

France in the South Pacific: An Australian Perspective

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At the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century, Australia continues to define its role as the leading power in the South Pacific region.¹ The United States, having contributed to the defence of the region in the Second World War and with its own Pacific island dependencies north of the Equator has effectively left the South Pacific to Australia.² The United Kingdom remains present principally in the 54 descendants of the mutineers of the *Bounty*, on Pitcairn Islands. It withdrew from the regional development cooperation organization, the Secretariat for the Pacific Community (SPC), in 2005. The independent countries of the Pacific Islands are facing challenges stemming not only from the post-colonization issues of governance, resource distribution and development, but also environmental issues fundamental to their existence, such as climate change and protection of fisheries resources.³ Together with

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¹ This paper refers to the South Pacific region as the area encompassing the 22 members of the Secretariat for the Pacific Community.

² For example, there is no mention of the South Pacific as such in two major U.S. strategic documents, Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy* (Washington, D.C., 2008); and The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C., 2006), which notes, "The United States is a Pacific nation, with extensive interests throughout East and Southeast Asia," not referring to the South Pacific, 45.

³ Dennis Rumley, Vivian Forbes and Christopher Griffin, *Australia's Arc of Instability: The Political and Cultural Dynamics of Regional Security* (Dordrecht, 2006); New Pacific Review, *L'État des états – Pacific Island States Today* (Canberra, 2003); and AUSAID, *Tracking Development and Governance in the Pacific* (Canberra, 2009).

New Zealand, Australia bankrolls the main regional organizations, and is the principal aid donor to the region.⁴ Australia and New Zealand are also looked to as guarantors of last resort for governance and stability in the independent and quasi-independent Pacific islands states of the South Pacific, evident in the request in 2003 by the government of the Solomon Islands to Australia to assist it to regain control in the face of insurgency, leading to the establishment of a Regional Assistance Mission there.⁵ At the same time, new interest in the Pacific is being shown by China, whose values and strategic interests differ to those of Australia and its allies.⁶

The one remaining Western power that has retained its sovereign presence in the South Pacific region is France. It is present in its three entities: New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and Wallis and Futuna. The purpose of this paper is to examine aspects of France's regional presence from the 1980s onwards; to address the questions of whether France wants to remain in the region and, if so, why; and to identify areas of risk for it and the region. Given the recent relative peace in the French Pacific entities, and some impending deadlines in New Caledonia, where voters are to decide on its international status sometime between 2014 to 2018, a review of the benefits to France deriving from its Pacific presence, particularly its presence in New Caledonia, may serve as a reminder of what is at stake should circumstances change.

In asking broad strategic questions, this paper takes up something of a vacuum in the academic literature in English. The flurry of English-language writings in the troubled 1980s and 1990s period, mainly focusing on opposition to France's Pacific policies at the time, has reduced to a trickle, coinciding with France's adjustments to its controversial policies discussed in this paper. Post-2000 French-language writers, including Jean-Yves Faberon, Mathias Chauchat, Pierre Cadéot, Jean-Marc Regnault, Frédéric Angleviel, Jean-Pierre and François Doumenge, Paul de Deckker, and Alain Christnacht,⁷ mainly focus on the three French Pacific entities themselves. Isabelle Cordonnier, Nathalie Mrgudovic, and Sarah Mohamed-Gaillard have written more broadly on France in the South Pacific.⁸ Only a handful of English-language writers address the subject regularly, including Nic Maclellan, David Chappell and Eric

⁴ Secretariat for the Pacific Community, *Annual Reports and Financial Statements* (Noumea, 2009).

⁵ Jon Fraenkel, *The Manipulation of Custom: From Uprising to Intervention in the Solomon Islands* (Wellington, 2004) and Sinclair Dinnen and Colin Firth, *Politics and State-building in the Solomon Island* (Canberra, 2008) analyse the situation in Solomon Islands leading to the establishment of the Australia-led Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands.

⁶ Grahame Dobell, "China and Taiwan in the South Pacific: Diplomatic Chess versus Pacific Political Rugby," *Lowy Institute Policy Brief* (Sydney, 2007).

⁷ For example, Jean-Pierre Doumenge, François Doumenge and Jean-Yves Faberon, *L'outre-mer français* (Paris, 2000); Mathias Chauchat, *Vers un développement citoyen: perspective d'émancipation pour la Nouvelle-Calédonie* (Grenoble, 2006); Pierre Cadéot, *L'outre-mer français dans le Pacifique Sud: Nouvelle-Calédonie, Polynésie Française, Wallis Et Futuna* (Noumea, 2003); Jean-Marc Regnault, *Tahiti malade, malade de ses politiques* (Paris, 2007); Frédéric Angleviel, *Brève histoire politique de la Nouvelle-Calédonie contemporaine (1945-2000)* (Noumea, 2006); Paul de Deckker and Jean-Yves Faberon, eds., "La Nouvelle-Calédonie pour l'intégration mélanésienne," *New Pacific Review/La Nouvelle Revue du Pacifique* 4:1 (2008); Alain Christnacht, *La Nouvelle-Calédonie* (Paris, 2004).

⁸ Nathalie Mrgudovic, *La France dans le Pacifique Sud: les enjeux de la puissance* (Paris, 2008); Sarah Mohamed-Gaillard, *L'Archipel de la Puissance: la politique de la France dans le Pacifique Sud de 1946 à 1998* (Brussels, 2010).

Waddell,⁹ and they focus mainly on New Caledonia and, to a lesser extent, French Polynesia, rather than on broader strategic issues.

France's Early Regional Presence

France has been in the region as long as any other European power. It was the ill-fated 1503 voyage of Paulmier de Gonneville,¹⁰ whose records of the Southern land that he discovered were lost in a shipwreck, that set off Europeans' further searches for the Southern continent. French seamen sailed aboard Magellan's vessel when it entered the Pacific in 1520.¹¹ French buccaneers with names like *Passe Partout* and *Hallebarde* marauded down the western South American coast in the seventeenth century.¹²

France invested considerable resources in sending official expeditions to the Pacific well into the nineteenth century, including the renowned voyages by Bougainville, La Pérouse, d'Entrecasteaux and Baudin.¹³ France's early presence was characterized by a spirit of scientific inquiry, national prestige, rivalry with others, most notably the British, and triumphs but also numerous losses and sacrifice.¹⁴ France established missionary, convict and settler groups in the region, protected by the French navy. By the late nineteenth century, France had declared suzerainty in what are today French Polynesia, New Caledonia and Wallis and Futuna and shared joint administration of New Hebrides (now Vanuatu) in a Condominium with Britain from 1886.

The Pacific territories were the most remote and offered least to France of all its overseas territories. Robert Aldrich points out that

⁹ See, for example, David Chappell's regular updates on events in the French entities in *The Contemporary Pacific* such as "New Caledonia: Melanesia in Review: Issues and Events, 2008," *The Contemporary Pacific* 21:2 (Fall 2009): 352-64; and Eric Waddell's *Jean-Marie Tjibaou: Kanak Witness to the World: An Intellectual Biography* (Honolulu, 2008). Nic Maclellan writes regularly for *Islands Business* and *Pacific Magazine* on New Caledonia, and on nuclear issues in the Pacific, touching on strategic issues, for example in "The Nuclear Age in the Pacific Islands," *The Contemporary Pacific* 17:2 (2005): 263-372, but concentrates mainly on the French entities themselves, including in his "The Australia-France Defence Co-Operation Agreement: Implications for France in the South Pacific," *Nautilus Institute Australia Austral Policy Forum* 09-19 (2009b), which focuses on New Caledonia.

¹⁰ A. d'Avezac-Macaya, *Campagne du navire l'Espoir de Honfleur 1503-1505* (Paris, 1859); E. Boissais, *Binot Paulmier dit le capitaine de Gonneville: son voyage, sa descendance* (Caen, 1912); and E.W. Dahlgren, "Voyages français: la destination de la Mer du Sud avant Bougainville," *Nouvelles Archives des missions scientifiques*, vol. XIV (1907): 423-568.

¹¹ James Alexander Robertson, ed., *Magellan's Voyage around the World* (Cleveland, 1906).

¹² New Zealand historian John Dunmore noted the difficulty in tracing the story of the French buccaneers, often whose nicknames alone survive, Dunmore, *Visions and Realities: France in the Pacific, 1695-1995* (Waikanae, N.Z., 1997), 17; and see Philip Gosse, *The Pirate's Who's Who* (New York, 1924), available in the Project Gutenberg EBook website, accessed September 2010.

¹³ See Étienne Taillemite, *Bougainville et ses compagnons autour du monde* (Paris, 1977); Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, *Voyage autour du monde* (Paris, [1771] 1982); John Dunmore, ed., *The Journal of Jean-François de Galaup de la Pérouse, 1785-1788* (London, 1994); Frank Horner, *Looking for La Pérouse: D'Entrecasteaux in Australia and the South Pacific, 1792-1793* (Carlton South, Vic., 1995); F. Jean Fornasiero, *Encountering Terra Australis: The Australian Voyages of Nicolas Baudin and Matthew Flinders* (Kent Town, South Australia, 2004) and transcriptions of Baudin's journals on the University of Sydney's Baudin Legacy website, currently being finalised.

¹⁴ John Dunmore has extensively researched and reported this long story, in *Les Explorateurs français dans le Pacifique* (Tahiti, 1978); and *Visions and Realities: France in the Pacific, 1695-1995*.

The Pacific territories had to import labour and capital; the number of white settlers...was small; many of the tropical products France obtained from the South Pacific...were produced elsewhere in the empire; even the mineral resources, such as nickel and phosphate, could be procured from the colonies of “friendly” powers.

France nevertheless held on to these outposts, and Aldrich also notes that the nineteenth-century Oceanic lobbyists defended their cause, principally in terms of their territories’ potential future value.¹⁵ Events during and immediately after the First World War drew Paris’ attention to the Pacific outposts. Both French Polynesia and New Caledonia supplied indigenous soldiers to fight for France in the First World War, although there was an indigenous rebellion in New Caledonia in 1917.¹⁶ These were also prompted by efforts to recruit soldiers and demands for greater autonomy and even independence in French Polynesia.¹⁷ A wartime German vessel had sought to help itself to phosphate from one of the French Polynesian islands, and the approach of the Second World War heightened the significance of New Caledonia’s nickel, much of which was sold to Japan – a confirmation of the island’s commercial and geopolitical significance.

New Caledonia manifestly became strategically important from the early days of the Second World War, as de Gaulle moved early to establish his support over that of Vichy authorities there and as nickel exports to Japan ceased, both with direct Australian assistance.¹⁸ It was in Noumea, the capital of New Caledonia, where Australia established what was only its fourth diplomatic mission in 1940, well before it had a mission in Paris, in order to monitor Australian interests as war clouds gathered.¹⁹ From New Caledonia, the American allies launched the Pacific battles fundamental to the defence of Australia during World War II.²⁰ And it was in Noumea that, after the war, the first institution of regional cooperation was established in 1947, the South Pacific Commission (SPC), now the Secretariat for the Pacific Community.²¹

France Isolates Itself in the Region: Nuclear Testing and Decolonization Issues

Just twenty years ago, France was considered a pariah in the region. Its policy of nuclear testing at Moruroa in French Polynesia, which began in 1966 after France lost its former testing site when Algeria became independent, was strongly opposed by Pacific island governments, by many in the Australian public, and more broadly in the international

¹⁵ Robert Aldrich, *The French Presence in the South Pacific, 1842-1940* (London, 1990), 325, 333-34.

¹⁶ Eric Waddell, *Jean-Marie Tjibaou: Kanak Witness to the World – An Intellectual Biography* (Manoa, 2009) 38.

¹⁷ Jean-Yves Faberon and Jacques Ziller, *Droit des collectivités d’outre-mer* (Paris, 2007), 314.

¹⁸ A story told in John Lawrey, *The Cross of Lorraine in the South Pacific: Australia and the Free French Movement 1940-1942* (Canberra, 1982); and Denise Fisher, “Supporting the Free French in New Caledonia: First Steps in Australian Diplomacy,” *Explorations* 49:1 (December 2010): 18-37.

¹⁹ Fisher, “Supporting the Free French in New Caledonia: First Steps in Australian Diplomacy,” 24, and Australian Consulate General Noumea, *Seventy Years of Bilateral Relations* (Noumea, 2010), 4.

²⁰ Kim Munholland, *Rock of Contention: Free French and Americans at War in New Caledonia, 1940-1945* (New York, 2005).

²¹ Secretariat of the Pacific Community, *Meeting House of the Pacific: The Story of SPC, 1947-2007* (Noumea, 2007).

community.²² In 1980, France had resisted the independence of Vanuatu (the former New Hebrides Condominium) where it had shared joint administrative responsibility with Britain, an attitude that left a legacy of suspicion there.²³ Furthermore, France's handling of independence demands in New Caledonia and French Polynesia, from the mid-1950s onwards, was a long history of statutory change involving intermittently extending greater autonomy only to revoke it by later statutes.²⁴

In New Caledonia, France encouraged ever-increasing numbers of immigrants from other parts of France and the French Polynesian islands, reducing the indigenous population to a minority in New Caledonia, and providing one of the causes for the rise of the Kanak independence movement led by a former priest, Jean-Marie Tjibaou.²⁵ This, together with the pattern of statutory changes undermining the delivery of greater autonomy, resulted in virtual civil war in New Caledonia by 1984. Euphemistically referred to as *les événements*, bitter, violent protest continued until 1988. France then brokered an agreement, the Matignon/Oudinot Accords, in 1988 to end the violence. The Accords created three provinces and a territory-wide Congress, established a principle of economic re-balancing to include Melanesian development, and effectively delayed a vote on independence for ten years to 1998 (later extended for another twenty years by the Noumea Accord, as discussed below). However, the fragility of the situation was evident when Tjibaou and his deputy, Yewéiné Yewéiné, were assassinated by Kanak associates in 1989.

The region's reaction to France's policies in the South Pacific was strong and coordinated. Opposition had been evident in the South Pacific against any form of atmospheric testing, including that carried out by Britain and the US, from 1956.²⁶ As early as 1971, France's opposition to any discussion within the SPC of political issues had led independent island states to form a separate political organization, the South Pacific Forum (later known as the Pacific Islands Forum – PIF).²⁷ In 1974 Australia and New Zealand took the issue of France's atmospheric testing of nuclear devices to the International Court of Justice, resulting in France's suspending atmospheric testing (but not underground testing) in 1975.²⁸ Small and newly independent as most of them were, the Pacific Island states nevertheless conducted an effective international campaign against France's nuclear testing and decolonization policies in the 1980s. This campaign

²² Evident in Bengt and Marie-Thérèse Danielsson's *Poisoned Reign: French Nuclear Colonialism in the Pacific* (Ringwood, Vic., 1986) and described in Derek Woolner's *Raison d'État and Popular Response: The Resumption of French Nuclear Testing in the South Pacific*, Parliamentary Research Service Current Issues Brief No 47, 1994/95 (Canberra: June 1995).

²³ Dunmore, *Visions and Realities: France in the Pacific, 1695-1995*, 269; Stephen Henningham, *France and the South Pacific: A Contemporary History* (North Sydney, 1992), 42.

²⁴ See Henningham, *France and the South Pacific: A Contemporary History*; and Faberon and Ziller, *Droit des collectivités d'outre-mer*.

²⁵ Henningham, *France and the South Pacific: A Contemporary History*, 193.

²⁶ Notably, the pre-independence assemblies of the Cook Islands and Western Samoa, in Jean Chesneaux and Nic Maclellan, *La France dans le Pacifique: de Bougainville à Moruroa* (Paris, 1992), 184; New Zealand also protested against American testing. See Nathalie Mrgudovic, *La France dans le Pacifique Sud: les enjeux de la puissance*, 113.

²⁷ See Steven Bates, *The South Pacific Island Countries and France: A Study in Inter-State Relations* (Canberra, 1990), 42.

²⁸ Chesneaux and Maclellan, *La France dans le Pacifique: de Bougainville à Moruroa*, 188; Mrgudovic, *La France dans le Pacifique Sud: les enjeux de la puissance*, 118.

resulted in the Declaration of a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in the Pacific in 1983 and a moratorium and eventual suspension of nuclear testing by France in French Polynesia. By the mid 1980s, a sub-group, the Melanesian Spearhead Group, was formed to work for the decolonization of New Caledonia. In 1986 the small Pacific Island states achieved the reinscription of New Caledonia as a non-self-governing territory with the United Nations Decolonization Committee, the first time a French territory was considered as such since France had declined to comply with UN self-determination provisions in 1947.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, France sought to improve its regional image with a number of measures, including by creating a South Pacific Fund and appointing a roving Secretary of State for the South Pacific. These efforts met with limited success, since they were not accompanied by appropriate policy changes in the two critical areas of concern, nuclear testing and decolonization of New Caledonia. Instead, French action was heavy-handed. The French President Jacques Chirac appointed as Secretary of State for the Pacific his close friend and supporter Gaston Flosse. Flosse served as the pro-France Vice-President, then President, of French Polynesia from 1982 until 2004 (stepping aside only from 1987 to 1991 when he took on the new role). Within French Polynesia, Flosse was a controversial character, who formed his own para-military force and frequently came before the courts on corruption charges.²⁹ In 1987 Flosse famously turned up at a South Pacific Forum meeting with his luxury armoured limousine while all the heads of government present made do with the car fleet provided by their Samoan hosts,³⁰ an indication of a lack of sensitivity towards his Pacific islands hosts and colleagues. More seriously, in 1985, France damaged its cause by sending intelligence agents into the port of Auckland, New Zealand, to blow up the Greenpeace vessel, the *Rainbow Warrior*, used to protest against nuclear testing. And, after suspending nuclear tests in 1992, France provocatively resumed them for a brief period in 1995.³¹

France Implements Conciliatory Policy Change

After years of lobbying by Pacific Islands Forum countries and an annual resolution in the United Nations calling for appropriate steps to self-determination in New Caledonia,³² by the early 2000s, France had made some critical policy changes. It finally ended its nuclear tests in French Polynesia in 1996 and became a cooperative aid partner with independent Vanuatu. It had negotiated a further agreement in New Caledonia, the Noumea Accord, signed in late 1998, after significant compromise by both Kanak pro-independence and largely European pro-France leaders. The Accord provided for progressive transfer, by 2014, of a range of responsibilities to a collegial local government drawn from all elected parties, albeit with the arrangements still falling short

²⁹ See Jean-Marc Regnault, *Le Pouvoir confisqué en Polynésie française* (Paris, 2005); Matthew Nichols, "The Impact of France on Conflict and Stability in the South Pacific" (Masters thesis, University of Canterbury, 2007), 128; *Radio New Zealand International* (21 June 2006); *Flash d'Océanie* (24 December 2009); L. Gonschor, "Polynesia in Review: Issues and Events, 1 July 2007 to 30 June 2008: French Polynesia," *The Contemporary Pacific* 21:1 (2009): 151-62.

³⁰ Chesneaux and Maclellan, *La France dans le Pacifique: de Bougainville à Moruroa*.

³¹ The regional reaction is presented in N. Maclellan and J. Chesneaux, *After Moruroa: France in the South Pacific*, (New York, 1998).

³² From December 1987 to the present, see for example UN documents A/Res/42/79 (4 December 1987) and A/Res/64/102 (19 January 2010).

of full autonomy; and it extended yet again a vote on independence, this time until 2014-2018.³³ The Accord bought time for France to implement promised greater devolution of administrative responsibility and wealth distribution, particularly by expanding development of the principal asset, nickel, from the mainly European south of the New Caledonian mainland to the predominantly Kanak north.³⁴ The Noumea Accord represented one final chance for France to deliver on promised autonomy measures which had been revoked in the past.³⁵

While it is too early for a full analysis on implementation of Noumea Accord commitments, it can be said that France has performed creditably in advancing financial and advisory support to the fledgling local government, although the schedule of critical handovers of administrative responsibilities has slipped.³⁶ But France has sent, at best, mixed messages on key elements of the Accord. France has been dilatory in implementing an agreement to restrict the electorate for certain local elections to long-term residents and sought to exclude the category of ethnicity from the census,³⁷ both sensitive issues for the indigenous Kanak people wary of being out-numbered by the generally pro-France European population and by immigrants from French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna. France also has raised for consideration the possibility of New Caledonia moving to adopt the Euro as its currency to replace the CFP or French Pacific currency (a colonial-era currency pegged first to the Franc and now to the Euro) when the Noumea Accord specifically provides for currency to be the subject of a vote only after 2014. The promised re-balancing of economic development to include the Kanaks is under way backed by enormous financial outlays by the French. However, the planned two new multi-billion dollar nickel projects are still not producing, and the major new project at Goro in the European-dominated south is far more advanced than that in the Kanak north, although it has missed several production target dates.³⁸ So, over half-way through the Noumea Accord implementation period, the 150-year-old French-dominated nickel company the *Société le Nickel*, based in the wealthy south, remains the sole processor of the nickel resource. Economic and social re-balancing has been slower than expected, and a small Kanak labour group, more extreme than the mainstream pro-independence groups, is starting to flex its muscles in response.³⁹

³³ The negotiation and contents of the Noumea Accord, and the preceding Matignon/Oudinot Accords, are well summarized by Alain Christnacht, *La Nouvelle Calédonie* (Paris, 2004), ch. 3.

³⁴ Leah Horowitz, "Toward a Viable Independence? The Koniambo Project and the Political Economy of Mining in New Caledonia," *The Contemporary Pacific* 16 (2004): 287-319.

³⁵ See, for example, comments by Kanak leader Roch Pidjot in 1984: "You have hurt us too many times. So we have become skeptical, and we will judge the Government not on its declarations but on its actions," cited in Eric Waddell, *Jean-Marie Tjibaou: Kanak Witness to the World – An Intellectual Biography*, 128.

³⁶ See analysis by Adrian Muckle, "No More Violence or War: 20 Years of Nation-Building in New Caledonia," *The Journal of Pacific History* 54 (2009): 179-94.

³⁷ The pro-France and pro-independence groups differed over the interpretation of the restricted electorate for local elections, an issue which France only resolved in 2007, President Chirac ordered the removal of an "ethnicity" question from the census in 2003 only reinstating it in a different form in 2009. This made difficult analysis of ethnic composition of the population, a key indicator for the minority Kanak, mainly pro-independence, group. See also Nic Maclellan, "Under a New Flag: Defining Citizenship in New Caledonia," *State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Discussion Paper 2010/2* (Canberra, August 2010).

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ N. Maclellan, "New Government in New Caledonia – The May 2009 elections in a French Pacific Territory," *State Society and Governance in Melanesia Briefing Paper 3/2009* (Canberra, 2009): 1-12; and

Problems have emerged in French Polynesia as well. French Polynesia's only economic resources, other than French budgetary support, are high-end tourism, pearls and fisheries. From the late 1960s, the economy became heavily dependent on French expenditure through the presence of infrastructure and personnel related to nuclear testing. When it ceased nuclear testing in 1996, France negotiated a generous budgetary compensation package, which it pays to this day. With the close relationship between local leader Gaston Flosse and the Chirac government, France introduced statutory reforms which included strengthened powers for a local president and a Tahitian flag which flies alongside the French flag.⁴⁰ In early 2004, France introduced further statutory reforms designed to bolster Flosse's pro-France group,⁴¹ but some of the measures backfired. One reform was to accord extra weighting to the winning party, which it was assumed would be the pro-France group. When the pro-independence group unexpectedly won the 2004 elections and benefited from the extra weighting, returning a long-standing pro-independence leader, Oscar Temaru, as President and breaking Flosse's hold on that position, the pro-French groups, led by Flosse, resisted to the point of requiring a re-run of the election, with France threatening to turn off the tap of economic aid if the pro-independence group won.⁴² Although Temaru's pro-independence government indeed won once again, it has been constantly frustrated since by floor-crossing and pay-offs by the pro-France group, resulting in 12 changes of French Polynesia's President since 2004,⁴³ putting stable, democratic local government at risk in French Polynesia. Within the region, the effect of these developments is complicated by the fact that Temaru has strong links with regional Pacific Island independent state leaders, whereas Flosse has been seen by regional leaders generally as a disruptive force, given the legacy of his actions as French Secretary of State for the Pacific and the nature of his political leadership of French Polynesia.

France Builds Regional Links

Regionally and internationally, France is strengthening its engagement as a Pacific partner. In 2004, France initiated a biannual Oceanic Summit, meetings hosted by the French President with all PIF leaders at venues alternating between the French Pacific collectivities and Paris. France has worked with Australia and New Zealand under the 1992 FRANZ (France, Australia, New Zealand) arrangements for joint maritime surveillance and natural disaster assistance, and stepped up defence exercises and cooperation, including collaboration with other Pacific island countries.⁴⁴ From 2002 it has been working on a regional coral reefs initiative, and in 2006 France signed an agreement with Australia and New Zealand on illegal fishing surveillance. France has also encouraged greater participation in regional bodies by its Pacific entities. It has continued modest funding to the region through a Pacific Fund, with a 2 million Euro

Denise Fisher, "Industrial strife as New Caledonia goes to the polls," *The Interpreter* blogsite, Lowy Institute (16 March 2009).

⁴⁰ The Internal Autonomy Statute of 1984, French Law no. 84-820 (6 September 1984).

⁴¹ The Organic Law of February 2004, French Law no. 2004-193 (27 February 2004).

⁴² David Chappell, "Political review of French Polynesia," *The Contemporary Pacific* 17 (2005): 193-203.

⁴³ *Flash d'Océanie*, 25 November 2009.

⁴⁴ "France Country Brief" and "New Caledonia Country Brief" on Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade website <www.dfat.gov.au> accessed 3 August 2010.

allocation in 2009 and by contributions to the Secretariat for the Pacific Community (just over 3 million Euro a year over ten years to 2009).⁴⁵ French Foreign Affairs Ministry figures show that France spent 27.8 million Euros in aid to the region in 2006, 98 million Euros in 2007 and 103 million Euros in 2009.⁴⁶ Moreover France has led greater development cooperation in the region by the European Union.⁴⁷ While these developments were all welcomed by regional recipients, the figures involved (at most 103 million Euros in 2009 including some double-counting of EU/French funds) are extremely modest relative to outlays by Australia, which has allocated 790 million Euro (1.09 billion Australian dollars) to the region in the year 2009-10;⁴⁸ and New Zealand, with 151 million Euros (280 million New Zealand dollars) per year for the next three years.⁴⁹

It is notable that it was only after concrete changes in policy that were controversial for Pacific leaders, that is, ceasing nuclear testing and seriously addressing decolonization issues, rather than through diplomatic measures such as more meetings and engagement in regional aid and activities, that France's relationships in the region improved. France secured the status of observer to the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) for New Caledonia in 1999 only after the conclusion of the Noumea Accord and for French Polynesia in 2004 only after statutory change there earlier that year. The PIF made a further gesture by granting both a specially-created status of Associate Member in 2006; Wallis and Futuna became an observer the same year. France's three outposts in the Pacific are now seeking full membership of this regional organization of "independent and self-governing states."⁵⁰ At their August 2010 Summit, Forum leaders referred to New Caledonia's request for full membership, noted that the Noumea Accord "self-determination" process itself would resolve the question of New Caledonia's international standing, and pointedly referred to further engagement, including by a visiting Forum mission (which had not taken place since 2004). The Forum simply "welcomed the continuing interest of French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna to deepen their engagement with the Forum."⁵¹ Clearly, Forum governments do not want to move further to engage the French Pacific entities without their further evolution towards independence and self-government.

New Caledonia's pro-France President at the time of the PIF summit, Philippe Gomès, also sought full membership for New Caledonia in the Melanesian Spearhead Group,⁵² the Melanesian sub-group formed in 1984 to drive opposition to France's decolonization policies in New Caledonia. Although currently New Caledonia is not a member, the Kanak pro-independence coalition, the Front de Libération Nationale Kanak

⁴⁵ Secretariat for the Pacific Community *Annual Reports and Financial Statements figures* (Noumea, 2009).

⁴⁶ Ministère des Affaires étrangères, *Livre blanc sur la politique étrangère et européenne de la France*, July 2008 and website <www.diplomatie.gouv.fr> accessed 14 May 2009 and 26 February 2010. It is not clear whether these figures include some of France's contribution to the region through EU funding.

⁴⁷ Currently worth 333 million Euros from 2008-2013 or 66 million Euros a year, which includes some of the French contributions referred to above. European Union, *Brochure of Delegation for the Pacific*, 2010.

⁴⁸ Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Press Release, 12 May 2009.

⁴⁹ NZAID website <www.nzaid.govt.nz/programmes/c-pac-countries.html> accessed 6 July 2010.

⁵⁰ See statement by New Caledonian President Gomès, *Flash d'Océanie* (19 January 2010). Pacific Islands Forum describes its members as 16 "independent and self-governing states," The Pacific Islands Forum website, accessed 27 September 2010.

⁵¹ See Pacific Islands Forum Communiqué, 5 August 2010 on the Forum website <www.forumsec.org.fj>

⁵² *Flash d'Océanie*, (19 January 2010).

et Socialiste (FLNKS), is a member, along with Vanuatu, Fiji, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. By seeking to replace the FLNKS coalition, the pro-France dominated New Caledonian government would weaken the pro-independence voice.

France has also decided, after sixty years, to comply with United Nations decolonization measures relating to New Caledonia. From 1947, France had declined to consider that its Pacific entities were non-self-governing territories and had not complied with UN requirements for Administering Authorities to transmit information to the United Nations about the evolving self-government of their territories. When Pacific Islands Forum countries secured the reinscription of New Caledonia as a non-self-governing territory with the UN Decolonization Committee in 1986, France declined either to recognize the listing or to comply with UN reporting provisions. However, in 2004, for the first time France submitted a report to the UN Decolonization Committee, effectively conceding the latter's status as a non-self-governing territory.⁵³ In November 2009, a representative of the pro-France government of New Caledonia visited New York and addressed the committee for the first time, inviting it to hold its next regular regional seminar on the Pacific in Noumea, which the committee did in May 2010.⁵⁴ But reflecting sensitivity to outside criticism and indicating the possible limits to its cooperation with the committee, France did not accede to requests by some members for a formal UN visiting inspection mission to New Caledonia to take place at the same time.⁵⁵ It did, however, agree to a mission by the Melanesian Spearhead Group to New Caledonia in June 2010, a mission which was critical of the slow pace of progress of implementation of Noumea Accord commitments.⁵⁶

French Interests in a Sovereign South Pacific Presence

France's efforts have clearly been directed at maintaining its Pacific entities under its sovereignty. In a speech to all the French Overseas Departments and Collectivities (known in France as the *Outre-mer*, or Overseas France), in January 2010, President Nicolas Sarkozy said that while he was willing to consider a variety of innovative measures and institutions in the French territories around the world, there was one red line that he would not allow to be breached, that of independence. Specifically on New Caledonia, he noted that France would implement its commitments under the Noumea Accord, including the promised 2014-2018 vote on self-determination, but urged that discussions start now so that a vote would be "overwhelmingly approved" in a way favourable to France. In view of his comment about the "red line" of independence, he was clearly envisaging a future for New Caledonia within France. For French Polynesia, he referred to the need for further statutory reform to ensure stability (although past measures have invariably been designed to support the pro-France groups).

At the same time, Sarkozy referred to France's third Pacific entity, the small archipelago of Wallis and Futuna. The tiny collectivity has few economic resources and is entirely dependent on France and on the larger French entities, particularly New

⁵³ Email communication to author, UN Decolonization Committee secretariat, New York, (26 March 2009).

⁵⁴ *Nouvelles Calédoniennes*, (19 May 2010).

⁵⁵ *Flash d'Océanie*, (10 March 2010).

⁵⁶ Ronald May, "The Melanesian Spearhead Group: Testing Pacific Island Solidarity," *Policy Analysis*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute 74:8 (8 February 2011), 6.

Caledonia where many Wallisians go to work. Wallis and Futuna has operated peacefully under a 1961 statute unchanged to this day,⁵⁷ which provides for the three local kings to retain their positions and some customary authority in parallel with French administration. Sarkozy foreshadowed unspecified new statutory measures for Wallis and Futuna.

What motivates the French to stay in the Pacific? There is very little articulation by the French administration of its policy in the Pacific *per se*. France's Defence and Foreign Affairs white papers under Sarkozy make little or no mention of the Pacific. Where the Defence paper does so, it refers simply to the disposition of military assets in New Caledonia and French Polynesia as domestic French territory. These documents do not portray any strategic reach for France from the Pacific. Rather, the Defence paper focussed on Europe and defined France's arc of interest as stretching from Europe across Asia.⁵⁸

Some French officials and writers themselves can indeed be dismissive of the *Outre-mer* territories. Notwithstanding the value of the overseas outposts to him, de Gaulle was known to refer to the island territories as "*les poussières de l'Empire*,"⁵⁹ and others described them as "*les confettis de l'Empire*"⁶⁰ (respectively 'dust' and 'confetti' of the Empire), one official doing so as recently as 2003.⁶¹ Some senior French officials both in Paris and in Noumea claim privately that France is only in the Pacific because the people there want to remain French and because it has statutory responsibilities there.⁶²

At times when there are troubles in the *Outre-Mer*, reminders are given of France's financial support, a sentiment encapsulated by the famously muttered reference by then Finance Minister (and future President) Valéry Giscard d'Estaing to "*les danseuses qui coûtent cher*" (costly dancing girls).⁶³ His comments echo de Gaulle's own unsubtle threat to the *Outre-mer* possessions in 1958, when they were to vote on acceptance of the 1958 Constitution, which de Gaulle made clear would mean a vote specifically for staying with France: "If you say no, France will know that you have chosen to fly with your own wings... completely ceasing to help you materially and morally."⁶⁴ The implication is that the entities are expensive, if attractive, indulgences that do not return much to France. Many times during my tenure as Australia's Consul-General in Noumea, from 2001 to 2004, senior French officials confided that France might decide it was all too expensive to maintain a presence in the Pacific, hinting that the financial and other responsibilities that France currently shouldered would revert to Australia as regional power, should France withdraw its support and relinquish its Pacific presence.⁶⁵

⁵⁷ Nicolas Sarkozy, *Discours de M. Le Président de la République: Voeux à la France d'outre-mer* (Saint-Denis, 31 January 2010).

⁵⁸ Ministère des Affaires étrangères, *Livre blanc sur la politique étrangère et européenne de la France* (July 2008); and Ministère de la Défense, *Livre blanc* (Paris, 2008).

⁵⁹ Jean-Claude Guillebaud, *Les Confettis de l'empire* (Paris, 1976), 24 and 104.

⁶⁰ The title of Guillebaud's book, *Ibid*.

⁶¹ In private comments to the author, 2003.

⁶² Comments, senior French officials, 2009.

⁶³ Guillebaud, *Les Confettis de l'Empire*, 61; see also Hervé Coutau-Bégarie and J.-L. Seurin, *Nouvelle-Calédonie: Les antipodes de la démocratie* (Paris, 1986), 208 and Coutau-Bégarie, *Géostratégie du Pacifique* (Paris, 1987), 286.

⁶⁴ Cited in Guillebaud, *Les Confettis de l'empire*, 66.

⁶⁵ Personal communications by French officials, Noumea, 2001-2004.

But does France derive benefits from its Pacific entities? To see what keeps France in the Pacific, since official statements are relatively rare, it is worth drawing on analyses of the motivations of the past, as much as observations about the present. Much of the French-language literature on France's motivations in the region dates from the troubled 1980s, but in the absence of more recent analyses, these writings provide pointers for the present, if only because there are writings from those defending France's position (such as Hervé Coutau-Bégarie and Philippe Leymarie) as well as those opposing it (such as Jean-Claude Guillebaud and Isabelle Cordonnier). The English-language literature on France's regional motivations similarly dates from the 1980s to 1990s and principally comes from a vantage point strongly critical of France (for example, Nic Maclellan and Jean Chesneaux), although Robert Aldrich and John Connell provide a more dispassionate view. For present French aspirations, in the absence of recent writing either in French or English on the subject, some key statements by Nicolas Sarkozy and his government provide a basis for analysis. These available sources suggest there are three areas of benefit to France from its Pacific presence: contribution to national prestige and *grandeur*; strategic ballast in France's international roles; and real and potential commercial return.

La Grandeur de la France

In its early years of exploration, as noted earlier, France was motivated by a spirit of enquiry, a sense of national prestige and international rivalry, particularly with Britain.⁶⁶ After France's occupation in World War II, de Gaulle saw the value of the *Outre-mer* in bolstering his position, and indeed it was the French Pacific territories which supported him early on, with the specific aid of Australia. Australia's navy escorted the pro-de Gaulle Henri Sautot, the French President of the New Hebrides, to oust the pro-Vichy Governor in Noumea in 1940.⁶⁷ By the late 1950s, de Gaulle put a high priority on delivering autonomy and indeed a choice for independence to the *Outre-mer*. But with the impending loss of Algeria, he speedily back-pedalled to keep the remaining *Outre-mer* territories, which he saw as boosting France's *grandeur* and international stature.⁶⁸ When French Polynesia replaced Algeria as the site for the nuclear testing program which underpinned France's defence policy of self-reliance, the importance of the French Pacific to France's self-image increased. Subsequent Presidents – Georges Pompidou, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, François Mitterrand, and Jacques Chirac – all shared, in their own ways, the Gaullist view that the *Outre-mer* was France and contributed to the *grandeur* of France.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Dunmore, *Visions and Realities: France in the Pacific, 1695-1995*, 179 and 188.

⁶⁷ Wilfred G. Burchett, *Pacific Treasure Island: New Caledonia* (Melbourne, 1941); Chesneaux and Maclellan, *La France dans le Pacifique: de Bougainville à Moruroa*, 80; Fisher, "Supporting the Free French in New Caledonia: First Steps in Australian Diplomacy."

⁶⁸ "Il fallait rebondir à l'autre bout du monde," cited in Chesneaux and Maclellan, *La France dans le Pacifique: de Bougainville à Moruroa*, 96.

⁶⁹ See Robert Aldrich and John Connell, eds., *France in World Politics* (London, 1989), ch. 1; Philippe Leymarie, "Les enjeux stratégiques de la crise calédonienne," *Le Monde diplomatique*, 1, (1985): 2; and Myriam Dornoy-Vurobaravu, *Policies and Perceptions of France in the South Pacific: New Caledonia and Vanuatu - Objectifs et interprétations de la politique française dans le Pacifique Sud: la Nouvelle-Calédonie et le Vanuatu* (Suva, 1994), 1, 50-51.

But President Sarkozy was a more unknown quantity, a president not in the usual mould, relatively young, of immigrant stock, and married to a foreigner. As a presidential candidate in March 2007, his *Lettre aux Calédoniens* emphasized his support for New Caledonia remaining with France, a theme he reiterated in his message to Noumea Accord Signatories' meetings at the end of 2007 and 2008.⁷⁰

Sarkozy nevertheless remained relatively silent on the *Outre-mer* in his first two years in office. He only became personally engaged in early 2009, after disturbances over the high cost of living turned violent in Guadeloupe and spread to the remaining three French *oultre-mer départements*, Guyane, Martinique and La Réunion. Sarkozy had previously been Minister for the Interior, when he had held a tough line on domestic security, cracking down heavily on violence, for example in the Paris suburbs in 2005. When union protests about the cost of living deteriorated in Guadeloupe in February 2009, the then Minister for Overseas France, Yves Jégo, negotiated an increase in the minimum wage, which Sarkozy then overturned, concerned at the implications for France's other overseas possessions.⁷¹ Sarkozy personally stepped in to negotiate an end to the protests, initiating a review of policy towards the entire set of France's overseas outposts. He announced over one hundred new measures, essentially economic, in November 2009; and gave a New Year's address to the *Outre-mer* in January 2010. These were targeted to the *Outre-mer* in general, and specifically the four *départements* rather than the Pacific collectivities, which have a different constitutional status. But the phraseology in his general comments is indicative of his view of the South Pacific entities. He referred to the *Outre-mer* as "*France des trois océans*" (France of the three Oceans), and said that *Outre-mer* contributed to France's identity, "*à notre rayonnement, à notre grandeur et à notre puissance*" ("to our influence, our grandeur and our power"); "The inclusion of all, across the thousands of kilometers that separate us, in the same national community is one of the multiple facets of the French genius."⁷² These are all de Gaulle's expressions and ideas.⁷³ Though he came late to the issue, Sarkozy arrived at the same conclusion as his predecessors on the value of the *Outre-mer* in general to France's international status.

Strategic Weight and Strategic Denial

Although French Polynesia no longer contributes directly, through the nuclear testing program, to France's strategic might, the literature points to France's Pacific presence continuing to deliver direct strategic benefits to France. France is a member of the elite club of only five permanent members of the Security Council formed in the aftermath of the Second World War (the others are the United States, Russia, China and the United Kingdom). But at a time when new political and economic realities have led to new claims to membership of that group (for example, by Germany, India and Brazil), France can refer to its special status as a global power through its string of *Outre-mer* territories

⁷⁰ Nicolas Sarkozy, *Lettre aux Calédoniens* (Paris, March 2007); and "*Intervention lors de la rencontre avec le Comité des signataires de l'accord de Nouméa*," (Paris, 9 December 2008).

⁷¹ "Guadeloupe: le calvaire d'Yves Jégo," 20 February 2009, <www.20minutes.fr> accessed 19 April 2011.

⁷² Nicolas Sarkozy, *Voeux à la France d'outre-mer* (Saint-Denis, 31 January 2010).

⁷³ See, for example, de Gaulle's Strasbourg Speech, April 1947, online at <<http://www.charles-de-gaulle.org/pages/espace-pedagogique/le-point-sur/les-textes-a-connaître/discours-de-strasbourg-7-avril-1947.php>> accessed 20 July 2010.

which enable it to claim first-hand experience and knowledge, direct interests through the presence of its citizens, and a military presence to protect them around the globe.⁷⁴

Within the context of Europe, the principal focus of France's strategic priorities, the *Outre-mer* and specifically the Pacific presence brings a global presence and assets, by virtue of their special status as European Overseas Territories. It was France that led the European Union to establish a category of Overseas Countries and Territories (OCT) in the Treaty of Rome in 1957,⁷⁵ in doing so extending the global reach of the EU and bringing France's *Outre-mer* collectivities into the European family. France's consistent efforts, from 1957, in maintaining its territories within the OCT system show that France sees its own *Outre-mer* entities as an important element of the EU superstructure. The French Pacific entities contribute to European undertakings such as the space program and NATO through their capacity for intelligence watching reaching into Asia (a new listening post was installed in New Caledonia in 2004), remote sensing, and retrieval capabilities across the vast Pacific Ocean.⁷⁶

While it is true, as some French officials argue today, and Phillippe Leymarie has noted,⁷⁷ that France does not need to have sovereign territory in order to have a strategic presence (its military presence at Djibouti being an example), a sovereign presence is more permanent and non-controvertible than operating as a world power present in an independent host country.⁷⁸

Within the Western alliance, France's Pacific presence gives it a role in strategic denial.⁷⁹ With the experience of the two world wars behind them, the Western allies – the US, France, Britain, Australia and New Zealand – have been able so far to preserve the South Pacific as a Western sphere of influence. France's mishandling of New Caledonian and Vanuatuan independence moves threatened this approach in the 1980s, creating opportunities for outsiders such as the then Soviet Union and Libya to play a role in the region.⁸⁰

The value of maintaining a strong developed Western interest in the Pacific is arguably more important than in the 1980s as the newly-independent island governments begin to show fundamental governance weaknesses. These vulnerabilities have been

⁷⁴ As the former minister Alain Peyrefitte wrote in *Le Figaro*, "Comment rester l'un des cinq membres du Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU si nous sommes réduits à la Hexagone?" "How do we remain as one of the five members of the UN Security Council if we are reduced simply to the Hexagon" or mainland France, 11 February 1985.

⁷⁵ Faberon and Ziller, *Droit des collectivités d'outre-Mer*, 249; European Commission, Commission Européenne, "L'union Européenne et les pays et territoires d'Outre-Mer," *Development DE99*, 1998, 11.

⁷⁶ Noted by Regis Debray, then Secretary General of the High Council of the Pacific, 14 February 1986, *Libération*. See also Mrgudovic, *La France dans le Pacifique Sud: les enjeux de la puissance*, 79-80.

⁷⁷ Phillippe Leymarie, "Les enjeux stratégiques de la crise calédonienne," *Le Monde diplomatique* 1 (1985), 4.

⁷⁸ The limitations of French influence without a sovereign presence in Africa are set out by François Gouttebrune in "La France et l'Afrique: le crépuscule d'une ambition stratégique?" *Politique Étrangère* 4 (2002): 1046-47.

⁷⁹ R.A. Herr analyses the importance of strategic denial in the post-colonial period in the region, defining it as "the maintenance of friendly Western access to the region, and the denial of access to countries regarded as potentially hostile," in R.A. Herr, "Regionalism, Strategic Denial and South Pacific Security," *The Journal of Pacific History* 21:4 (October, 1986), 174.

⁸⁰ For example, Vanuatu negotiated a fishing agreement with the Soviet Union and sent students to Libya, see Mrgudovic, *La France dans le Pacifique Sud: les enjeux de la puissance*, 220; and also Henningham, *France and the South Pacific: A Contemporary History*, 222.

evident most seriously in instability in Fiji, where efforts to ensure a democratic voice for indigenous and Indian Fijians alike failed, leading to a series of military coups from 1987, and the Solomon Islands, where rebel and secessionist forces led to a breakdown in governance in 2003. The economic fragility and dependence of the island states creates the potential for threats to security and the Western hegemony. Security issues have been recognized in regional measures to counter transnational crime and terrorism, as set out for example in the Pacific Islands Forum Honiara Declaration.⁸¹ China's recent forays into the region begin to challenge the dominance of Western influence in the South Pacific.⁸² In this context, the presence of a disciplined developed ally such as France provides a counterbalance and source of economic and security cooperation to the region.⁸³

France's weight in the region is also arguably an asset in its own dealings with China, where France may be seen not just as a European government, but as a global power with a Pacific presence, although there is little overt acknowledgement of this situation by French policy-makers.⁸⁴

Commercial Interest

France derives unique returns to its national status by virtue of the Pacific collectivities' Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), agreed under the 1982 Law of the Sea Convention. On the basis of its *Outre-mer* presence, but particularly its Pacific presence, France can now claim to be the world's second largest maritime nation (after the US). While figures measuring a country's EEZ vary, one comparison shows that France's EEZ emanating from its metropolitan area measures just 340 290 square kilometres. Its EEZ covered by all its global territory extends to 11.57 million sq km, of which 7.3 million sq km derives from its Pacific entities alone (and with just under 5 million sq km from French Polynesia alone).⁸⁵

It is only relatively recently that French writers attribute a commercial dimension to France in its dealings with the Pacific, referring to the extensive EEZ, and then they do so only tentatively.⁸⁶ But at a time when global energy and mineral resources are in increasing demand, and when the world's petroleum reserves are expected to be

⁸¹ Declaration by the South Pacific Forum [now Pacific Islands Forum] on Law Enforcement Cooperation (Honiara Declaration), 1992; and see Neil Boister, "New Directions for Regional Cooperation in the Suppression of Transnational Crime in the South Pacific," *Journal of South Pacific Law* 9:2 (2005), online

⁸² Dobell, "China and Taiwan in the South Pacific: Diplomatic Chess versus Pacific Political Rugby," *Lowy Institute Policy Brief* (Sydney, 2007).

⁸³ See Amaury du Chéné, "Le Pacifique et la France," *Hermès* 32-33 (2002), 495-512.

⁸⁴ For example, there is no reference to this in either of France's 2008 Foreign Affairs or Defence White Papers: Ministère des Affaires étrangères, *Livre blanc sur la politique étrangère et européenne de la France* (July 2008) and Ministère de la Défense, *Livre blanc sur la défense et la sécurité nationale* (31 July 2008). Du Chéné, "Le Pacifique et la France," 2002, made the case for France to take a position on China's aspirations in the Pacific.

⁸⁵ Faberon and Ziller, *Droit des collectivités d'Outre-mer*, 8, based on *Outre-mer* file figures.

⁸⁶ See, for example, Mrgudovic, *La France dans le Pacifique Sud: les enjeux de la puissance*, 84; and Sarah Mohamed-Gaillard, *L'Archipel de la Puissance: La politique de la France dans le Pacifique Sud de 1946 à 1998*, 66 and 260. Both refer to the size of the EEZ but Mrgudovic sees economic potential in the region as relatively modest (see Section "Des relations économiques timides mais encouragées" 365 et seq) while Mohamed-Gaillard's work concentrates more on political questions.

exhausted at locations under current exploitation, there is no doubt that France has access to the vast potential resources of its Pacific EEZs (a consideration reminiscent of the similar point made by the Oceanic lobbyists of the nineteenth century). Whereas the extent of under-sea resources is unknown, at least a third of global petroleum reserves are located in the ocean bed.⁸⁷ There are sedimentary indicators of the presence of hydrocarbons off New Caledonia's southern shore within its EEZ, where France has been conducting assessments for petroleum and gas.⁸⁸ New Caledonia alone represents from 30 to 40 percent of the world's nickel resource and is the third largest repository of nickel in the world.⁸⁹ The *Société le Nickel* processing plant near Noumea is one of the largest mining projects in France.⁹⁰ It will be supplemented by the new projects, each worth over 3 billion US dollars of investment, at Goro in the south and Koniambo in the north. Just as the proceeds of the company's activities in Noumea have been returned primarily to France, if France maintains sovereignty in New Caledonia, the revenues from the future projects will deliver substantial commercial return to France, certainly greater than if a French company were exploiting the mineral in an independent New Caledonia.⁹¹

A further perceived spin-off for France retaining its Pacific presence is a view that this provides a link to a new dynamic economic zone (albeit one centred in the North Pacific).⁹² This view was enunciated in 2003 by then *Outre-mer* Minister Brigitte Girardin, who 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."⁹³ This rhetoric reflects the belief that France must be present in the flourishing Pacific for its *grandeur* and prestige as much as for potential economic return.

The wide expanses of the Pacific and its global EEZ also enable France to maintain a strong position in scientific research, particularly with a tropical, oceanic and environmental focus. There is little or no literature addressing this aspect of France's engagement. France has branches of its Institut Français de Recherche pour l'Exploitation de la Mer and Institut de Recherche pour le Développement in its Pacific entities, from which it bases its hydrographic, marine and environmental research and monitoring, including off Wallis and Futuna and the uninhabited Clipperton Island off the

⁸⁷ Mrgudovic, *La France dans le Pacifique Sud: les enjeux de la puissance*, 95.

⁸⁸ Roland Vially, Yves Lafoy, Jean-Marie Auzende and Roy France, "Petroleum potential of New Caledonia and its off-shore basins," *AAPG International Conference* (Barcelona, 2003).

⁸⁹ Horowitz, 299.

⁹⁰ For summary of other projects and mine closures see H. R. Newman, *The Mineral Industry of France*, US Geological Survey Minerals Handbook, 2001.

⁹¹ New Caledonia's share of the revenue has been a fundamental political issue. In background negotiations to the Noumea Accord, New Caledonia was granted a substantial share in SLN from 1999, adjusted in 2007 to 34 per cent as well as a 4.1 per cent share in Eramet one of the principal shareholders of SLN, SLN's website <www.sln.nc> accessed 21 October 2008. The pro-independence groups have sought a 51 per cent share.

⁹² This thinking is exemplified in the title of the book by Georges Ordonnaud, Daniel Coulmy, Jean-Pierre Gomane and J.L. Guibert, in 1983, *Le Pacifique, 'nouveau centre du monde'* (Paris, 1983).

⁹³ She added: "So the Pacific Overseas is an opportunity for France: a gangplank to other civilizations, a gateway to a dynamic economic zone and the place for innovative policies" quoted in Pierre Cadéot, *L'Outre-mer français dans le Pacifique Sud: Nouvelle-Calédonie, Polynésie Française, Wallis et Futuna* (Noumea, 2003), 7.

Mexican coast.⁹⁴ Such expertise enhances France's stature as a global scientific contributor and may result in commercial spin-offs.

Costs to France and Public Opinion

Against these benefits, the costs to France of maintaining a South Pacific presence are relatively minimal. France spends around 4.6 billion Australian dollars a year in its Pacific entities, a not inconsiderable sum by any measure.⁹⁵ In Pacific terms, this sum seems enormous. It is larger than the GDPs of any of the Pacific island states except Papua New Guinea and Guam (the latter an American outpost).⁹⁶

In the context of the French national budget, however, this amount is small. It represents only 0.14 per cent of France's GDP, and less than 1 per cent of its budget.⁹⁷ This expenditure is not a subject of particular public concern. The French public takes very little interest in the French Pacific.⁹⁸ There is little or no coverage of the French Pacific in the metropolitan media. Debate is virtually non-existent on the French Pacific in the National Assembly, even in its Finance Committee discussions. The only time the French public have expressed interest in the French Pacific in recent years has been when events have taken a dramatic turn, for example, during the bombing of the *Rainbow Warrior* in New Zealand by French security personnel in 1985 and when a hostage-taking event in New Caledonia coincided with French presidential elections resulting in twenty-one deaths in 1988, in both cases leading to the French public's disapproval of state actions.⁹⁹ A related phenomenon has been the effect of trouble in one overseas possession on the others, seen most recently in 2009 as discontent over the cost of living in Guadeloupe spread quickly to other parts of the *Outre-mer départements*, and even potentially to the Pacific, where Oscar Temaru threatened similar protest. From these experiences, there seems to be a strong motivation for French administrations to keep order in the French Pacific so as to prevent negative public opinion at home and to prevent a domino effect on its other possessions.

Conclusion

This review shows that, as Australia continues to play its role leading the numerous fragile island countries in the Pacific in the face of changing global power balances, its

⁹⁴ See, for example, "La France veut sécuriser son accès aux métaux rares," *Le Monde*, 28 April 2010; *Bibliography of research* at <www.clipperton.fr> accessed 10 July 2010; and Christian Jost, "Bibliographie de l'île de Clipperton – Île de La Passion (1711-2005)," *Le Journal de la Société des Océanistes* (2005): 120-21.

⁹⁵ Tableaux de l'Économie Calédonienne, *Institut de la statistique et des études économiques, Édition abrégée*, 2008, 960; French High Commission press release on French Polynesia 7 August 2007; *Service Territoriale de la statistique et des études économiques*, Wallis and Futuna, at <www.spc.int/prism/country/wf/stats/>

⁹⁶ Tableaux de l'Économie Calédonienne, *Institut de la statistique et des études économiques*, 12 Table.

⁹⁷ Senate Finance Commission, *Figures on costs of overseas collectivities*, conveyed by email correspondence to author September 2008.

⁹⁸ Chesneaux and Maclellan, *La France dans le Pacifique: de Bougainville à Moruroa*, 116; Alain Christnacht, in "L'avenir de l'accord de Nouméa," *Revue Juridique, Politique et Économique de Nouvelle Calédonie* 2 (2003), 10.

⁹⁹ Chesneaux and Maclellan, *La France dans le Pacifique: de Bougainville à Moruroa*.

neighbour and indeed partner in the Pacific, France, is implementing policies in a way that indicates it wants to retain sovereignty in its Pacific collectivities. According to officials, its motivation arises from an obligation to implement its statutory responsibilities and respond to the will of the population. However, its record in delivering in these areas is mixed and, at least for its most important Pacific collectivity, New Caledonia, will not be fully tested until promised referendums from 2014 to 2018. Analysis of the literature of the recent past and public statements by President Sarkozy suggest that, whether overtly acknowledged or not, or whether derived from *a posteriori* analysis rather than clearly stated strategic policy objectives, there are real and potential strategic and economic returns to France deriving from its sovereign presence in the South Pacific region. Some of these returns contribute to Australian security objectives in the region, mainly the effect of having a well resourced, democratically-based friendly Western ally present in what is otherwise a poor, fragmented and isolated neighbourhood vulnerable to pressures from new external influences.

But, along with the benefits, there are accompanying risks. To identify these would be the subject of another paper, but these risks are evident in the memory the Pacific region has of France's past mis-management of democratic sentiment in Vanuatu, French Polynesia and New Caledonia. As signaled in the Pacific Islands Forum's consideration of membership by the French Pacific collectivities, regional leaders remain vigilant. They will be watchful of the direction of further reform in French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna; and as voting deadlines of 2014-2018 approach in New Caledonia, regional leaders will be alert to whether France heeds the memory of the recent violent past.