Introduction

‘Nous devons gérer les révolutions que nous ne pouvons pas éviter’

‘We must manage those revolutions we can’t avoid’

The study and awareness in Australia of France’s presence and influence in the South Pacific have waned since France ended its controversial nuclear testing in French Polynesia in 1996 and seriously addressed Kanak demands for independence in New Caledonia through the Matignon and Noumea accords from 1988 to 1998.

Few Australians are aware of the fact that France, present in its South Pacific entities New Caledonia, French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna, is one of Australia’s closest neighbours. New Caledonia is only two and a half hours flying time from Brisbane, but its name is less familiar to most Australians than the names of the Solomon Islands, Fiji, or even Tonga much further away. In recent years, nightly regional weather reports of the Australian television channel, SBS, regularly omitted New Caledonia from their forecasts, and presenters pointed from Sydney across to Fiji, without reference to the long cigarette-shaped main island of New Caledonia they traversed along the way. Including their maritime zones (Exclusive Economic Zones or EEZ), the three French Pacific entities stretch from east of Queensland to well over halfway across the Pacific. New Caledonia and French Polynesia, respectively, bookend the South Pacific region, with Wallis and Futuna at the centre. France also possesses Clipperton Island, an uninhabited atoll southwest of Mexico, which is administered by the French authorities in French Polynesia.

For the last two decades, relative calm and stability have prevailed in the three French South Pacific entities. But in the two principal French Pacific collectivities, New Caledonia and French Polynesia, there are inherent instabilities. Administered by posted French officials, side by side with elected local governments, they each have large indigenous populations and a history of protest and violence, and are inexorably anchored in their geographic region with links to neighbouring populations. Managing expectations within France

---

1 Edgard Pisani, interview with Hugh White, then Sydney Morning Herald reporter, 1985.
2 With a constitutional change in 2003, under Article 74 of the French Constitution, French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna became overseas collectivities or collectivités d’outre-mer (COM), and New Caledonia has a sui generis status as collectivité spécifique by virtue of section XIII of the Constitution (Faberon and Ziller, 2007, 3). They will collectively be referred to as entities or collectivities. The South Pacific region will be considered to represent the regions encompassed by the members of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community and the Pacific Islands Forum. Translations of French terms will be the author’s own.
3 Which includes the islands of Walpole, Belep, Huon, Surprise, Chesterfield, Astrolabe, Bellone, and Matthew and Hunter (or Fearn), the latter claimed by both France and Vanuatu.
and the region of increasing autonomy has called for innovation and flexibility. By the 1990s, the French were providing such a response, but only after serious opposition, including violence, in New Caledonia; a prolonged campaign in French Polynesia against nuclear testing there; and, concerted regional action and international criticism. Since it stopped nuclear testing in French Polynesia in 1996, and negotiated a renewed agreement — the Noumea Accord — transferring some autonomy and deferring a vote on independence in New Caledonia, France has generally maintained a creative, innovative approach for most of the last two decades. As regional leader and close neighbour, Australia has supported and encouraged France in these efforts.

But cracks are appearing. Instability in government has characterised French Polynesian governance since 2004. Critical deadlines are approaching in New Caledonia, Australia’s near neighbour. There is a new generation of leaders in France and, given the priority that France traditionally gives to its role in Europe, and its other domestic political and economic challenges, it is not certain that the solutions of the past will provide continued predictability and stability in the future. Nor even that France will remain in the region or, if so, on what terms.

Generally, very little has been written about the recent evolution of France’s engagement in the South Pacific region. Strong views about the pros and cons of France’s controversial engagement in nuclear testing and the decolonisation of New Caledonia generally formed the basis of English and French language academic writings in the 1980s and 1990s. Since then, much of the commentary and academic literature on contemporary France in the South Pacific has emanated from the French Pacific collectivities themselves, or metropolitan France, and most is in the French language. In general, Australian academics and journalists writing on the South Pacific are restricted by language from exploring the French-language resources. This means that the complexities surrounding the French entities, and their role in the region, risk being overlooked by Australian policymakers. It also means that, for French readers, some regional perspectives, including Australian perspectives, have been represented generally from a French viewpoint. Moreover, in the recent French-language literature, the voice of indigenous people is notably absent. Thus, this literature tends to favour, or assume, the continued presence of France, and to paint an unalloyed positive

4 A decade of analysis in English in the 1980s by Australia-based writers including journalist Nic MacIellan (often in collaboration in both languages with French academic Jean Chesneaux), John Connell, Robert Aldrich, Stewart Firth, Stephen Henningham, Stephen Bates, and Helen Fraser, abated by the mid 1990s. While MacIellan continues to write on the subject, along with Hawaii-based David Chappell and Quebec-based Eric Waddell, most recent writings are primarily in French, including by Paul de Deckker, Alain Christnacht, Jean-Pierre Doumenge and François Doumenge, Isabelle Cordonnier, Jean-Yves Faberon, Mathias Chauchat, Pierre Cadedot, Nathalie Mrgudovic, Jean-Marc Regnault, Frédéric Angleviel, and Sarah Mohamed-Gaillard.

5 Indigenous views are not prolific. They are generally reported through publications such as the daily Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes and La Dépêche de Tahiti or New Caledonia’s cultural periodical Mwà Véé; party
picture of France and its policies in its collectivities and in the wider region. The general consensus in the recent French literature is that the bad old days are behind France, and France, with its reformed policies, is now a welcome, unreservedly positive influence in the region. With its diplomatic attention focused on trouble spots elsewhere in the Pacific, the Australian Government tends to concur in this view.

This book questions this assumption. Reflecting the experience of the author, an Australian former diplomat, it focuses on broad strategic positions and practical policy. It is based on an examination of the available literature, particularly the contemporary literature, but also draws on interviews with key figures in Paris, the French collectivities and in Australia, not only during the course of research, but also during a three-year posting as Australia’s Consul-General in the French Pacific collectivities, based in Noumea, from 2001 to 2004. It starts with a review of the history and rationale underpinning France’s South Pacific presence, and considers future directions and challenges, in the broad context of regional security. It will present for the English language reader some of the thinking evident in recent French language literature to add to understanding of contemporary French policy. Finally, it signposts areas for further attention by Australian students of international relations, in an area that has generally been neglected but that offers significant rewards in terms of its direct relevance to Australian interests.

As set out in Chapter 1, history suggests that France has as much right to be present in the region as Australia does (an assertion that was much disputed during the 1980s and early 1990s when France’s policies were opposed in the region). France has been in the region as long as any other European power. It has invested significant financial, political and human resources in ensuring a continued presence. Securing the Matignon/Noumea Accords in New Caledonia and statutory reform in French Polynesia enabled France to claim, as did Louis Le Pensec, then Minister for Overseas France, that its presence is based on the democratic will of the people in its Pacific collectivities, including their indigenous peoples (Le Pensec, 1990). In recent years France has sought to improve its image and engagement in the broader region.

---

6 Evident in the assertion by former Prime Minister Michel Rocard in a forward to Nathalie Mrgudovic’s work, *La France dans le Pacifique Sud: Les enjeux de la puissance* (2008), that France had passed ‘from the ranks of detested power … to one more like that of big sister’ (13).

7 Then Parliamentary Secretary for Pacific Affairs Duncan Kerr, on 18 November 2008, spoke of Australia’s ‘strong appreciation for the role of France in the region supporting the region’s security and development’ and said he was ‘convinced … that genuine integration is the key to a stable and prosperous future here [in New Caledonia]’, media release, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 18 November 2008.

8 ‘Overseas France’ will be used as an equivalent to France’s use of the term L’Outre-mer, or overseas dependencies.
One weakness in this argument is that the democratic will of the people in its Pacific collectivities is yet to be fully tested on the subject of their future status relative to France. Ideas about independence, decolonisation and emancipation are still evolving in the Pacific collectivities. Both French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna look to New Caledonia to set the pace of their own future status. In French Polynesia, increasing support for pro-independence parties seeking, at the least, the autonomy measures accorded to New Caledonia, has been frustrated by pro-France pressure and marked by outbursts of violence and ongoing political instability. The tiny collectivity of Wallis and Futuna, ruled by an alliance of kings, church and State, is dependent on the continued prosperity of New Caledonia, where most of its people work. And, in New Caledonia, the democratically endorsed Noumea Accord and its suite of irreversible provisions for increased autonomy is yet to be fully implemented and is a transition measure only, on the future of which critical votes have yet to be cast.

The argument is advanced that, central to France's continued positive influence and acceptance in its collectivities and in the region, will be democratic governance there, particularly France's ability to find a long-term democratic solution to the status of New Caledonia by 2018. The provisions of the Noumea Accord come to an end by 2018, with votes to be held on the future status of New Caledonia between 2014 and 2018 (although one senior French adviser has already suggested the vote could technically be held as late as 2023, Christnacht 2011).

Regional leaders, and elements of civil society, remain wary of France. Many remember the failed policies of the 1980s and early 1990s, when France was a force for instability in the region. While cautiously welcoming France's recent positive engagement, they hold high expectations for France's treatment of its collectivities, and its contribution to the economic development of the region. Paradoxically, the post-colonial instabilities within the independent island countries of the Pacific intensify their leaders' expectations of France and its entities. This is particularly true of leaders of the Melanesian countries of Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, and Fiji. In these Melanesian countries, important developments relating to the assertion of indigenous claims are evolving in parallel with New Caledonia's transition processes and deadlines under the Noumea Accord, creating their own uncertainties and potential for ongoing instability. Fiji, prey to government by military coup, is seeking a workable long-term democratic process to address the claims of all elements of its population, a population as ethnically divided as New Caledonia's. In the wake of internal division, the future of the Solomon Islands and the Regional Assistance Mission there is yet to be resolved permanently. Papua New Guinea has managed violent opposition to government policies in Bougainville by drawing partly upon the Noumea Accord model, providing for
progressive autonomy with its own electoral deadlines falling due from 2011 to 2016, coincident with the Noumea Accord deadlines. West Papuan claims for independence from Indonesia remain a fractious issue for many regional Melanesians.

All these countries are members of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), which was formed to support Kanak claims in New Caledonia. The MSG has shifted its focus to economic issues in recent years, but it remains a forum for Melanesian expression on regional issues, and it remains watchful of outcomes in New Caledonia. The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and the United Nations (UN) Committee on Decolonisation, while relatively dormant on the issue in recent years, retain a watching brief over New Caledonia. The positive relationships that France has fostered in the region and, by extension, the role of Europe and the effectiveness of the European Union (EU) in the South Pacific, which France has led, are all at stake as the future of New Caledonia unfolds.

Strategic benefits for France

France’s Pacific presence represents a global strategic asset. Its Pacific entities are a key link in its worldwide chain of overseas possessions, with the potential for mismanagement to set off domino reactions elsewhere along the chain. Retaining a physical global presence has lent weight to France’s claim to continue as one of only five powerful Permanent Members of the UN Security Council wielding a veto in the UN, at a time when the composition of that group is under discussion. Its sovereignty in the Pacific, and naval presence there, though small, mean France can bring a unique perspective to its North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) membership including its renewed participation in the High Command. As a leading EU nation, France’s Pacific possessions provide an important support basis for activities such as the European space program.

Within the Pacific, the resident presence of France enables it to play a significant strategic role complementary to that of regional allies — the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan — and potentially balancing the influence of newcomers to the region, such as China, at a time of global power shifts.

For France, New Caledonia represents a source of significant strategic resources such as nickel (it is believed to represent 30–40 per cent of the world’s nickel and the third largest world’s reserves) and potentially petroleum (there are signs of hydrocarbons in the basins off New Caledonia and Australia). New Caledonia, along with French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna, offer France the potential

---

9 The MSG sent a visiting mission to New Caledonia in June 2010 to assess the implementation of France’s promises under the Noumea Accord.
resources of their vast Pacific maritime EEZ. Together, they contribute 7.6 m. sq. km. of France’s total of 11.57 m. sq. km. of EEZ. Controlling these existing and potential assets positions France at the forefront of the global marketplace, at a time when new, long-term supplies of resources and energy are in demand.

**Strategic benefits for Australia and the region**

The region-wide and global dimensions of France’s presence have specific security implications for the region, particularly for Australia as leading power of the region. France’s responsibility for the smooth administration of its three collectivities in the Pacific has meant that, for the last two decades, Australia could devote its diplomatic and development cooperation effort elsewhere in the Pacific. Broadly, as noted by the Australian Government’s White Paper on Foreign Affairs and Trade, ‘instability in the South Pacific negatively affects Australia’s ability to protect its eastern approaches’ (Foreign Affairs and Trade 2003, 20). In crude terms, if the French were to leave, there would be three more potentially fragile island economies on Australia’s doorstep, and considerable demands on Australia’s diplomatic energy and resources to ensure their development and stability appropriate for its domestic security.

Australia and New Zealand together could never match the over $A4.6 billion\(^\text{10}\) per year that France has put into its Pacific entities. Without these inputs, there would be an inevitable weakening of these economies, with resultant security vulnerabilities for the region, and Australia. Whereas the populations of the French Pacific collectivities represent less than six per cent of the population of the South Pacific countries in the Secretariat for the Pacific Community (SPC), or 515,000 of a total population of 9.1 million of all SPC island member countries, they currently have the highest standard of living of the Pacific island entities, with per capita incomes exceeding those of New Zealand (SPC figures from October 2006, website <http://www.spc.in/> accessed December 2008), due largely to significant French financial inflows. An unstable New Caledonia on its doorstep would impose urgent demands on Australia, within the already tenuous Melanesian ‘arc of instability’ that embraces its northeast shores. Weak independent states of French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna would add further to the demands, not only on Australia and New Zealand, but on regional Pacific organisations, the PIF, SPC, and the multiple regional organisations under the Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific (CROP).

A second related factor is the regional burden-sharing that France has provided, especially in recent years. For Australia, in whose charge the main weight of

---

\(^{10}\) EUR 2.65 billion in 2008 alone, see note 1 Chapter 6, explaining conversion rates.
development and security of the island states remains, the political and economic resources of a major European state, with a regional presence accepted by the wider region, are welcome contributions to the region. Apart from up to $A146 million it provides annually to numerous regional agencies and bilaterally, France, as a founding EU member, has been a prime instigator of the EU’s Pacific island development assistance programs. France is well placed to improve the effectiveness and size of EU contributions to the region.

France’s presence carries strategic significance in the region. While the importance of the French collectivities in protecting sea routes and providing re-supply bases has diminished with global and technological change, that role remains. Noumea provided an important staging point for Australian ships during the 2006 Fiji coup and in the evacuation of injured servicemen when a Blackhawk helicopter crashed into a destroyer at that time. The presence of several thousand skilled and trained military personnel of a western ally, at the western and eastern ends of the Pacific in Noumea and Papeete, is a regional security asset for Australia. The French were the first physically to respond to Australia’s call for support in East Timor in 1999, being able to send a vessel that was already in the region.

And the future presence of France in the collectivities, if made on a clear basis of choice governed by democratic principle, would constitute a belt of western and European interest and values in the region at a time when northern Asian interests are changing, with resource-hungry China turning its attention to the South Pacific.

Global security is now determined by more than military might. It also involves good governance, successful environmental management and a predictable resource and energy supply. The French entities currently enjoy generally democratic government and a French justice system, which accommodates local custom. They are a potential vehicle for French and local scientific and technical research and collaboration addressing major global environmental issues including climate change, so critical to Pacific islanders. Their extensive maritime zones, backed by French investment, represent potentially valuable, albeit unchartered, seabed resources at a time when the world is re-thinking its long-term future energy and mineral needs.

In the broader Pacific region the predictabilities of the past are giving way to the challenges of the future. The immediate post-colonial period is behind it, and the effects of globalisation, while they present opportunities, also highlight weaknesses and vulnerabilities, as the global financial crisis has shown. Environmental issues present unique challenges for the island states. Concerns of traditional donors about governance problems, with their negative impact on the effectiveness of development cooperation that leave the island states open
to the import of terrorism, raise complex security concerns. All of these factors have heightened the stark reality of the region’s poverty and dependence on patron states. Meeting these challenges region-wide requires flexible approaches to cooperation and governance.

The conjunction of political and economic change within France, the effects of developments such as the global financial crisis and climate change on the wider Pacific region, and Australia’s own growing strategic interest in France’s democratically based presence, has led to a narrowing of the difference between the interests of France and those of Australian and other regional governments, providing scope for closer cooperation in new areas and new ways.

With much depending on the democratic presence of France in the region, France’s securing a successful, democratic outcome in New Caledonia will be the key, both to France continuing to derive strategic benefits in the region, and for Australia’s ongoing regional security interests. Addressing ongoing instabilities in French Polynesia and ensuring continued tranquility in Wallis and Futuna, whose statutory framework dates from 1961, will be important. But these two collectivities look to New Caledonia as a model. And New Caledonia is in the midst of an agreed transition process, with specific deadlines for a democratic outcome, which is being watched by regional leaders. With its mineral wealth, status as France’s regional base for its military and scientific research presence, and its proximity to the largest regional power, Australia, New Caledonia represents a significant strategic investment for France. As French academic Xavier Pons so eloquently put it when writing in 1991, New Caledonia’s importance is that of ‘its potential as a powder keg, which, if it were to explode, might contribute to destabilise the whole region’ (in Aldrich 1991, 45). This remains as true now as it was then.

After the Noumea Accord?

In seeking a long-term solution to the future status of New Caledonia, French and local leaders have a range of alternatives to consider, including by drawing from the options already in operation in the Pacific island countries. Independence is not the only option and, indeed, it is seen as unlikely by many, in view of the demographic and economic realities in New Caledonia. But it is an option which some in New Caledonia will not give up lightly, having been willing to shed blood for it only 20 years ago.

With the future arrangements in New Caledonia, its pre-eminent Pacific entity, to be decided from 2014 to 2018, it is a propitious time to review elements of France’s presence in the South Pacific, its official actions and policies, motivations, and its relationship with the wider region; and to reflect on future
challenges, risks and options. To set this analysis in context, Part I will present a brief overview of the history of France’s presence in the Pacific, from the time of the first French pirates there in the early seventeenth century; to the establishment of a colonial presence which could have easily included both Australia and New Zealand; the pivotal World War II period which engaged Australian strategic interest for the first time and when the relatively egalitarian American presence catalysed autonomy and independence demands; and the troubled post-war years when France’s view of its presence as a projection of its worldwide middle power status reinforced its pursuit of policies overriding local sensitivities, creating problems to which it was required to respond.

Part II will examine the period after France’s cessation of its nuclear tests (1996) and the conclusion of the Noumea Accord in 1998, a time when significant statutory change has been implemented in both French Polynesia and New Caledonia, a transition that is still in process. It will also survey France’s policy towards the region as a whole, including the greater engagement of the EU there.

Part III will identify France’s continuing motivations for staying in the region; some of the risks and uncertainties surrounding those interests; and the challenges for the future, including options for New Caledonia, and for how France might work with Australia and other regional countries to advance shared objectives.