3. Regional diplomatic offensive
1980s–1990s

While France introduced a suite of policies to improve its image and engagement in the broader region from the mid 1980s, these superficial changes initially met with mixed success. It was only after genuine French attention to independence demands in New Caledonia, and the nuclear testing issue, that regional attitudes began to change.

After the war, well into the 1970s, French policy was to keep its territories relatively isolated from the region. Chapter 2 described how France resisted efforts to draw new island states into the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), and the consequent formation of the South Pacific Forum (SPF), which excluded France and its territories. France had given some indication of a wish to be more involved in the Pacific region in the 1970s. Secretary of State for Départements et Territoires d’Outre-Mer (overseas departments and territories, DOM-TOMs), Olivier Stirn, claimed in 1975 that there was no wish for France to isolate itself or its territories, and affirmed its desire for its territories to establish relations with their neighbours (cited in Bates 1990, 94), and he travelled to some of the Forum island states. One of the first meetings of France’s senior officials and representatives in the South Pacific region took place in 1978 to plan a strategy for greater regional co-operation, with little apparent result on the ground. Bates notes that a subsequent call, in 1980, for a new approach to explain its presence only occurred because some island states were stepping up the campaign for the decolonisation of New Caledonia. The idea languished in the early 1980s, although French Polynesia had lodged a request for observer status to the Forum by 1985.

It was only with the effect of the Rainbow Warrior affair on France’s international and regional reputation in mid 1985, the re-inscription of New Caledonia in the United Nations (UN) Decolonisation Committee and the conclusion of the Treaty of Rarotonga, that President François Mitterrand and later Jacques Chirac (as prime minister) took action to repair the damage, always with a Gaullist eye to preserving France’s national prestige.

But the exercise from the outset was one of damage limitation rather than genuine policy change. Chirac proceeded with the Pons statutes in New Caledonia throughout this period; and even later, when France declared a moratorium on nuclear testing in 1992, it resumed its nuclear testing program from 1995 to 1996. Bates wrote at the time that the exercise was ill founded in that it was designed to correct misperceptions that France believed Australia and New
Zealand were responsible for perpetrating, and therefore was competitive and presentation-focused rather than collaborating with these countries to clarify any differences (Bates 1990, 97).

The first step in this image-improving process was a pledge by Mitterrand to increase diplomatic involvement and spending in the region. He set up a South Pacific Council in Paris and proposed a French university in the region and numerous scientific and cultural projects with island states, but only after having visited Moruroa in late 1985 ‘to reaffirm France’s commitment to its testing programme’ (in Henningham 1992, 209). The council was composed of key cabinet ministers, the French High Commissioners and French senior diplomats from the South Pacific, attached to the office of the president.

**Flosse as secretary of state for the South Pacific**

Chirac, who became prime minister in March 1986, proceeded with regional co-operation projects to stave off criticism from increasingly disaffected island states. He appointed his personal friend, Gaston Flosse, then president of French Polynesia, as secretary of state for the South Pacific from early 1986, which post he retained until Chirac lost government in 1988. Flosse began a process of annual meetings on the South Pacific in which he engaged senior regional French officials. He visited island states and invited their leaders to visit Paris, French Polynesia and even Moruroa.

French regional multilateral activity increased. France increased its disbursements to the SPC. Links between its numerous research and scientific organisations and Forum countries, and regional organisations, improved. For the first time, French scientific and research activities were pitched to the development of regional island states (Bates 1990, 100). With the negative aspects of nuclear testing in the minds of island leaders, the French turned their attention to bolstering their environmental credentials, setting up an environment monitoring observatory to collect and disseminate data in coordination with similar laboratories in the region; and participated in conventions on the protection of natural resources in the South Pacific and on banning driftnet fishing in the region. France offered help in surveillance of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) and set up emergency rescue and first aid supplies in its territories, for regional use (SPC Conference communiqué October 1990, Henningham 1992, 214). It set up a computer centre for the SP Geosciences Commission, later SOPAC, in Suva. France joined the Pacific Islands Development Program based in Honolulu, and established a consulate-general there in 1987, accredited to the Micronesian entities.
Flosse oversaw new bilateral aid to regional states, consisting of emergency and humanitarian aid in the wake of environmental disasters such as cyclones, and project aid and loans, including from his small ($US$4 million per annum) South Pacific Co-operation Fund. Flosse’s support to the Solomon Islands, in May 1986, which provided speedy and effective assistance in the wake of a devastating cyclone, set things off to a good start and was replicated in aid to the Cook Islands, Fiji and Vanuatu after similar natural disasters. Overall, France increased its bilateral aid expenditure to an average of $A12 million a year from 1987 to 1990, a modest amount given it was spending over one hundred times that in its own Pacific territories (Henningham 1992, 209).

In all of this, the French military took a high profile, the senior representative accompanying Flosse on visits, often in naval vessels. Naval courtesy calls to Fiji and Polynesian countries increased, sometimes delivering aid equipment. This was seen by many as designed to legitimise the presence of the French military in the region (Bates 1990, 99).

France encouraged French business and investment in the non-French Pacific. *Alliances françaises* were formed in Fiji and Tonga. At this time, reflecting shades of the old idea of France’s *mission civilisatrice*, or civilising mission, there was prevalent reference to the concept of *rayonnement*, or dissemination of French culture, in the South Pacific region, including by President Giscard d’Estaing. This included the idea of the French territories there being seen as a means to spread French influence, just as the colonies had done in Africa (see, for example, Leymarie 1985, 2; Aldrich and Connell 1989, 5, Chapter 8 and 101; Cordonnier 1995a, 113; Henningham 1992, 194). This trend took place within the context of a revival of the idea of formalising the influence of French culture globally, and specifically in the French territories, as a source of spreading French influence. Mitterrand created a high council for *Francophonie* in 1981 and Chirac created a state secretary for *Francophonie* in 1986 (see Aldrich and Connell 1989, Chapter 8).

Flosse’s leadership of the strategy proved a mixed blessing for many reasons. On the one hand, his Polynesian ancestry, ability to speak Tahitian — which facilitated communication with other Polynesian speakers, his flamboyant creativity, frenetic preparedness to travel widely, and obvious desire to help were all assets. Importantly, he was a strong regional personality working from Papeete, and not a metropolitan Paris-based functionary.

But his brief was problematic. It was based on chequebook diplomacy and corrective presentation rather than being collaborative. He was tasked to play a role in general policy and economic development in the French territories and
improve relations in the South Pacific working with the DOM-TOM and foreign affairs ministries, but he was excluded from policy-making with regard to New Caledonia.

Apart from the confused messages inherent in Flosse’s friendly overtures, while nuclear testing continued and policy tightened towards New Caledonia, he made some clumsy faux pas, reflecting a lack of understanding of island politics and a tendency to self-aggrandisement, which countered many of France’s positive intentions. Financial payments were offered to the opposition in Vanuatu’s elections in 1987, leading to the expulsion of the French ambassador there. In the Solomon Islands, even the generous and speedy French emergency response to the 1986 cyclone was undercut by Flosse’s provision of aid to Prime Minister Peter Kenilorea’s home village, which played into the hands of the opposition and resulted in Kenilorea having to resign (Bates 1990, 105). He also oversubscribed in the Cook Islands, where Prime Minister Sir Tom Davis, who had been well disposed towards French Polynesia despite opposing French testing there, also lost his job over the handling of aid from France. Flosse’s personal manner stood out from generally modest island ways. For example, he arrived at the 1987 Apia Forum meeting with his own luxury armour-plated limousine, where all other Forum leaders, including the Australian and New Zealand prime ministers made do with the VIP cars provided by the Samoan Government (Chesneaux and Maclellan 1992, 197).

His regional impact was divisive, even to the point of threatening regional security. Already, France’s New Caledonia policy had led elements there and in Vanuatu to consolidate ties with Libya, and Libya was glad to comply given its own problems with France over Chad (Henningham 1992, 222). This development undermined the overriding Western security strategy, led by regional powers Australia and New Zealand, and supported by France, of denial of the region to hostile powers. But Flosse’s heavy hand added its own ingredient of insensitivity and counterproductivity. At one point, in 1986, he threatened that if France withdrew from New Caledonia, there would be civil war between the Kanaks and Caldoches and the resulting power vacuum would be filled by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and Libya. In June 1987, he sought to galvanise Australia, New Zealand, the United States, France and Great Britain to define a policy for the South Pacific (Bates 1990, 109), seemingly unaware of the provocative nature of this suggestion to the independent island states, with its overtones of colonialism.

These lines of argument led to direct responses, especially by Melanesian leaders. In 1987, both Vanuatu’s Prime Minister Ham Lini and then PNG ambassador to the UN, Renagi Lohia, referred to France’s policies as ‘a direct threat to peace, security and stability … in our region and they have serious implications for
international peace and security’ (Islands Business April 1987, 19), and the Solomon Islands prime minister noted that ‘the powers that perpetuate terrorism in the region do not include Libya’ (Post Courier 21 May 1987, 2).

And, just as French policies in New Caledonia had proven divisive regionally by directly resulting in the formation of first, the Forum, and then, the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), so now Flosse compounded the problem, by counter-proposing a Polynesian Community. Although Flosse credited Cook Islands Prime Minister Davis with the idea, it seems generally accepted that it was Flosse’s (by Chesneaux and Maclellan 1992, 197; Bates 1990, 112). He organised meetings with Polynesian leaders to discuss it and raised it when he received regional leaders as his guests in Papeete. His actions were part of a deliberate policy of divide and rule, and were badly received.

France’s relationship with Fiji was also regionally divisive. France sought to increase its influence, capitalising on the nuanced regional responses to the 1987 coups by military leader Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka. Australia and New Zealand, and the Commonwealth, instituted sanctions against Fiji, although some island leaders were more forgiving of Rabuka’s actions. Although France publicly neither condemned nor condoned the coup, it conducted a joint naval exercise with Fiji shortly afterwards, and welcomed Prime Minister Sir Ratu Mara to Paris, providing much-needed international recognition in doing so (Henningham 1992, 216; Bates 1990, 101). France stepped up bilateral aid commitments to around $A16 million, which compared favourably to Australian annual aid of around $A14 million at the time. This aid included a helicopter and civil emergency equipment, which some saw as potentially usable by the rebellious army. France already had military links with Fiji arising from shared participation in the UN Interim Force in Lebanon. European Commission aid continued uninterrupted, no doubt influenced by French views. Meanwhile Flosse drew pointed comparisons between regional views criticising Rabuka’s desire to reduce the influence of the Indian community while insisting the future of New Caledonia should be decided by the Kanaks; and questioning the Forum’s view of New Caledonia as an international issue while maintaining its stance on Fiji was an internal matter (Bates 1990, 102).

The reaction of regional leaders was, understandably, mixed. The Forum, in its annual communiqués, continued to voice its strong opposition to France’s nuclear testing, including its resumption in 1995; and to watch closely developments in New Caledonia. Some leaders, such as in Western Samoa and Cook Islands, favourably noted French efforts towards dialogue and to provide constructive aid, but continued to oppose France’s nuclear testing and New Caledonia policies. Tonga’s public position vacillated. Not surprisingly, Melanesian leaders were more resistant, with Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu not dissuaded from their efforts in the UN, attacking French nuclear and New Caledonia policies. As
noted in Chapter 2, Vanuatu expelled the French ambassador and France reduced its aid there. Stephen Bates, in 1990, made the harsh assertion that the Flosse initiatives ‘failed to reduce the hostility of the Melanesian countries towards France and … there is no conclusive evidence that they had a moderating effect on the attitude of the Polynesian states’ (113).

A policy shift from 1988

But, over time, with the nomination of socialist Michel Rocard in place of rightwing Chirac as prime minister amidst the Gossanah cave affair in May 1988, France bolstered its efforts with more concrete policy change. Rocard led the changed approach to New Caledonia with the Matignon Accords and, significantly, removed Flosse from his position in 1988. He revived France’s South Pacific Council, which had been inoperative under Chirac, and established a regional roving ambassador for the South Pacific, a position that endures until today. Naval visits to island states increased. Rocard visited the Pacific in 1989, including stops in Australia, New Caledonia, Fiji and French Polynesia, but finished pointedly with Moruroa. During his visit he urged the French territories to integrate more in the cultural and economic life of the region. And, in 1992, his successor Pierre Bérégovoy announced a suspension of nuclear testing in French Polynesia.

The island governments at this time were certainly happy to accept more engagement from France in development co-operation. In 1992, Stephen Henningham, while noting continued opposition by island countries over New Caledonia and nuclear testing, pointed to France’s diplomatic offensive having ‘secured broader acceptance … of the view that France has a legitimate role, and contributions to make to the region’s economic welfare’, particularly by Fiji, and countries of Polynesia and Micronesia, although he acknowledged some improvement even with Melanesian countries by 1990 (218–219). But these countries continued to oppose nuclear testing, and remained vigilant over New Caledonia. It took concrete policy change in both areas to improve regional acceptance. Even after cessation of nuclear testing in 1996, regional leaders did not see either the Matignon or Noumea Accords as sufficient in themselves to remove New Caledonia from the UN Committee of Decolonisation list. Thus, as noted in Chapter 2, every year, to this day, a New Caledonia resolution is passed without vote in the Decolonisation Committee, sponsored by Fiji and Papua New Guinea (see also Regional reactions, Chapter 6).

In Australia and New Zealand, grassroots sentiment was strongly anti nuclear testing (especially in New Zealand) and pro independence for New Caledonia. The two governments officially recorded these policy stances, but worked to
moderate regional pushes for tough action against France. As described in Chapter 2, they had slowed down island leaders’ moves for reinscription of New Caledonia with the UN Decolonisation Committee, only changing their stance when Chirac tightened policy with the Pons statutes. Differences with Chirac’s approach had led to deterioration in relations, especially between Australia and France, culminating in the expulsion of Australia’s Consul-General in Noumea, John Dauth, in 1987. No doubt relations were coloured by the complexion of governments in the respective countries, improving, for example, when both French and Australian governments were of the socialist left, as when Rocard became prime minister in France in 1988 while Bob Hawke led Australia’s Labor Government. Throughout the difficult 1980s both the Australian and New Zealand governments had conducted private dialogue in Paris, to encourage change. Accordingly, both welcomed the Rocard reforms on New Caledonia, and strongly supported the Matignon Agreements. Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans, visited New Caledonia shortly after signature of the Agreements where, for the first time in many years, the Australian Consul-General at the time hosted a reception attended by both Rassemblement Pour la Calédonie dans la République (Rally for [New] Caledonia within the Republic, RPCR) and Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (Kanak Socialist National Liberation Front, FLNKS) members (Personal communication, O’Leary September 2009). Despite lingering strain in New Zealand over the Rainbow Warrior affair, New Zealand’s foreign minister visited Noumea in 1989, offered technical assistance to support the success of the Matignon Accords, and spoke of France’s important role and enduring legacy in the South Pacific. Both governments took a more measured approach to decolonisation than many other island governments, welcoming, for example, the Micronesian non-independent states into the Forum and regional structures in the 1980s (Henningham 1992, 222). This was to have the effect of paving the way for an accommodating view to the French entities in the 1990s.

By the end of the 1990s, France had begun to implement genuine policy change, ceasing its nuclear tests in the region by 1996, by which time it was well into implementing the Matignon/Oudinot Accords in New Caledonia, and adjusting its statutory provisions for French Polynesia to accommodate demands for change. These processes were not straightforward and involved extensive financial and administrative investment. France began advocating greater participation in the region by both collectivities in the 1990s and early 2000s. But, with a record of broken promises in the preceding decades, some of the difficulties France encountered in implementing changes in its entities, which will be explored in the next two chapters, left continued questions about its future role and acceptance in the region.