014.

<sup>69</sup> See footnote 67.

<sup>70</sup> Embassies in FSM, Fiji, PNG, Samoa, Tonga, Vanuatu.

<sup>71</sup> D'Arcy 2007: 4.

<sup>72</sup> See Chung 2010: 102.

<sup>73</sup> Hanson in Brady 2010: 84 and Yang in Brady 2010: 261.

<sup>74</sup> Brant 2013b. For comparison, Australia contributed 4.8 billion USD, the US 1.27 billion USD, New Zealand 899.3 million USD, Japan 868.8 million USD, France 718 million USD and the EU 595.8 million USD for the same period.

Yang offered 1 billion USD in concessional loans for infrastructure development.<sup>75</sup> China's aid increased to 1.474 billion USD between 2006 and 2013.<sup>76</sup>

Economic ties have grown rapidly. There are now estimated to be over 3,000 Chinese businesses operating in the PICs.<sup>77</sup> Total Chinese trade with the PICs increased from 530 million USD in 2004 to 838 million USD in 2005 alone, the volume of bilateral trade totaling over 1.5 billion USD in 2007, and growing to over 2 billion USD by 2008.<sup>78</sup> Its exports to the region totaled 2.6 billion USD in 2011, when it was the second largest trading partner for the region after Australia.<sup>79</sup> One source suggests China's total trade with PICs exceeded 4.5 billion USD in 2012.<sup>80</sup>

By 2005 China was PNG's top trading partner and biggest buyer of its timber; by 2011 its overall trade with PNG had increased ten times to 1.265 billion USD over that in 2001.<sup>81</sup> Its largest venture has been investment by the Chinese Metallurgical Construction Corporation in the Ramu nickel project in PNG from 2005. But it attends to the micro states as well: from nonexistent trade with Tonga in 1998, by 2004 China was Tonga's second largest export partner and fourth largest import partner.<sup>82</sup> Chinese construction companies operate in PNG and Fiji. China has concluded fisheries Memorandums Of Understanding with five island countries.<sup>83</sup> China funded a PIF trade office in Beijing from 2000.

Chinese tourists to the region increased from 35,000 in 2002 to over 50,000 in 2005 and 70,000 by 2012.<sup>84</sup> Visits by Chinese nationals to Fiji alone, grew sevenfold from 4,000 in 2008 to 28,000 in 2014.<sup>85</sup>

Not only has trade and aid grown, China has imposed different conditions on PICs to those of traditional donors. Instead of requiring good governance or human rights commitments, which Pacific island states have found onerous, China has simply required political recognition of it alone and not Taiwan. It has linked compliance with the reward of attributing Approved Tourism Destination status, allowing for Chinese tourism, a potentially lucrative source of income for the PICs.<sup>86</sup> China's aid is primarily in concessional loans, in which form it provided

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<sup>75</sup> Firth 2013: 10.

<sup>76</sup> Graphic at Brant 2015. Again for comparison, for the same period 2006-2013 Brant's data shows Australia contributed 6.83 billion USD, the US 1.770 billion USD, Japan 1.225 billion USD, New Zealand 1.096 billion USD, France 0.893 billion USD and the EU 0.765 billion USD.

<sup>77</sup> Yang in Brady 2010: 269.

<sup>78</sup> See Zhang 370 and Chung 2010: 102.

<sup>79</sup> Hayward-Jones 2013: 7. For purposes of comparison, exports from Australia to the region totaled 4.14 billion USD and from the EU 1.54 billion USD in 2011.

<sup>80</sup> Yu 2014: 2.

<sup>81</sup> Hayward-Jones 2013: 7.

<sup>82</sup> Shie 2007: 312.

<sup>83</sup> Cook Islands ; Fiji. Federated States of Micronesia, PNG, Kiribati.

<sup>84</sup> Yang 2012: 12 and World Travel Online website accessed 10 April 2015.

<sup>85</sup> Bainarama, 2014.

<sup>86</sup> In 2006 Premier Wen told the CPIC that only those recognising China would be approved as tourist destinations.

over 80% of its aid since 2006.<sup>87</sup> It has also insisted on using its own contractors and labour in many of the massive construction projects, with many Chinese workers staying on and setting up small businesses. 50% of its procurement is from China.<sup>88</sup>

Beijing has also developed military ties with Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and other countries in the region. It established a tracking station in Tarawa Kiribati in 1997 (but dismantled it in 2003, after Kiribati's recognition of Taiwan). In 2010 China made ship visits to PNG, Tonga, Vanuatu and Australia and New Zealand. There are some visits by senior military officers and provision of non-lethal equipment such as uniforms and vehicles to PNG, Fiji and Tonga.<sup>89</sup>

More broadly, consistent with its preference for bilateral aid, China has stood apart from coordinating with other donors. There was an early indication that it might coordinate its aid with Wellington, when Assistant Foreign Minister He Yafei visited New Zealand in 2006.<sup>90</sup> China and New Zealand are involved in a water mains project in the Cook Islands, a world first trilateral project involving China.<sup>91</sup> Denghua Zhang has cited a trend of trilateral Chinese engagement elsewhere.<sup>92</sup> But when the 2009 PIF summit agreed on the Cairns Compact on Strengthening Development Cooperation to facilitate cooperation amongst donors, China declined to join, emphasizing instead its approach to the PICs as a 'fellow developing country'.<sup>93</sup> China's strong preference for bilateral dealings with PICs is based in part on the Taiwan rivalry, but undoubtedly enables it to pursue its commercial and broader strategic interests.

The size, speed and nature of China's increased presence in the small micro States have, unsurprisingly, had some destabilizing effects. Analysts in the mid-2000s noted the effect of entrenching corruption and threats to good governance and accountability.<sup>94</sup> In Kiribati, which recognized the PRC in 1980, China's funding of candidates during a major election in 2002 led to allegations of corruption. Within six months Kiribati reversed its recognition of the PRC, switching to Taiwan.<sup>95</sup> The influx of Chinese nationals in most PICs has led to resentments, especially since China maintains a role with its own nationals overseas, keeping in contact with them and using them for propaganda purposes.<sup>96</sup> Riots in Solomon Islands and Tonga in 2006 and in PNG in 2009 were all marked by the locals turning on Chinese nationals and attacks on Chinese shops.<sup>97</sup> There has been some involvement by Chinese nationals in people

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<sup>87</sup> Brant 2015.

<sup>88</sup> Dornan and Brant 2014.

<sup>89</sup> Hayward-Jones 2013: 12.

<sup>90</sup> Yang 2012: 99.

<sup>91</sup> Dornan and Brant 2014.

<sup>92</sup> Citing Chinese cooperation with the British and Americans in African projects, and Eliot 2007; see Zhang 2014: 371.

<sup>93</sup> Hayward-Jones 2013: 15.

<sup>94</sup> See Hanson 2008, Dobell 2007, D'Arcy 2007.

<sup>95</sup> Shie 2007: 316.

<sup>96</sup> Brady and Henderson in Brady 2010: 216; for specific examples see Brady 2009: 3-4.

<sup>97</sup> Dobell 2007: 3.



trafficking, passport selling, and criminal triads.<sup>98</sup> The illegal Chinese population in PNG alone has been estimated as 20,000.<sup>99</sup> China's supply of massive concessional loans has seen a steep increase in indebtedness in the PICs, and there is no evidence of debt forgiveness. China's vagueness and ambiguity about debt forgiveness draw the PICs into even greater indebtedness with potential for dependence on, and exploitation by, the new regional player.<sup>100</sup>

The unsettling effects of China's increased engagement have not only been bilateral. Its funding of projects in Fiji from 2006, the year of Bainarama's takeover of the government by coup, bolstered the illegal Bainarama regime, and diluted efforts to promote good governance through conditional aid, when sanctions were imposed by Australia and New Zealand. China has also funded the Pacific Island Development Forum, an initiative by Fiji to undercut the PIF and the involvement of Australia and New Zealand (see Changing Regional Cooperation section below), and paid for headquarters of the Secretariat of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), which opened in 2008 in Vanuatu, to the unease of neighbouring France (in New Caledonia), whose handling of calls for independence is a core target of MSG activity and concern.

Partly because these destabilising influences were being felt at a time when China was developing its naval capability and backing its maritime claims in the South China Sea with force,<sup>101</sup> western allies in the region began to show some unease, with discussion as early as 2009 including the idea of a "China threat".<sup>102</sup> More recently there has been much academic debate in Australia and elsewhere about the nature of China's South Pacific approach, for example whether or not it is part of a grand strategy,<sup>103</sup> about the impact on US predominance in the region and on Japan's role,<sup>104</sup> and on weakening US alliances in the region and building strategic alliances of its own.<sup>105</sup> People's Liberation Army analyst Senior Colonel Liu Mingfu pointed out in 2010 that rivalry with the US was inevitable, and China's White Paper that year identified the US as a source of rivalry particularly given its regional security involvement in the Western Pacific.<sup>106</sup> But in 2012 Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs Cui Tianki told the PIF Summit that China was not competing with anyone:

"We are not here to seek any particular influence, still less dominance. We are here to work with island countries to achieve sustainable development...we are not here to compete with anyone"<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> See Chung 2010: 107, Shie 2007: 316, Lintner in Brady 2010: 7.

<sup>99</sup> Herr and Bergin 2011.

<sup>100</sup> The ambiguities are ably described in Brant 2013: 169-70, and see Herr and Bergin 2011 Dornan and Brant 2014.

<sup>101</sup> See Hsiu 2011; White 2011.

<sup>102</sup> Fisher 2012b, Ratuva 2011, Hanson 2008b, D'Arcy 2007: 1, and Mallatrait and Meszaros 2009: 66,77, 96; reflected also in CERI discussion about the Asia-Pacific, for example Herrly and Meijer 2013.

<sup>103</sup> See for example Linda Jakobsen 2014; Saunders in Brady 2010; Yang 2012.

<sup>104</sup> Writings of Hugh White for example, especially an exchange in The Strategist online blogsite in early April 2015.

<sup>105</sup> See Windybank 2005, Shie 2007, Zhang 2007; and Chung 2010 suggesting China is out to displace Japan.

<sup>106</sup> Herr and Birgin 2011a: 27.

<sup>107</sup> Cited by Hayward-Jones 2013: 6.

Still, claims by military officials that the US would be forced out of the Pacific by a rising China persist.<sup>108</sup>

Drawing together these strands, there is general agreement that China's motivations in increasing its presence in the South Pacific region have included:

- securing ongoing support and votes of the numerous PICs in the UN and other multilateral groups, including for the one-China policy;

- resources, particularly minerals, hydrocarbons, timber, gold, fisheries; at a lower level, tourism destinations. At a time when tourism in the region from Japan and the US has fallen, Chinese numbers are increasing;<sup>109</sup>

- long-term strategic assets relating to space. In 1997 China established a satellite tracking station in Tarawa in Kiribati which was instrumental in China's first manned space flight in October 2003.<sup>110</sup> There were accusations that this station was used to spy on the US army presence at Kwajalein and the ballistic missile range in the Marshall Islands. The station was dismantled after Kiribati switched allegiance to Taiwan in 2003. China maintains a fleet of maritime aerospace survey vessels; one of which is permanently stationed in the South Pacific region.<sup>111</sup> Supporting China's satellite and space program is clearly a primary interest in the South Pacific;<sup>112</sup>

- access to sea lanes with Australia and South America for Chinese merchant vessels.<sup>113</sup>

While the idea of a "China threat" is still current in the literature,<sup>114</sup> there is more general acceptance of a role for China, evident, for example, in the broad participation in China's new Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, including by Australia and New Zealand. Still, whatever China's motivation, the effect of its rapid, massive investment in tiny island states, at a time when external western attention was diminished, has necessarily resulted in some strategic displacement. Its appetite for resources is huge and will have an effect, including on interest by others such as Japan and Europe in fisheries and minerals. Its bilateral military ties have so far been providing mainly logistical and training support but there is the potential for these to change. China's investment in infrastructure such as airports, bridges and highways, and shipping access agreements, may have strategic implications for the future. The use of its soft power as well – student exchanges, increasing familiarity with its goods and services; television broadcasts; business ties, tourism – enhances its potential to influence.

And, whatever the overt motivation, the fact of an increasing role for China in the region is indisputable. This new presence has altered the nature of participation of some of the existing players.

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<sup>108</sup> Hayward-Jones 2013: 6.

<sup>109</sup> Shie 2007: 322.

<sup>110</sup> Shie 2007: 322.

<sup>111</sup> Lintner in Brady 2010: 29.

<sup>112</sup> See also Brady and Henderson in Brady 2010: 204.

<sup>113</sup> Chung 2010: 106, Brady and Henderson in Brady 2010: 203.

<sup>114</sup> See for example Dupont and Baker 2014 and their evidence of a progressive Chinese strategy of "fish, protect, contest and occupy" in the Western Pacific.

## Effect on Other External Players: United States, Japan and Taiwan

### • Renewed United States Interest

By the late 2000s, the rise of China and the emergence of the Asia-Pacific region as a geopolitical centre of gravity led the U.S. to reassess its engagement in the broader region,<sup>115</sup> with consequences for the South Pacific, where the U.S. had basically left protection of western interests to Australia and New Zealand). A shift in US views on the broader Pacific region was enunciated in November 2011 by President Obama during a visit to Australia when he told the Australian Parliament that the U.S. had made a "deliberate and strategic decision...to play a larger and long-term role in shaping this region and its future... The United States is a Pacific power, and we are here to stay", adding for good measure that "the United States will continue our effort to build a cooperative relationship with China."<sup>116</sup> On 16 November 2011 he separately announced the deployment of up to 2500 US marines to Darwin by 2017 and closer cooperation between Australian and US air forces.<sup>117</sup>

In an article in *Foreign Policy* in November 2011 Hilary Clinton outlined the U.S.' updated approach to the Asia-Pacific, noting the U.S. was building 'new partnerships' including outreach to China and the Pacific Island countries, amongst others, as 'part of a broader effort to ensure a more comprehensive approach to American strategy in the region. We are asking these emerging partners to join us in shaping and participating in a rules-based regional and global order' Referring to China, she referred to 'fears and misperceptions' lingering on both sides of the Pacific and rejected this approach in favour of cooperation. She told Pacific island leaders at the UN General Assembly in 2011 that the US was renewing USAID commitments.

Despite the promised review, US aid in the region remains modest, and focused on climate change and governance. The U.S. reopened a regional USAID office in PNG in 2011 after 16 years of absence, with a budget of 21 million USD for climate change activities.<sup>118</sup> In 2012 it doubled its contribution to the SPC, to a still modest 4 million USD.<sup>119</sup> In 2014 US aid agencies committed 9.1 million USD to the South Pacific region, an increase of 2/3 over 2013, but spent just 2.1 million USD, mainly in the environment sector.<sup>120</sup>

Although the US has sent delegations to the PIF meetings before 2011, these had been small and low-level. In 2011 the U.S. sent a 50-member delegation to the PIF post Forum dialogue, the largest US delegation ever to attend; and large high-level US delegations have attended since, with Secretary of State Hilary Clinton heading the delegation in 2012. In 2012 the U.S.

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<sup>115</sup> See Denmark et al 2013.

<sup>116</sup> Obama 2011.

<sup>117</sup> Obama and Gillard 2011.

<sup>118</sup> O'Keefe 2011.

<sup>119</sup> SPC 2012: 14.

<sup>120</sup> USAID 2015.

participated for the first time in Japan's PALM with PIF leaders. The US Navy conducted Pacific Partnership visits in 2011 and 2012 targeting aid and healthcare in Asia and the Pacific, joined by France, Australia and New Zealand.<sup>121</sup>

The US' military presence lies principally in its own territories north of the Equator and in Australia. In the South Pacific region, it continues to rely heavily on Australia, the predominant donor and trade partner, and New Zealand to uphold western interests.<sup>122</sup> It is notable that the most significant change with the 2011 announcement of re-focused policy is primarily in Australia, through increased marine deployments, rather than an increased presence elsewhere in the South Pacific. Still, the U.S. will continue to keep a close eye on China from its posts in the region, and is planning for 60 per cent of its navy to be based in the Pacific Fleet by 2020.<sup>123</sup>

#### • Japan increases its aid

Japan, whose strategic outlook has long been dominated by its rivalry with China, reacted almost overnight to China's aid engagement in the South Pacific. From 1987 to 1997 Japan had contributed 150-200 million USD annually to PICs; and it contributed around 105 million USD annually from 1998 to 2005,<sup>124</sup> making it the second largest donor after Australia. One month after China's inaugural CIPC meeting in April 2006 announcing aid increases, Japan in turn announced at its May 2006 PALM, a large increase in its contribution to the region, to 357 million USD annually.<sup>125</sup> For the first time Japan invited US participation at the PALM in Japan in 2012, which some have described as symbolizing a new united US-Japanese purpose in undermining Chinese influence in the Pacific.<sup>126</sup> At that meeting Japan announced a package of assistance worth 500 million USD for the ensuing three years. In 2013, Japan produced its first National Security Strategy, Prime Minister Abe summarizing its approach when he declared that Japan "is not now and never will be a tier two nation", signifying that Japan would not accept Chinese dominance nor recede from leadership in maintaining the international order established by leading democracies after World War II.<sup>127</sup> Japan's relationship with the United States remains pivotal, and both committed to revising and strengthening their bilateral defence guidelines in October 2013.<sup>128</sup>

Japan continues to seek the support of PICs for its international interests. Within the UN, it has secured the support of all PIC members of the UN except Tonga, which is heavily dependent on China's aid, in its bid for Security Council reform and for its own membership.

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<sup>121</sup> Larsen 2012: 2.

<sup>122</sup> See Hayward-Jones 2013: 12.

<sup>123</sup> Harris 2015: 5.

<sup>124</sup> Chung 2010: 100.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid: 102.

<sup>126</sup> See Watanabe 2012.

<sup>127</sup> Green 2013: 3.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid: 11.

China is likely to seek to block Japan in its future UN bids,<sup>129</sup> including by putting pressure on PICs who have supported it. Japan has also garnered some PIC support for its whaling activity in the Pacific. The six countries supporting it are the same as those recognizing Taiwan, and include the poorest and smallest island states.<sup>130</sup>

#### • Continued and more Ambiguous Taiwan Engagement

Not to be outdone by China's April 2006 CIPC forum with regional leaders, Taiwan immediately convened its own first Taiwan Pacific Allies Summit in Palau in September 2006, promising 100 million USD in aid to the Solomon Islands for 2008.<sup>131</sup> There is little doubt that Taiwanese meddling in the Solomons' April 2006 election campaign contributed to the violent reaction against local Chinese population in riots that month.<sup>132</sup> Such pressures eased somewhat when, in 2008, with the election of President Ma Ying-jeou of the nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) party, Taiwan and China seem to have agreed that neither would seek to encourage particular island states to switch allegiance in recognition from either the PRC or the ROC, described quaintly by Taiwan as a "détente between mainland China and Taiwan's promotion of 'flexible diplomacy.'"<sup>133</sup> But whether this apparent "détente" will last remains to be seen. Municipal elections in December 2014 saw a defeat of the KMT and Ma's resignation as KMT Chairman. On 7 November 2015, just months before scheduled elections, Ma met President Xi Jinping in a historic first meeting of the PRC and Taiwan leaders, in Singapore – time will tell whether the Taiwanese voter will endorse Ma's party supporting closer links with the PRC. Whereas the constant switching of sides by some small island states appears to have subsided, Taiwan's aid and other engagements have remained strong. Though difficult to quantify, by 2010 Taiwan was each year funding scholarships for PIC students totaling around 500,000 USD annually, and aid worth 8.9 million USD to the Solomon Islands, 1.65 million USD to Tuvalu and 700,000 USD to the PIF Secretariat.<sup>134</sup> Taiwan's President Ma visited the six island countries recognizing Taiwan in 2010. Despite the apparent truce, Herr and Bergin described in 2011 how Taiwan was one of the most active in the "depth and spread" of its rivalry with China across the region.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Brady and Henderson in Brady 2010: 205.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid: 197.

<sup>131</sup> Chung 2010: 105.

<sup>132</sup> See for example Atkinson in Brady 2010: 174.

<sup>133</sup> See Press Release, Taipei Economic and Cultural Office, Canberra 1 April 2010.

<sup>134</sup> Brady and Henderson in Brady 2010: 196.

<sup>135</sup> Herr and Bergin 2011a: 20.

The net result of China's increased involvement is that the PRC and Taiwan each have missions in six (different) island states,<sup>136</sup> a combined representation in twelve states, with China also represented in French Polynesia. This constitutes an extensive overall Chinese presence,<sup>137</sup> one which is divided ideologically and therefore potentially divisive.

### **New Forms of External Engagement**

But the greater presence of China and the accompanying strengthened, more complex, activity of longstanding players US, Japan, and Taiwan, are not the only changes for France to contend with. New and varied players have become engaged in the South Pacific. The evolution of increased interest from other than traditional players has been most evident in the number of Dialogue partnerships of the PIF. Dialogue Partners are not members of the PIF but meet PIF leaders every year in separate dialogues immediately after the annual Forum Summit. The rank of Dialogue Partners has grown rapidly in recent years, from the first five who attended in 1989, Canada, France, Japan, UK and US (when China was invited but did not attend as such). There are now seventeen Dialogue Partners: the first five plus China, Cuba, the European Union, India, Indonesia, Italy, the Republic of Korea, Malaysia, Philippines, Spain, Thailand, and Turkey. These do not include associated institutional partners which also meet PIF leaders after the Summit, such as the Asian Development Bank and ASEAN. The Dialogue meetings risk being more important than the annual Summits themselves, since the latter involve only fourteen island members.<sup>138</sup>

The global search for new sources of energy and other resources, added to efforts to secure UN votes, have brought interest in aid and commercial activity into the region from new actors, and a host of new options as interlocutors for Pacific Island countries, ranging from Russia and India to the Bill Gates Foundation.<sup>139</sup> Newcomers have included the EU, Indonesia, India, Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Cuba, Georgia, Iran, Russia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).<sup>140</sup> Their interests are varied, Russia seeking UN votes for recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the UAE for their bid to headquarter the International Renewable Energy Agency.<sup>141</sup> As for commercial engagement, mineral exploration off Clipperton demonstrates the weight and range of this interest, including from France, Russia, Japan, China and Korea.<sup>142</sup> One Australian analyst alone in 2013 noted business interest coming from Ireland in the mobile

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<sup>136</sup> China in Fiji, FSM, PNG, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu ; Taiwan in Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Marshalls, Nauru, Palau and Tuvalu.

<sup>137</sup> See Herr and Bergin 2011: 18.

<sup>138</sup> See Herr and Birgin 2012.

<sup>139</sup> Atwood 2012.

<sup>140</sup> Firth 2013: 10, Herr and Birgin 2011a: 20, Brady and Henderson in Brady 2010: 206.

<sup>141</sup> Herr and Bergin 2011a: 21.

<sup>142</sup> See footnote 35.



phone industry, from French companies in the energy sector, US Exxon in PNG, South Korean companies in cassava, ethanol and tuna; Japanese companies in PNG's cement industry and as the largest employer in Samoa, Malaysian logging and palm oil interests in PNG; and Philippines, Malaysian, Thai and Chinese commercial interest in tuna processing.<sup>143</sup>

The engagement of others is sometimes more complex than aid or commercial interest. In the case of Indonesia, political interests arising from the support of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) for independence demands in Indonesia's province of Irian Jaya have led to an unlikely situation. In June 2015, presumably under pressure from Indonesia's neighbor and MSG founding member PNG, the MSG granted observer status (rather than the requested full membership) to the United Liberation Movement for West Papua; and in a mollifying move, admitted Indonesia as an associate member, on the basis of its large Melanesian indigenous population.<sup>144</sup> Dealing with Indonesia within its ranks will be an ongoing challenge for the MSG countries.

At the same time as others are becoming engaged, Pacific island leaders have been open to new interest through a deliberate Look North policy. The then Secretary-General of the PIF said in 2004 that the Pacific states welcomed China's growing role in the region.<sup>145</sup> In part their approach has stemmed from a desire to broaden investment and aid sourcing beyond traditional partners such as Australia and New Zealand. Pacific leaders like China's relatively strings-free approach, and can exploit traditional donor unease at China's new interest to maximize their returns. Cook Islands Prime Minister Geoffrey Henry, after establishing diplomatic relations with China in 1998, noted that the days were gone when the future of his country was linked solely and overwhelmingly to one country.<sup>146</sup> Samoa's Prime Minister Tuilaepa, in an interview in June 2012 said he considered China a better friend to Pacific countries than the US which he said had a lack of interest in the Pacific; and that China filled a gap that Australia and New Zealand could not fill as it was flexible about aid delivery; while Papua New Guinea's Prime Minister Peter O'Neill indicated in November 2012 that PNG's paramount strategic and security relationships were with Australia and the US but that his country would continue to look for economic growth opportunities in Asia as well as in Australia.<sup>147</sup>

The change has also partly arisen from political instability in Fiji, the largest of the island economies. Fiji was the first PIC to establish diplomatic relations with the PRC in 1975. After the military takeover of the government in 2006 by Bainarama, traditional partners Australia, New Zealand, the EU and France imposed sanctions and the PIF expelled Fiji from its ranks in 2009. In part it was retaliation against these traditional partners, particularly Australia, which has insisted on democracy and governance conditions before Fiji could re-join the PIF, that has led Fiji's wholehearted welcome of China's support and engagement.<sup>148</sup> Premier Ji visited Fiji

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<sup>143</sup> Hayward-Jones 2013: 9.

<sup>144</sup> Report by Fox 2015 and good analysis in Lawson 2015.

<sup>145</sup> Shie 2007: 314.

<sup>146</sup> Shie 2007: 314.

<sup>147</sup> Hayward-Jones 2013: 9, 13.

<sup>148</sup> Bainarama 2014.

in November 2014 and signed five agreements covering economic and defence cooperation, climate change, visa provisions for Fijians visiting China, and establishing a Chinese cultural centre in Fiji. Bainarama made a return visit to Beijing in July 2015 and sought scholarships for Fijians and trade concessions. Bainarama's bitter difference with Australia has also led him to look actively for alternative trade, aid and investment sources and regional partnerships (see next section).

Given the influx of these new aid and business players, more longstanding ones such as France must now compete, in pursuing their regional interests, for the time and attention from island countries which have small and overloaded bureaucracies.

## **Changing Regional Cooperation**

There has also been a discernible change in the way PICs are conducting their regional activity, moving away from traditional patterns of association with Australian and New Zealand both within the PIF and by strengthening partnerships in other international groupings.

As indicated, dictatorship in Fiji has led to shifts in the traditional focus of regional activity, often excluding traditional players like Australia and New Zealand, and with some support from China. Excluded from the PIF from 2008, Fiji began hosting its own regional Engaging with the Pacific meetings, on the eve of PIF summits, from 2010 including many, but not all, of the island states of the PIF, and on occasion French Polynesia and New Caledonia, but not Australia and New Zealand. China has funded the Pacific Island Development Forum, initiated by Fiji in 2013 to build on its Engaging with the Pacific group. Fiji's battle with the traditional partners continues: in April 2015, even though democratic elections had been held in September 2014, Fiji claimed it would not rejoin the PIF unless Australia and New Zealand were excluded.<sup>149</sup>

The PICs have sought to assert their interests within broader international groupings. In 2011, within the UN, those Pacific islands with UN representation have strengthened their identification with the Asia Group by achieving a change in the name of the UN grouping to which they belonged, from the "Asia Group", to the "Asia-Pacific". Within that group, the PICs work in in the Pacific Small Islands Developing States Group, which is basically the PIF minus Australia and New Zealand, who are in the Western European and Others Group.<sup>150</sup> Similarly, much of the island states' work on the central issue of climate change is done within the Small Islands States group,<sup>151</sup> which shares small island concerns and interests often at odds with Australian policy, and certainly introduces a large number of new players, albeit small. In this case, France's global interests stand to be well served by the PICs' shared interests with other islands. As the host of the November-December 2015 United Nations Global Climate Change conference, France has the support of these islands for its policy approaches, whereas Australia is on the outer.

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<sup>149</sup> Cooney 2015.

<sup>150</sup> Herr and Bergin 2011a and 2012.

<sup>151</sup> Fry 2014.

Australia and New Zealand were integral participants and founders of the Pacific Plan, crafted by the Forum in 2005 and centred on security, economic growth, sustainable development and good governance, aimed "to strengthen regional processes and outputs so that the regional system carries some of the burdens of sovereignty for the PICs that lack the capacity to do all that statehood requires of them."<sup>152</sup> Over time the Plan has lost momentum and it is the PICs who have re-cast it in 2014 as a more general Framework for Pacific Regionalism.<sup>153</sup> This Framework is a broad and flexible umbrella for PIC economic activity allowing for the many bilateral and other links with existing players such as Australia and New Zealand, but also with a range of new external players.

On the trade side, the PIF countries continue to work within their traditional collective trade framework agreements, the 2001 Pacific Island Countries Trade Agreement (PICTA) and Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER). The PACER includes Australia and New Zealand and was given greater impetus at Australia's behest from 2009 when it became PACER (Plus), a trade and economic integration agreement, at a time when the EU was advocating bilateral Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with the PICs. Apart from their involvement in these major regional negotiations, the PICS are increasingly having to comply with the styles of other players who often pursue bilateral rather than regional arrangements, notably with the EU in EPAs and with China.

The net result of these changes is that the number of international groupings the PICs are engaged in has increased, with a range of new partners coming into play, including Asian members of the UN Asia-Pacific Group, Caribbean and other island members of the Small Island States groups, and new economic partners. This adds to the challenges that traditional partners such as Australia and New Zealand, and France, have in their dealings with the region by reducing the space and attention to their concerns.

## **Effect on French Interests**

The combined effect of China's greater involvement in the region; renewed US and Japanese interest and ongoing, more complex, involvement by Taiwan; strengthened core Pacific island regional cooperation at home and in new international arenas; along with the increased economic involvement of other diverse players such as Indonesia, Korea, Russia, and sovereign and non-sovereign business agencies; has some consequences for France and the pursuit of its interests.

At a broad strategic level there are three consequences of recent trends for France.

First, the interest of new strategic players underlines the existing and potential value of the region, for France as for others, as a source of raw materials, particularly minerals, hydrocarbons, and potential sea-bed resources; as a source of political support including through

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<sup>152</sup> Herr and Bergin 2011a: 45.

<sup>153</sup> For an assessment of its successes and weaknesses see Newton-Cain 2014.

the numerous votes in the UN they represent; but also in terms of strategic benefits: access to sea-lanes; a base for military, communication and space activity; and as a theatre for France to play a unique role in the western alliance. It also highlights the unique characteristics of France, "one" unique player amongst the many others (more about this below).

But second, the field is more complicated. France is now one of many more players with interests in the South Pacific and must compete with them for the attention of the small island countries, and even for the attention of the local authorities in France's own collectivities, all of whom had serious capacity limitations in managing even the more narrow engagements of others in the past. And, as the Cold War years showed, the PICs (particularly post-coup Fiji) are skilled in playing the card of turning to major new powers both to extract new assistance and to pressure traditional partners into providing more. The entry of numerous new players, particularly China with its strategic and economic weight, lends a geo-strategic edge even to aid cooperation,<sup>154</sup> and some offer new and different models of economic development, not necessarily compatible with that of France's collectivities in the Pacific.

And third, France is dealing with these pressures within its own territories. In 2013 *Outre-mer* (Overseas France) Minister Lurel noted Japanese interest in closer links with New Caledonia and French Polynesia.<sup>155</sup> Local authorities in French Polynesia and New Caledonia have both played the card of relations with China in pressing their claims for more autonomy, and even independence, with France. In French Polynesia, former President Gaston Flosse, advocate for greater autonomy within France, has long pursued relations with China.<sup>156</sup> China's senior leaders have had stopovers in Papeete since the 1980s on their way to South American destination, and French Polynesian leaders, principally Flosse, but also pro-independence former President Oscar Temaru, have developed direct relationships with them, to the discomfort of France. France's Constitutional Council put a brake on Flosse's moves to set up a French Polynesian office in Beijing in 2004,<sup>157</sup> but there has been a Chinese consulate in Papeete from 2007.<sup>158</sup> Temaru when he was President intermittently from 2004 to 2013, pursued closer cooperation and joint ventures with China. The existence of a longstanding Chinese community has provided a base for China's engagement in French Polynesia.<sup>159</sup> China's offer of investment in developing the airport and hotels, has been controversial (see President Hollande's comments below).

In New Caledonia, Chinese companies were interested in taking over from the major Canadian partner in the northern nickel project in the early 2000s. Deflected from that, one Chinese company was establishing a competitive smelter in neighbouring Vanuatu.<sup>160</sup> Northern Province (Kanak) leaders have engaged with South Korean company Posco in nickel

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<sup>154</sup> See for example Wesley 2011.

<sup>155</sup> Lurel in Sénat 2013.

<sup>156</sup> See Bessard 2015 and Gonschor 2015.

<sup>157</sup> Fisher 2015a: 44.

<sup>158</sup> Not surprisingly in constant conflict with the Taiwanese as explained in Trémon 2009.

<sup>159</sup> See Trémon 2010: Ch 8.

<sup>160</sup> Dang 2014.

processing at Gwanyang,<sup>161</sup> and by 2014 a similar agreement was being planned with China's Jinchuan for processing at Guangxi.<sup>162</sup> In New Caledonia's south, France's own longstanding mine uses energy and staff inputs at a very high cost relative to competitors in the region from China and India.<sup>163</sup> And local authorities have begun the game of playing off links with China, specifically, the desirability or otherwise of exporting raw nickel, as opposed to nickel processed in New Caledonia, to the attractive China market, in the political debate about the future of New Caledonia.<sup>164</sup>

In response mainly to China's overtures in the French Pacific territories, President Hollande has indicated that France welcomes such investment, with the caveats that it should comply with local production controls; that France should be a major capital stakeholder; and that regulations and conditions are respected, particularly regarding the environment.<sup>165</sup>

Along with the more intense involvement of new and old big players come their own rivalries, including Sino-Japanese, US-China, and China-Taiwan competition, where far bigger stakes are in play than those in the South Pacific islands. In the resource area, the weight of the new players is significant, particularly China with its massive demand for fish, raw materials and minerals. Even the involvement of the EU presents France with difficulties, as the EU has a reputation in the region for having destroyed its own fish stocks and has been criticized for its non-cooperation in managing Western Pacific stocks.<sup>166</sup> So France is not only one among many more players, but it is one among many more complex, more powerful players with their own internecine rivalries.

Still, of all the players mentioned, France has one major and distinct advantage: it is present in the South Pacific region by virtue of sovereignty over its collectivities there, and is the only European power effectively present in the region. It may be an exogenous influence in terms of its primarily European focus, but its geographic and sovereign presence has so far been clear. To this extent, it is "one" very unique sovereign resident player amongst other more exogenous ones.

Another aspect to France's unique status is that, with increased world demand for resources, its sovereignty in New Caledonia gives it, for the first time, economic return for its regional presence through nickel, and potentially, petroleum. In a sense, because of the real and potential economic considerations attaching to its Pacific collectivities, France has a greater direct economic motivation than either Australia or New Zealand to engage in the region.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Fisher 2013: 137.

<sup>162</sup> Dang 2013.

<sup>163</sup> See Fabre in Sénat 2013.

<sup>164</sup> Fisher 2015b.

<sup>165</sup> Hollande 2014.

<sup>166</sup> See Brady and Henderson in Brady 2010: 206.

<sup>167</sup> Henningham observed in 1992 that for Australia and New Zealand the region was important in defence and security terms far outweighing its economic importance (Henningham 1992: 219). Stewart Firth noted that the non-sovereign Pacific states are of greater strategic importance than the independent Pacific states, and the French entities themselves were no exception (Firth 1989: 75).

In spite of this status, or perhaps because of it, the act of exerting influence has become more complex. With a greater number of players, there is more pressure than ever before on the tiny bureaucracies and foreign and trade ministries of the small Pacific island states. The influence and impact that any one country can wield are therefore negatively affected to some extent, even for resident regional countries like Australia or New Zealand, and indeed France, resident by virtue of its territories there. Like Australia and New Zealand,<sup>168</sup> France will need to be more attentive, more skilled, and more generous financially in its bilateral and multilateral engagement to influence opinion and acceptance in the region.

The plethora of recent French government and parliamentary papers underlining the geostrategic value of the Pacific presence indicate that the French State is seized of the new complexities. Just how much financial and political resource it can invest in maintaining, or building, its regional presence against a background of economic reforms and competing demands within the Hexagon is not clear.

## **MANAGING DEMANDS FOR AUTONOMY AND INDEPENDENCE IN ITS PACIFIC COLLECTIVITIES**

The legitimacy of France's presence in the region depends on its continuing role in its territories, which will, in turn, depend on the evolving views of the people there. Despite its current unequivocal resident status, the nature of France's future status in the region is not certain. It is managing pressures for more autonomy, and for some, independence, from within two of its most valuable Pacific possessions (French Polynesia and New Caledonia). Moreover, there is a timeline for New Caledonia, prescribed by the Noumea Accord, and its expiry is imminent, with a referendum process due in principle by 2018.<sup>169</sup>

As the local New Caledonian government is now in its final mandate under the Noumea Accord, France and the two major political groupings, those supporting independence and those supporting staying with France, are working together to prepare for a referendum process which must address questions of New Caledonia's international status; the remaining core sovereign responsibilities such as defence, foreign affairs, currency, justice and law and order; as well as citizenship and nationality issues.<sup>170</sup> The task is not easy and highly sensitive. There are divisions within the two major groupings for and against independence, almost greater than those between them. Principal issues, apart from the central one of independence v. staying with France, include protection of longstanding residents' rights over those of newcomers from other parts of France, and managing and distributing the benefits from New Caledonia's rich

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<sup>168</sup> For a recent analysis of the effect of the rising influence of China in the Pacific islands region on Australian policy see Hayward-Jones 2013; on New Zealand policy interests see Brady and Henderson in Brady 2010.

<sup>169</sup> Senior French officials are beginning to push this deadline out, arguing technical provisions under the Noumea Accord providing for scenarios beyond 2018 (to 2023, Christnacht 2011 and to 2022, Lechervy 2015).

<sup>170</sup> Noumea Accord 1998 Article 5.



nickel resource.<sup>171</sup> Regional governments, particularly the Melanesian island states surrounding New Caledonia in what Australians and other regional countries call the Melanesian 'arc of instability,' are watching closely and are closely connected to local Kanak independence leaders.<sup>172</sup>

Leaders of French Polynesia, whose political debate engages principally those seeking more autonomy within France and those seeking independence, are also watching developments in New Caledonia closely with that territory's own future in mind. The depth of division has led to multiple changes of local government since the pro-independence group first won government in 2004. Its reinscription on the UN decolonization list has heightened international attention.<sup>173</sup>

This paper has argued that the stakes for France are high, higher than ever before. So far the French state has implemented a phased series of handovers of responsibilities to New Caledonian local leaders which is innovatory and impressive. But the final stage is now to be played out. It is no accident that in participating in the 2013 Senate Colloquium on France's future in the Pacific, a senior Foreign Ministry official identified as the first challenge for France, the evolution of the political and institutional evolution of its collectivities there.<sup>174</sup>

Fortunately, within the region there are many kinds of models for France and New Caledonia to draw from. Many states exist in various kinds of association with larger countries, including the Cook Islands, Tokelau and Niue with New Zealand; the Mariannas, Guam, Western Samoa and Marshall Islands with the United States; Norfolk Island with Australia.<sup>175</sup> But, apart from domestic sensitivities within New Caledonia, the regional backdrop is complicated, with a referendum in PNG on the independence demands of Bougainville to occur by around 2016; fragilities in the Solomon Islands and Fiji; and now the reconstruction of Vanuatu after the devastating March 2015 cyclone.

## CONCLUSION

In recent years, France has both a sharper sense of its strategic interests in the South Pacific, and a more competitive environment in which it is pursuing them. It retains a presence in an area that is currently the object of the attention of a future superpower, and plays an important balancing role in protecting the interests of the existing superpower. It has improved its image

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<sup>171</sup> For a feel for the debate, see Colloque 2014, Boengkih 2010, Chappell 2013, Regnault and Fayaud 2008, de Deckker and Fabéron 2008, Chauchat 2006, Deladriere 2004, Christnacht 2003.

<sup>172</sup> Much has been written in the Anglophone literature on the Melanesian arc of instability, coined by Paul Dibb in his article in 1999 (Dibb 1999: 18), including most significantly Ron May's 2005 work (May 2005). For a French view see de Deckker 2003 and a more recent contemporary French analysis Wittersheim 2014.

<sup>173</sup> Background on recent developments is available in Gonschor 2015, Regnault 2010 and 2005, Al Wardi 2015 and 2009.

<sup>174</sup> Laurin in Sénat 2013 – the other two were regional stability and access to the region's "immense" resources.

<sup>175</sup> Aldrich in Regnault and Fayaud 2008, Fisher 2013: 295-7, Gain in Mallatrait et Meszaros 2009: 19.

in the region after major controversies thirty years ago. But these roles are now being pursued in a more complex environment, where France is one amongst many more players. On the one hand the players, apart from being more numerous, now include more deeply engaged traditional players with their own rivalries in play, plus newcomers with business rather than aid on their minds, who prefer bilateral rather than traditional regional approaches, and some from far away as the island countries cement new small island links in international fora. On the other hand, France is currently a unique "one", the sole resident European power with all the resources and assets it alone can bring.

At the same time, this legitimacy of resident sovereignty is undergoing redefinition. France is managing the last stages of its historic compromise with leaders of New Caledonia over greater autonomy and even possibly a form of independence, which will determine the nature of France's future regional presence not only in New Caledonia but also in French Polynesia, and indeed in others of its possessions around the globe.

Some practical policy measures are open to France to shore up its position in the changing strategic context in the South Pacific region. These include:

- Ensuring a referendum process in New Caledonia which encourages the local people to consider options consistent with UN decolonization principles, given France's responsibilities as a UN Security Council member;
- Continuing to build cooperative links with China including within the region itself, for example at post PIF summit dialogues, encouraging China to coordinate its aid and other engagements in the region;
- Continuing to work closely with Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Japan to advance western alliance interests in the region;
- Opening its Pacific collectivities more to economic engagement in the region and to more two-way exchanges of officials, staff and cultural events, including by strengthening the genuinely local capacity of its collectivities' international relations units;
- Strengthening its cooperation and financial contributions to the SPC, PIF and the range of subsidiary Council of Regional Organisations in the Pacific (CROP) organisations, to maintain and strengthen its regional influence;
- Maintaining a regional military presence that would be consistent with its strategic interests and domestic objectives, but also with its Noumea Accord commitments – whereby responsibility for defence is to be subject to a referendum process. Such activity should involve continued and strengthened defence co-operation, involving its local territorial leaders, with large regional powers and selected island states, especially focused on disaster response and the protection of fisheries. One example of France's changing commitments in the new strategic environment has been its participation, from 2 May 2013, in meetings of South Pacific Defence Ministers, which include France, Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Tonga and Chile. The inaugural meeting itself suggested that "certain new states"

could be invited to observe existing regional military activities and exercises especially in the fields of humanitarian assistance, disaster relief and maritime surveillance.<sup>176</sup>

Of all of these policy approaches, none is as important as the process of defining New Caledonia's, and by implication, France's, status in the region over the next few years. The way in which France manages this, and the democratic legitimacy of that process, will be important in maintaining and strengthening regional acceptance for its own future presence.

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<sup>176</sup> See Hayward-Jones 2013: 16 and South Pacific Defence Ministers 2013.

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