

7. French motivations in the Pacific

France has sought, quietly, to play a greater role in the region, including through maintaining stability in its collectivities and contributing to selected regional activities. It has increasingly sought to pursue this role in tandem with Australia. For its part, Australia has been a willing partner. Australia could rely on the peaceful administration of the French Pacific entities as it grappled with serious governance shortcomings in the Melanesian arc, from Papua New Guinea and Fiji, to Solomon Islands and even a fragile Vanuatu. French military assets have enabled regional burden-sharing in surveillance and emergency assistance across vast areas of the South Pacific. So, an important question for Australia, and for the stability of the region, is: will France stay in the Pacific and if so, why, and how?

There has been very little specific public articulation of French policy on these questions. Chapter 4 referred to institutional factors in Paris working against a coherent strategic approach. As in most key areas of France's presence in the Pacific throughout history, ambiguity is rife. In 2000, a survey of the French overseas presence stated baldly that 'the position of the French government *vis-à-vis* the overseas territories is not always clear' (Doumenge et al 2000, 207).

Just as so often occurred in the past, today France's European and domestic priorities continue to dominate its approach to its Pacific collectivities. Senior French officials note the overriding priority of preoccupations within metropolitan France and Europe, and variously ascribe State action relating to the Pacific collectivities as based on reflex and past approaches, as linked solely to statutory requirements, or as arising simply from the duty to protect French settlers abroad (Personal communications Paris April 2008 and Noumea March 2009).

Pointers to France's continuing motivations in the Pacific are evident in its past motivations, and statements made by the government of Nicolas Sarkozy about its approach to its overseas territories generally, and its practice and policy in the Pacific.

Past motivations

'La grandeur'

As noted in earlier chapters, France's early ventures into the Pacific were based on national prestige and *grandeur* (greatness), to establish its ascendancy as a

global power, which was originally based on a quest for knowledge and wealth, accompanied by a competitive objective for its cultural influence to prevail (*rayonnement* and *mission civilisatrice*, or cultural expansion and the civilising mission) particularly over that of Britain. By the late eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth century, there was also a logistical need to support its missionaries and residents and provide *points de relâche* (provision and supply stops) for the presence of its navy; and a temporary motivation in the nineteenth century to relocate its convicts. For the most part, economic or commercial gains were secondary motivators. Charles-Robert Ageron (1978) argues that business interests were notable more for their absence than presence in French colonial adventures to the twentieth century).

For most of this time, too, France was affected by losses of territory in Europe, particularly in the nineteenth century, and sought by its overseas empire to make up for these losses. Chapter 2 shows that this kind of thinking persisted into the twentieth century, after the two world wars and also after its loss of Algeria and Indochina, which shaped its approach to New Caledonia.

At this time an important, but less tangible, motivation was what Robert Aldrich describes as 'an effort to give France a stake in the region and a bet on later uses of the possessions', given the region's potential for the future — its 'strategic centrality' (1990, 32 and 334). Nathalie Mrgudovic describes this as a 'will to be present' (*'une volonté de présence'*) rather than a policy of conquest (2008, 73). Hervé Coutau-Bégarie notes the importance for France of simply being present by virtue of its Pacific entities, despite the lack of revenue they brought for France (1987, 286).

Coutau-Bégarie's writings provide some insight into longstanding French beliefs, which continue to inform its approach to the region. He emphasises the preoccupation of France with providing a Gallic leavening to the predominant Anglo-Saxon presence. This was extrapolated from Britain towards Australia, to the point of accusing Australia of being jealous of France. He enumerates instances where Australia had allegedly sought to stymie the French presence: in 1918, apparently succeeding in ensuring France did not get any German islands in the reallocation of colonial possessions; alleged efforts to 'relieve' France of New Caledonia in 1945 and alleged Australian efforts to erase signs of the French presence on Vanuatu's independence in 1980 (1987, 287). This kind of thinking was behind the concerns of Charles de Gaulle's London-based supporters in 1941, to get rid of Governor Henri Sautot, who had worked so assiduously to sustain a loyal pro-de Gaulle New Caledonia, but who had done it in concert with Australia and the Americans, and was thereby suspect (Chapter 1).

Logistical bases and strategic denial

Aldrich describes the strategic motivators for France as changing in the nineteenth century, from supply points for its merchant navy in the 1840s, to coaling stations for steamships in the 1880s and, in the early twentieth century, to airfields for transpacific aviation in the 1930s (1990, 334), to which could be added naval support as World War II approached. Generally, as the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth, imperial Pacific powers were motivated more by strategic factors in a global context, and focused more on the ocean than on the islands themselves (Alexander 2001, on Japan).

During the world wars the Pacific possessions were seen by European powers, including France, as important assertions of sovereignty and logistical bases from which to defend it. Moreover, during World War II, and throughout the Cold War, France, along with the Western allies, saw its Pacific possessions as an important bulwark from which to keep out hostile powers (for example Guillaud 2003, Henningham 1992, 222). Thus France saw itself, along with the United States, as the principal balance to unwanted Soviet intrusion into the region. Jean Chesneaux sketched in polemical terms the tendency of France to 'only realise its destiny in the Pacific through an adversary which it demonised' (Chesneaux and MacLellan 1992, 91). Again, commercial factors were secondary (Guillaud 2003).

French Polynesia and the independent nuclear deterrent

By the middle of the twentieth century, an initial postwar impulse to free their dependencies gave way to a determination to retain them, albeit within a more democratic framework. As Chapter 1 shows, de Gaulle foresaw, early in World War II, the role of France's overseas empire in bolstering its flagging prestige. As France under de Gaulle sought to build its own self-reliant defence capabilities after its humiliating experiences during the two world wars, the fundamental importance of the nuclear deterrent, the *force de frappe*, meant it was vital to retain testing grounds that were isolated from metropolitan France. Its fevered efforts to retain Algeria, in part for this purpose, failed. These traumatic events underpinned the strength of France's determination to retain the French Polynesian testing site and to continue testing well into the closing years of the twentieth century, despite regional and international opposition.

The coincidence of this commitment with independence demands in New Caledonia also partly explained France's obstinacy there: if New Caledonia were to become independent, it could set a poor precedent for French Polynesia, which was then the more strategically important possession. (Such is the potency of the domino effect argument that one senior New Caledonian pro-France

leader as recently as March 2009 expressed his personal belief that it had been the CIA who had instigated the independence movement in New Caledonia, precisely to undermine France's nuclear testing in French Polynesia, (Personal communication March 2009). This thinking is almost incomprehensible to an Australian, or any Western ally, given US support for France as a nuclear power, notwithstanding the latter's desire to be an independent member of the nuclear club.)

France as European '*puissance mondiale moyenne*' (middle-sized world power)

In the 1980s, in an increasingly defensive mode, France made much of the global dimension of its presence. As former Prime Minister Raymond Barre said, 'whatever the cost, our overseas possessions assure us [France] of a global dimension which is fundamental to us' (Chesneaux 1992, 99). Underlying this thinking at this time was France's self-defined role as a *puissance mondiale moyenne* (middle-sized world power), a Fifth Republic concept that grew out of the 'grand design' of the Gaullist years (see Chesneaux 1991).

The importance of the French overseas presence, particularly in the Pacific, to this role was evident in publications of the Institut du Pacifique (such as Ordonnaud 1983). A seminal work of the time on the subject was a paper by French journalist Philippe Leymarie 'Les enjeux stratégiques de la crise calédonienne' ('The strategic stakes in the Caledonian crisis', *Monde diplomatique* 1985). That the work is breathtaking in its articulation of a French/Eurocentric perspective, warts and all (he describes the territorial continuity provided to France by its overseas presence in the Pacific as stretching from Australia 'in the east' to Easter Island in the 'west' (p. 3)), does not diminish the contribution Leymarie has made to enunciating French motivations in the Pacific at the time. Despite, or perhaps because of, his French chauvinist tendencies, his article is illuminating on French motivations, to the modern, non-French reader. Implicit in his paper is a justification or legitimation of the French possessions.

Related domino effect

Leymarie cites a 1985 French armed forces study stating that, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, France was meeting its 'destiny as a middle global power' by its presence in the Pacific (1985, 1 and see also Chesneaux 1987a, 4). He expands on the potential domino effect of a crisis in New Caledonia for France's possessions elsewhere (not only in the Pacific but in the Indian Ocean and beyond, specifically Guyana, Guadeloupe and Réunion, see Leymarie 1985, 1, 3). In this context, he notes that whereas the only questioning ('*contestation*')

of French power for the other overseas territories was internal, this was not the case in the Pacific, especially New Caledonia, where it was the surrounding region that questioned French rule. He cites other specific cases where external claims were being made such as to Clipperton (by Mexico) and Matthew and Hunter (by Vanuatu).

Role in defence of France and Europe

Leymarie notes the importance of the Pacific presence for the defence of France and Europe including through the leverage that France's Pacific entities provided for the Western alliance, particularly for action in advance of that of the United States, which he notes had proved circumspect on any issue in which its own interests were not directly engaged; and for maintaining a role independent of the East–West division in the Third World. The idea of the islands as advance 'aircraft carriers' or 'economic shopfronts' in the Pacific is enunciated, as launching points for penetration of regional markets, cultural '*rayonnement*' (radiation, or influence) and development co-operation as well as sovereign bases from which dissuasion or external intervention could be authorised from Paris (Leymarie 1985, 1 and 2).

In a precursor to the policies contained in France's 2008 defence white paper (see Sarkozy government policy, below), Leymarie extols the virtues of upgrading Noumea as a defence logistics base, for pre-positioning materiel rather than personnel which, he notes, could be landed there in 36 hours. He refers to the value of Noumea in protecting access from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean via the Torres Strait in the event of conflict to the north, describing it as the only alternative to sea lanes that are flanked by Indonesian and Malaysian waters (sic, given Indonesia's proximity to that strait). This access, he asserts, would be important to protect the New Caledonian nickel resource. Once again he adduces the argument of displacement: France, by its presence, prevents other powers from obtaining a foothold in the region, among which he mentions, revealingly, Australia in company with the then Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

Exclusive Economic Zone resource base for Europe

Leymarie also refers to the foothold the Pacific presence gave France in the unexploited economic zone resources, including fisheries and minerals, in an ocean touted as the new centre of the world. He argues that it was only at the level of the European Community (EC) that this economic challenge could be met. Still, he notes that the military importance of Noumea should not be exaggerated, citing other examples where relinquishing a presence did not necessarily mean another enemy moving in (Seychelles, Mauritius, Malta, Maldives) and, indeed, asserting that to leave could better ensure a presence

(*'s'en aller pour mieux rester'*, to go the better to stay) as France had done in Djibouti, Gabon, Senegal and the Ivory Coast (1985, 4). He claims that even the nickel resource would not be lost, as it would be exploited jointly and 'France would share the revenue with any new state' as its commercial interests made this worthwhile. In any case, he notes that France was concentrating its search for metallurgic nodules more on Clipperton, than elsewhere in its territories at the time.

Post-1990s French policy to retain Pacific collectivities within France

Recent history (see Chapter 2 and 5) shows that successive French administrations in Paris have exercised considerable innovation and ingenuity in developing solutions for the Pacific collectivities, even by changing the French constitution, confirming that they want them to stay with France. They are prepared to underwrite the considerable financial costs of maintaining sovereignty. At the same time, New Caledonia has replaced French Polynesia in primary strategic importance.

French Polynesia

Chapter 5 showed that, in French Polynesia, there was no question of French departure so long as the nuclear testing program had not been completed, which occurred in 1996. But, since then, France has paid a premium to ensure continued sovereignty there by extending its compensation payments to French Polynesia well into the future. It has also invested political energy in statutory change and exerted political pressure to entrench its interests.

As in New Caledonia, France has repeatedly wielded the economic carrot, warning that payments could be at risk if pro-France forces lost out. This threat is the more effective given that French Polynesia has few resources and would be unlikely to survive on its own without French aid. Pro-France groups have frustrated the repeated election of pro-independence forces since 2004. The French State has so far stopped short of extending to French Polynesia the new key powers it has given to New Caledonia (the ability to legislate, special citizenship benefits, and the promise of a vote on independence). Thus France retains leverage over local parties to maintain French sovereignty.

Ascendance in importance of New Caledonia

By the late 1990s, with the end of nuclear testing and the agreement of the Noumea Accord, the relative dominance and importance of the two French Pacific collectivities was inverted, with New Caledonia setting the pace in acquiring increased autonomy (Chapters 4 and 5).

Part of the evolving solution for New Caledonia from 1988 included the development of its rich nickel resource, in ways that were designed to distribute the benefits more equitably to Kanaks and European New Caledonians alike. The prospect of petroleum reserves in New Caledonia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) heightened the stakes. The commitment to an eventual vote on New Caledonia's future status was made in an innovative transition formula, through the Matignon and Noumea Accords, to buy more time for the French State to build confidence and economic prosperity such that few would wish to take on the responsibilities of independence outside the French republic.

But the day of reckoning is yet to come, and developments to 2018 will be critical in a peaceful ongoing resolution of differences in New Caledonia.

Generally, there has also been an undeniable element of the legacy of history by which France, having held on to its Pacific possessions, had to some extent little choice but to implement its statutory commitments to them. In Wallis and Futuna, for example, there has been little push for change (indeed, the entity still operates on its 1961 statute), and in both New Caledonia and French Polynesia the pro-independence forces have been shown to have used their public stances to pressure France for more support for their groupings at times. But, overall, France has maintained a continuing objective to retain the three Pacific collectivities within the French fold. Did France's motivations change from the 1990s?

France's motivations post 1990s

Continuing strategic importance of France's Pacific presence

While the nuclear deterrent remains a bedrock of French defence policy (see, for example, France's 2008 Defence White Paper), the suspension of the nuclear testing program in French Polynesia altered the contribution that the Pacific entities make to France's global place. France's foothold in the Pacific continued to deliver strategic benefits, but the role of the Pacific is now more indirect in its relation to France. Retaining a presence in the Pacific returns a boost to the

strategic weight of France (as part of the chain of Overseas France possessions); real and potential commercial benefits; a negative benefit related to preventing critical public opinion domestically and internationally, as had occurred in the past; and, a claim to new democratic legitimacy and protection of its nationals abroad. Each of these elements will be examined in turn, before considering the approach of the Sarkozy government to the French Pacific collectivities.

Ballast for France's European and global role

France continues to be motivated by its sense of itself as a global power with special privileges and responsibilities. Its leaders no longer use the phrase *puissance moyenne mondiale* in a world where the emergence of China reduces France's status to that of a small power, rather than a medium-sized power. Still, France wants to retain its status as one of the elite five Permanent Members of the United Nations (UN) Security Council, at a time when the composition of that group is under debate. France's presence in every corner of the globe, therefore, remains important. As Jacques Chirac has so succinctly said, 'Without the departments and territories overseas, France would be only a little country' (in Aldrich and Connell 1989, 148).

In the mid 1990s and early 2000s, France was seen as maintaining its overseas possessions to add to its strategic weight (see Firth in Howe 1994, 302: 'France resisted, and continues to resist, the decolonisation of its Pacific territories, because their loss would undermine France's claim to be a world power and create a gap in the global string of French military installations'; Doumenge et al 2000, 205: 'the French overseas collectivities give France a listening post in all the large regions of the world'; Berman 2001, 24: 'Continued presence in New Caledonia projects France's status as a global power').

Elements of Chesneaux's analysis, written in 1987, remain true today. He notes that France is the only power, apart from the United States, capable of establishing military bases worldwide and a communications network that is firmly based on its sovereign possessions including Noumea and Papeete (1987a, 5). A major new listening station was opened near Noumea's international airport, Tontouta, in 2004. The EU's 2009 Briefing Paper on Military Installations lists France's military assets in its Pacific entities (EU Parliament 2009).

Isabelle Cordonnier, in 1995, talked about French military motivations of nuclear dissuasion, exploitation of space; freedom of air and naval mobility; a strategic perception that the presence in the Pacific balanced France's presence in the Atlantic; and the role of the Pacific territories in the *rayonnement* (influence) of France in its global maritime domain, with its vast EEZ deriving from them, its ports, bases and business interests. She also referred to the 'vacuum filling' objective of preventing colonisation of the Pacific by hostile Asian states (1995a,

112). It is partly this concept of denial to outsiders that underpinned the 1990s diplomatic effort to improve France's image in the region as a constructive partner (see Chapter 6).

As late as 2003, Paul de Deckker wrote (2003b, 2) that France went against the current in maintaining its Pacific collectivities to preserve its strategic mining and military interests, the interests of its French nationals, and a nuclear assurance of national defence in French Polynesia.

There was some official acknowledgement of the strategic importance of the French entities in the Pacific. In 2003, the then Minister for Overseas France, Brigitte Girardin, wrote that 'our territorial collectivities of New Caledonia, Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna enable our country to be present in this ocean' (in Cadéot 2003, 7). In his preface to Mrgudovic's 2008 work on France in the South Pacific, former Prime Minister Michel Rocard referred to the South Pacific as a place where France faced the classic contradiction between its 'generous' principles and 'its interests as a great power that it claimed at every opportunity' (Mrgudovic 2008, 13).

Since 2007, Sarkozy's administration has continued to see Overseas France as key to France's global status, which he has described in terms reminiscent of de Gaulle's vision for France (see Sarkozy government policy, below).

Strategic denial/balance

Since Cordonnier wrote of 'vacuum filling' by France in 1995, China has become more engaged in the South Pacific, beginning with competitive chequebook flashing with Taiwan, but also including aid and other investment activities targeted at securing valued fisheries and minerals resources, and simply a strategic presence (see Hanson 2008, especially on China's \$US150 million annual aid program; Dobell 2007, on its destabilising effects; Firth in de Deckker and Faberon, 2008, 174, on practical aid and other activity by China including building a headquarters for the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) in Vila, and sending workers to staff a Chinese-owned mine in Papua New Guinea). France retains control in an area that is currently the object of the attention of a future superpower, and contributes to balancing China's presence for the Western alliance.

Stewart Firth argues it is the non-sovereign Pacific states that are of greater strategic importance than the independent Pacific states, and the French entities themselves are no exception (1989, 75). The US dependencies generally lie north of the Equator (the exceptions being the island of Jarvis, the EEZ of Micronesia and Baker Islands). For Australia, France's presence in its three Pacific entities south of the Equator arguably confers wider strategic returns than relations with the independent states, particularly when coupled with the

coincidence of France's strategic interests with Australia's own (Firth 1989, 87). Waddell noted in 2008 that France shared with Australia, New Zealand, and the independent Melanesian states, 'a convergence of strategic preoccupations, notably the concern to buttress 'failed' island states and the need to protect the region from what are perceived as destabilising forces originating in Asia' (2008, 12). Australia's Parliamentary Secretary for Pacific Island Affairs, Duncan Kerr, acknowledged France's contribution in working with Australia on issues of mutual security, defence co-operation, control of illegal fishing, and other areas when he visited New Caledonia in November 2008.

By its role in strategic denial alone, France's presence returns strategic benefits not only for France, but also for the Western alliance, and most importantly for Australia. But, as history has shown, these benefits have the potential to turn into negatives should France's presence again become destabilising; for example, by virtue of opposition or dissent by a significant percentage of its local populations who could turn to unwelcome sources of external support, as they have in the past (shown for example when New Caledonia and Vanuatu turned variously to Libya and the Soviet Union, Chapter 2).

Role in supporting space technology within Europe

Part of France's role as a global middle power from the second half of the twentieth century has been its engagement in space technology. Its overseas possessions are an important element of this engagement. Guyana has been the launching site for the French *Ariadne* rocket since 1968 and, from 1975, for the European Space Agency, which co-funds the spaceport and launched the European space shuttle *Hermes*. There has long been recognition of the importance, or at least the potential importance, of a presence in the vast Pacific Ocean in the French space program. On 14 February 1986, Régis Debray, Secretary-General of the High Council for the Pacific, told *Libération* that 'the Pacific may provide opportunities for France and Europe to establish control and treatment stations for geo-stationery and circulating satellites ... the space age will raise the importance of the overseas territories' (Chesneaux 1987a, 4).

And France indeed does derive a leading role within Europe from its role in developing space technology. Apart from hosting the European satellite-launching site in Guyana, France's extensive presence in the Pacific Ocean facilitates space sensing, monitoring and retrieval. While the Centre d'Expérimentation du Pacifique (Pacific Experimentation Centre, CEP) has closed down, useful infrastructure remains on the French Polynesian islands of Hao and Moruroa (landing strips on each, some staff and scientific monitors measuring underground movements on Moruroa, Personal communications

Noumea, March 2009; also Maclellan 2005e, 372). For example, the United States has signed an agreement with France to use the Hao landing strip for the American space shuttle (see Mrgudovic 2008, 98).

Sarkozy acknowledged the role of Overseas France in France's status as a first-rate space power (*'une puissance spatiale de tout premier plan'*) in his November 2009 speech on Overseas France reform (Sarkozy 2009).

Commercial motivations

In recent years, commercial incentives for France to stay in the South Pacific, which were marginal in the past, have strengthened.

Resource base and extended EEZ

France is the second-largest world maritime nation owing to the size of its EEZ, the largest part of which derives from its Pacific collectivities (see Chapter 2 and Sarkozy 2009), with all the potential that extensive EEZ offers in unknown economic resources. While French Polynesia, by its vast extent, contributes the largest portion of EEZ to France, the importance of the EEZ extends to the tiniest element of France's sovereign claims. Mrgudovic describes France's continuing assertion of its claim over the island group of Matthew and Hunter, representing 24,000 square kilometres of EEZ, as illustrating its attachment to a strategy of territorial presence with power deriving primarily an expression from its EEZ rights (Mrgudovic 2008, 219, 261, 397). France's continued scientific research off the Clipperton Islands is another example.

While analysts no longer talk of manganese nodules, as they did in the 1980s, largely because of the continued availability of land-based minerals and the relative expense of seabed extraction, there is little doubt that the seabed is one of the earth's last unexplored frontiers. Almost a third of existing oil deposits come from undersea deposits (Mrgudovic 2008, 95). De Deckker (in Cadéot 2003, 205), notes that the EEZ was not only significant for the resources it may contain, but also in the scope it offered for scientific research and technology transfer. This is an important consideration for a country such as France, which projects itself as a world leader in science and technology. Whereas sovereignty is not a necessary condition for scientific research, it facilitates research at lower cost than such research undertaken on foreign shores. Sarkozy has acknowledged the role of Overseas France in enhancing the role of France in space and in biodiversity (Sarkozy 2009).

As for the French Pacific, François Garde refers variously to fisheries development, scientific research, space interests, new technologies, and hydrocarbons which all give increasing value to the Pacific entities, and which may be worth much

more in 20 or 50 years time (2002, 67). De Deckker sees the first decades of the twenty-first century as possibly invalidating the priorities of the past, with economic gain as the major priority (in Cadéot 2003, 205). Coutau-Bégarie, as long ago as 1986, saw the EEZ and nickel resource potential as likely, in the long-term, to outweigh the costly record of the French Pacific collectivities, which were then popularly known as '*les danseuses qui coûtent cher*' (expensive dancing girls) (Coutau-Bégarie and Seurin 1986, 208).

In the Pacific, New Caledonia provides the pre-eminent interest for France, because of its nickel resource and the potential for exploitation of hydrocarbons offshore. France's interest in New Caledonia has been described as a 'geopolitical project', which assists in France's global status and access to the potentially rich seabed and resources (Rumley et al 2006, Chapter 13). As discussed in Chapter 4, New Caledonia's current nickel projects represent France's largest mining activities nationally. In December 2008, Sarkozy told the Noumea Accord signatories committee that Eramet, France's vehicle for participating in New Caledonia's nickel development, was the largest single French mining actor, and wielded strategic responsibilities for the country (*Nouvelles Calédoniennes* 11 December 2008). With global energy demands changing, signs of the presence of large, but currently unviable, hydrocarbon and natural gas reserves represent a significant potential asset.

Link with Pacific as new economic hub

More broadly, reprising the debate of the late 1800s (set out in Aldrich 1988, and see also Chapter 2), there is a view that France's presence in the South Pacific links it to the vibrant economic growth of the northern Pacific (for example, Ordonnaud 1983, Lacour 1987, who argue that the centre of the world inexorably derived from the Pacific Basin, and France's fortuitous presence gave it a chance to take its place amongst the great powers competing for influence there, 17). The idea of the importance of having a presence in this hemisphere persists, despite warnings like that of Chesneaux in 1992 about the risks of confusing the two parts of the Pacific within the fashionable concept of it as the new centre of the world (102). Girardin, then Overseas France Minister, in a forward to Pierre Cadéot's 2003 volume on the French Pacific collectivities states that they 'enable our country to be present in this ocean which has become in the twenty-first century the other Mediterranean. So the Pacific Overseas is an opportunity for France: a gangplank to other civilisations, a gateway to a dynamic economic zone and the place for innovative policies' (7).

So, for the first time, the collectivities in the Pacific represent a positive economic asset for France, notwithstanding France's considerable financial outlay there. This is of interest since, for Australia and New Zealand, 'the importance of the region in defence and security terms ... far outweighs its economic importance

to them' (Henningham 1992, 219). In a sense, because of these real and potential economic considerations attaching to its Pacific collectivities, France has a greater direct economic motivation than either Australia or New Zealand to be in the region.

Investment requires stability

One consequence of the ascendancy of the economic factor, particularly the importance of large-scale projects such as in nickel mining and the potential processing and exploitation of hydrocarbons, is that investors are necessary, especially in a competitive global environment; and, investors seek political and economic stability. This has injected a new element into the debates about political independence and economic dependence in the French collectivities. It has strengthened France's hand with its overseas communities, as France is better placed than any local government to provide the requisite civil stability and financial inputs. Thus, pro-France leader Jacques Lafleur frequently argued that New Caledonia needed France to negotiate big commercial deals in order to develop (Lafleur 2002; Personal communications 2002, 2009). On the other hand, in New Caledonia in particular, the new players, particularly if they come from metropolitan France, want a say in their community, and expect voting rights (Doumenge et al 2000, 207), which potentially undermines the special electoral arrangements devised to underpin ongoing stability.

France as leader of the EU in the Pacific

France's increasing provision of economic and other types of assistance to the region, and its role in leading EU contributions there, potentially increases its capacity, and that of the EU, to win supportive votes from the numerous Pacific island states in multilateral bodies, most notably the UN, on issues of interest to it. At the same time, France and Europe need to exercise this leverage carefully. As elaborated in Chapter 6, the Pacific island states are aware that EU and French engagement can be a two-edged sword (for example, France threatened New Zealand's access to EU butter markets in the wake of the *Rainbow Warrior* affair; Europe holds the purse strings over sugar with Fiji).

Public opinion

Another recent, unstated motivator for France has been the desire to ensure that its overseas Pacific presence does not become the subject of negative public opinion, either internationally or domestically. One recent senior French official said that his brief before departing for Noumea was succinct: '*pas d'ennuis*' (no problems) (Personal communication April 2008).

As noted in Chapter 2, just as French domestic policy and preoccupations have dictated the pace and direction of policy applying to the French Pacific entities, so too have negative developments in the overseas entities impacted severely on French governments. The starkest example was the effect of the Algeria debacle in bringing down the Fourth Republic government. Another is the role of the Gossanah cave affair on the French presidential elections of 1988. France's Pacific policy engaged the full force of public opinion, not only in France, but internationally, over the nuclear testing issue, the Rainbow Warrior affair, and treatment of New Caledonia, with devastating effect on France's image.

So, France does not want to have its hand again forced by domestic and world focus on what it is doing in the Pacific. On the one hand, this has motivated France to behave more responsibly in the region, but, on the other, it has reinforced a tendency if not to secrecy, at least to non-articulation, or ambiguity, of policy and a desire to avoid international attention. It has also taken firm preventative action, for example by seeking to mute Oscar Temaru's influence in French Polynesia after he raised self-determination and UN reinscription issues in the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) (Chapter 5).

Relative disinterest of French public

Back home, historically, domestic public opinion neither focused on, nor cared about, the French overseas presence in general, and even less about the Pacific presence. Chesneaux notes that the French at home were too concerned with their own political differences and issues to worry about Overseas France, and that, in any case, France's Pacific entities received less interest and attention than Africa or Indochina (1992, 91). This is true so long as no major disturbance occurs overseas, such as the *événements* in New Caledonia; or, more recently, protests in the mid 2000s in Guadeloupe, spreading to other overseas *Départements*, about the cost of living.

Characteristic of the history of France's overseas presence has been the relatively thin spread of institutional involvement in the overseas empire. As described in Part I, France's overseas possessions were run initially by the navy (which indeed has taken a predominant role right up until the present, see Chapter 4), then by a relatively small Overseas France ministry, which persists until today. Narrow lobby groups have in the past sought to influence policy, including the oceanic lobby of the late nineteenth century. But broad media or public interest in Overseas France has been rare. Such disinterest can be explained by relative ignorance about Overseas France, but also by greater substantive interests; for example, by business people and travellers, in other parts of the world such as Asia.

More recently, René Dosière, French MP for the Aisne, with the special parliamentary role of rapporteur for the Organic Law of 1999, told the colloquium marking the 20th anniversary of the Matignon Accords that ‘The National Assembly shows no interest at all in the Overseas, which corresponds to the state of metropolitan public opinion’ (Regnault and Fayaud 2008, 159; also see Coutau-Bégarie and Seurin 1986, 40; Chesneaux 1987a, 9 and 1992, 144; Guillebaud 1976, 29; Victor 1990; Doumenge et al 2000, 61; Christnacht 2003, 5; Diémert in Tesoka and Ziller 2008, 239).

Public disinterest seems to apply even to the political issues and lavish expenditures on the Pacific collectivities (demonstrated by Dosière in Regnault and Fayaud 2008, 159–63; Personal communication by members of the Senate Finance Committee 2008). There is no public debate about the collectivities, even when their budgets are under consideration (one New Caledonian representative noted that he often had to remind officials presenting to the Senate Finance Committee to say something about expenditure in the Pacific collectivities, Personal communication March 2009).

Relatively low cost of French Pacific entities

Partly, the French public does not take a close interest in the overseas presence because the costs are not widely known. Moreover, within the overall context of the French budget, the costs are relatively insignificant. The budget for *all* the overseas entities is only .7 per cent of France’s GDP, and only 4.6 per cent of its budget. The cost of the three South Pacific entities, totalling EUR2.65 billion (\$A4.6 billion) in 2008, represented only .14 per cent of France’s GDP or .95 per cent of the French State’s budget (figures provided by French Senate Finances Commission September 2008).

In 2000, the costs of Overseas France were considered by some to be relatively cheap (Doumenge et al 2000, 205). Costs per head of the population in the French Pacific collectivities were lower than those per head of the population nationally (23,300 francs per overseas resident (\$A6227) as opposed to 28,800 francs nationally (\$A7700) in 1999); and an article in *Le Figaro*, 14 September 1999, shows that Corsica, including ‘subsidies, fraud and tax exemptions’, cost the French State 50 times as much (10 billion francs or \$A2.6 billion) as French Polynesia (200 million francs or \$A053 million) in 1999 (Doumenge et al 2000, 205).

Chapter 4 described how even reductions in excessive special payments to newcomer retirees in the French Pacific collectivities were motivated more by abuse of the system by newcomers than by a concern about the costs themselves, and these payments are only to be fully phased out by 2027.

Lack of political clout of French entities

It is argued that the Pacific escaped French domestic scrutiny partly because the population of the Pacific collectivities together represented only 20 per cent of the population of all the overseas entities of France in 1999 (Doumenge et al 2000, 61), whereas the four Overseas departments (DOMs) represented over 70 per cent. The non-continental French populations totalled only 2.157 million in the 1999 census, or a mere 3.5 per cent of the entire population of France, overseas and continental (60.9 million); and, according to Internet figures for 2006–2007, this total was even smaller: 2.12 million or 3.25 per cent of a total population of 63.2 million (see Faberon and Ziller 2007, 6). And, from these figures, the South Pacific collectivity populations represented fewer than 500,000 all together, or less than one per cent of France's overall population in either 1999 or 2006–2007.

These figures underpin the political reality that the French Pacific collectivities between them represent limited voting power in the national assembly and senate: two *députés* (MPs) and one senator each from New Caledonia and French Polynesia, and one *député* and one senator from Wallis and Futuna (of a total of 577 *députés* and 343 senators).

This disinterest meant for Doumenge et al that the future of the overseas entities was in question (2000, 61), but it could now be argued that the converse is true. As shown by their own figures, to the extent that the costs were considered, the French do not regard themselves as funding an overseas colonial presence, but rather that the collectivities are part of France. And the French do not have the Australian/Westminster tradition of extensive, broadly based public scrutiny of government costs and efficiencies. Moreover the French public is more occupied with internal mainland and European issues than the overseas possessions. There is also a general feeling that, even if the French Pacific entities were independent, they still would require French handouts (see, for example, Coutau-Bégarie 1986, 208), just as the former African colonies do.

But the lack of a public opinion does not mean that there is no potential for such an interest should things sour, as shown by the damage to France's international image over the Pacific nuclear and decolonisation issues. So it can be said that maintaining a low level of public interest in itself is a motivating factor and an objective for French administrations.

Democracy and the will of the people

With the agreement of the Noumea Accord and statutory evolution in French Polynesia, France's stated motivations began to reflect the new democratic

underpinnings these processes had provided for its regional presence. France could now proudly claim, as did the Minister for DOM-TOMs, Louis Le Pensec, in 1990, that it retained its overseas territories first and foremost because it was the wish of their inhabitants to remain French (Henningham 1992, 193). But, as Stephen Henningham pointed out in the early 1990s, Le Pensec did not mention Kanak complaints about the shifts in the population, and therefore the electoral balance, against them in previous decades by government-encouraged immigration, nor that French officials and politicians had worked hard to discourage pro-independence sentiments (1992, 193). And, a few years later, Martine Piquet noted that the underlying assumption of this approach was the familiar *mission civilisatrice*: that, from a republican basis of democratic choice, the civilising mission was ‘to progress according to a linear pattern towards absolute perfection and refinement’, i.e., to remain French (Piquet 2000, 9–10). Just as much of its activity in the Pacific in the past was hinged upon the presence of its missionaries, France claimed it wanted to preserve and advance the interests of its nationals in the Pacific entities (de Deckker 2003b, 2, and see Protection of nationals, below). In the same vein, senior advisers on New Caledonia indicated that France would proceed to the planned referendums simply because it was statutorily bound to do so through the legal processes set up under the Noumea Accord (Personal communications Paris 2008).

Today, after the extensive modification of statutes and laws to deliver more autonomy and democracy to the two largest French Pacific entities, and continued influxes of metropolitan French, with pro-France views, into New Caledonia, the principal claim by senior French officials continues to be that France is present in the Pacific exclusively because the people of those entities want France to be there, as indicated by their votes in successive elections. This claim is made privately by senior officials, to the point of some denying any other interest in remaining in the Pacific (Personal communications Paris, April 2008 and Noumea March 2009).

But the question of remaining with France has been a vexed one, and indeed, central to political debate in both places.

In 1987, on the only occasion when the question of remaining with France was put to the people of New Caledonia since 1958, a strong boycott by pro-independence forces clouded the result (see Chapter 2). The 1988 Matignon Accords and the 1998 Noumea Accord were specifically designed to defer any referendum on the question of independence or staying with France, at least until 2014–2018.

New Caledonians did vote for what are transitional arrangements in the Matignon and Noumea Accords (see chapter 4, although only 57 per cent of the 63 per cent turnout supported the Matignon Accords; while with a turnout of three-

quarters of the population, 72 per cent of them voted 10 years later to accept the Noumea Accord, but this occurred after further inflows of migrants from France and elsewhere in the French Pacific). Since then, some New Caledonians (a restricted electorate, defined precisely as set out in Appendix 1, but generally requiring 10-years residence to 1998) have voted on a proportional basis for a temporary, local, collegial government of transition in provincial elections. The majority of even these restricted electorate voters in these successive provincial elections have supported pro-France parties, but, as noted in Chapter 4, many of these pro-France parties have increasingly adopted policies shared with pro-independence partners. And 2009 provincial elections showed an overall reduction in the pro-France vote, with a clearer polarisation of the pro-independence vote in the Loyalty Islands, where the pro-France groups did not win a seat, even as the pro-independence groups won more representation than in 2004 in the mainly pro-France south (see Chapter 4).

All New Caledonians (i.e., not just a restricted electorate) have been able to vote in French national parliamentary elections (the '*législatives*') and have returned, every time, pro-France *députés* (MPs), but, in the exceptional transitional period, this can hardly be described as representative, as French officials often do in private, as a vote to remain with France. The two legislative districts returning a *député* each, both include substantial proportions of Noumea and therefore more pro-France voters (as opposed to the provincial electorates, two of which are predominantly Kanak). Moreover, in 2007 legislative elections, the pro-France R–UMP's Gael Yanno won easily in the first district (including Noumea proper and small outer islands), whereas Pierre Frogier won in the second district (which includes Noumea suburbs and the interior) with a closer margin (54 per cent as opposed to 46 per cent for his Union Calédonienne (Caledonian Union, UC) competitor Charles Pidjot).

In June 2012, for the first time, the principal pro-France party (in recent years, the R–UMP) did not win both positions. Yanno retained his seat in the first district, but the second *député* position was won by a breakaway rival pro-France group, Philippe Gomès' Calédonie Ensemble, which takes a less hardline pro-France position than the R–UMP.

In the referendum process on the status of New Caledonia to be held after 2014, there will be a broader electorate than that voting in provincial elections. In addition to the latter, i.e., those with 10-years residence to 1998, the referendum electorate will include voters with 20-years residence to 2014, i.e., those arriving in the collectivity up to 1994 as opposed to those who had arrived by 1988 (see Chapter 8 and Appendix 1). As such, that electorate may be expected to include more pro-France newcomers.

In French Polynesia too, the picture is mixed. Frequent floor-crossing and support-bartering between individuals mask the true political affiliations of elected representatives. In entity-wide votes in 2004, however, voters twice returned a leader who propounded independence, and the results were only overturned through procedural means with the complicity of France.

Protection of nationals and the demonstration effect: The 'red line' of independence

In a strand of argument related to the 'will of the people' assertion, French officials claim that France remains in order to do the right thing by its citizens. Although this contention covers all of its citizens, indigenous and otherwise, some senior players point specifically to the responsibilities of protecting longstanding French settlers. Once again, in this respect, they claim that New Caledonia remains key to continuing French motivations in the Pacific because there is a larger France-originating settler population there than elsewhere (Personal communication Paris March 2008 and also Henningham 1989, referring to the 'political ballast' of the majority settler population in New Caledonia that is not present in French Polynesia, 31).

Linked to this idea of defending the interests of its nationals, particularly its settlers, in the overseas collectivities is the idea of preserving the indivisibility of the French republic, to head off a domino effect throughout its entities. Because New Caledonia has been granted the most autonomy of France's overseas possessions, the future fate of New Caledonia is seen as having specific importance as a demonstrator effect for other French collectivities. Thus, a principal motivator for France to succeed in New Caledonia is to retain its possessions elsewhere. Specifically these include French Polynesia, which, as noted in Chapter 5, looks to New Caledonia as a model for its own status; but also Guyana, the vital launch pad for France's space program; and Mayotte (Mrgudovic notes parallels between New Caledonia and Mayotte in France's access to control of petrol-supply routes, 2008, 96).

Closer to home in metropolitan France, the demonstration effect is particularly feared for troubled Corsica. Both Stephen Bates (1990) and Aldrich and Connell (1989) referred to French concern at the implications of actions in New Caledonia for Corsica, Bates quoting then Interior Minister Charles Pasqua as describing the defence of Bastia (northern Corsica) beginning in Noumea (1990). But the domino effect operates both ways: what happens in other possessions also has an effect on the French Pacific collectivities. French handling of the riots and protests in Corsica are equally salutary for New Caledonia. The mainstream New

Caledonian newspaper *Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes*, throughout the early 2000s, regularly reported news of Ajaccio as if to remind the French reader in New Caledonia of the importance of maintaining the French presence.

The outbreak of violent protests against *la vie chère* (high cost of living associated with being tied to the French economy) in Guyana, led to similar protests in Guadeloupe, Martinique and Réunion in February and March of 2009. The speedy chain reaction throughout its West Indies territories and ultimately as far away as Réunion, in the Indian Ocean, confirmed France's fears of the contamination effect of events in one possession influencing developments in the others. In the French Pacific, after the outbreaks on the other side of the globe, arrangements were speedily set in place for local consultations to head off similar reactions. The Sarkozy government response was firm. It included clamping down on violent protests, a major reform of its provisions to Overseas France, and a clear indication of an 'unbreachable' line, that of independence (see Sarkozy government policy, below).

Sarkozy government policy

Strategic importance of Overseas France but declining interest in French Pacific

Sarkozy, elected in early 2007, took little interest in the French Pacific collectivities. He came late to formulating a policy towards Overseas France, only personally addressing the subject when trouble broke out in the French entities in the Caribbean and Réunion in 2009. As a new style of president, of a new generation and with an immigrant background, Sarkozy's views were relatively unknown. His predecessors had all held firmly to the important role of France's overseas possessions in defining the international prestige of France, from de Gaulle, Georges Pompidou, Giscard d'Estaing, and Chirac on the right, to François Mitterrand who, although from the left, had served as Overseas France minister. Sarkozy's early priorities were a special relationship with the United States, and France's role in Europe, including returning France to the high table of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) by rejoining the High Command. In attending to these national priorities, the strategic role of France's string of overseas possessions became clear, as the evolution of thought in official statements shows.

Contribution of Overseas France to France's international status

The early view of the Sarkozy administration about Overseas France emerged over a number of statements by his Overseas France Secretary, Yves Jégo. Speaking to a France–EU seminar in Paris in June 2008, Jégo highlighted the importance of the OCT (overseas collectivities) for Europe, through which, he said, 'Europe has become the first world maritime power' (*Flash d'Océanie* 1 July 2008). In an interview in October 2008, he said that few people understood what the overseas presence meant, for example, that it provided 80 per cent of France's biodiversity, that it made France the second largest maritime power in the world, and that France was present in the three oceans by virtue of its overseas presence. He said the overseas presence was 'an opportunity for France and for Europe in a globalised world' (*Le Parisien* 14 October 2008).

In his response to the troubles in the Caribbean territories, Sarkozy built on these statements. He made two important speeches on Overseas France, one in November 2009 and the other as a New Year message, in January 2010. In his November speech, he referred to France's status as the second maritime nation of the world with an EEZ equal to that of the United States; as a premier space and nuclear power, and one with major diplomatic influence over oceans, and unrivalled biodiversity, all owing directly to Overseas France. '*La France sans l'Outre-mer*', he said, '*ce ne serait plus la France*' (France would not be France without the Overseas France) (Sarkozy 2009). Similarly, in his January 2010 speech, he said that it was because of its overseas possessions that France was '*France des trois océans*' (France of the three Oceans). It was these possessions that contributed to France's identity, '*à notre rayonnement, à notre grandeur et à notre puissance*' ('to our influence, our grandeur and our power') and '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' (Sarkozy 2010a). These are the words of de Gaulle (see 1947). Sarkozy's use of them suggests that, two years into his presidency, he was convinced, as de Gaulle had been, of the role of France's overseas possessions in bolstering France's claim to international status and power.

Sovereignty reinforced: No tolerance for violence or independence

In his speeches, Sarkozy reinforced France's intention of continued sovereignty over its possessions, if necessary backed by force; and announced areas of reform, even innovation, in the governance of its various possessions, but

always stopping short of independence. His November 2009 speech was designed to announce a number (137 in total) of reforms primarily targeted at the Caribbean possessions, providing for institutional change including more local participation and greater economic engagement by entities in their geographic regions. But, at the same time, Sarkozy reaffirmed that his government would not tolerate violence or independence.

In his 2009 speech, his comments were focused more on the West Indies ('To be perfectly clear, the question to be put to voters in January will be the appropriate degree of autonomy of Martinique and Guyana in the Republic, and not that of independence. I restate this very simply, but firmly: the question of independence of Martinique and Guyana will not be put. These territories are, and they will stay, French lands', Sarkozy 2009). But, in his early 2010 New Year speech to Overseas France, Sarkozy was more general. He said he was prepared to countenance a range of options for France's overseas *territories* (as opposed to collectivities, as in the Pacific), provided that the unity of the Republic was not called into question. He then noted that the French constitution allowed considerable flexibility, of which he intended to make use, with respect for the will expressed by the relevant populations, 'with only one red line which I will never accept to be breached: that of independence. *The Overseas (France) is and will remain French*' (my italics). This language, i.e., 'the Overseas', includes all French overseas possessions, including the French Pacific entities.

View of the French Pacific

Specific statements and approaches to the French Pacific territories are rare. Sarkozy's comments on the strategic role of France Overseas in the foregoing section can be expected to apply to the French Pacific as well, particularly in view of the vast expanse of the Pacific entities.

French white papers on foreign affairs (July 2008) and defence (November 2008), commissioned by Sarkozy, provide little further insight into the administration's view of the Pacific, which is surprising given France's sovereign presence there. There is no reference to the Pacific region in the foreign affairs paper and the defence white paper simply refers to changing domestic logistical dispositions within its French Pacific entities, which it treats entirely as domestic appendages (see Noumea becomes preeminent base for France's Pacific military presence, below). Apart from a general reference to Australia being a valued partner, no Pacific regional defence priorities or perspectives are identified as stemming from France's resident Pacific presence. Rather, it emphasises exclusively the priority for France of the arc stretching from Mauritania in Africa across the

Middle East to the Indian Ocean (Fisher 2008c). Indeed, the paper speaks of the *'éloignement'* or isolation of Asia, hardly the perspective of a resident Pacific nation (Défense 2008).

Chapter 4 analyses the institutional arrangements and senior appointments that Sarkozy has made, which suggest a continuation of the declining importance of structures and attention devoted to the French Pacific collectivities. Funding allocated to the small South Pacific Fund has declined (see Chapter 6). Sarkozy decided not to head the French delegation to the third Oceanic Summit, in Noumea in late July 2009, which was the first time that the French president did not chair that meeting. He did visit New Caledonia towards the end of his term, in August 2011, to open the South Pacific Games, which it was hosting.

New Caledonia: Commitment and ambiguity

Sarkozy and members of his government say that they are committed to fulfilling the obligations of the Noumea Accord, that their preference is that New Caledonia remain with France and, somewhat ambiguously, that the French State should take an active but impartial approach as the Noumea Accord comes to its end.

The earliest indication of Sarkozy's thinking was set out in a letter he wrote to New Caledonians in March 2007, while he was still a presidential candidate (Sarkozy 2007a). In the Gaullist tradition, his letter begins by recalling that New Caledonia was the first overseas territory to rally to Free France and notes 'your desire to continue to live within our Republic', which he shares. He expresses the hope that, at the appropriate time, New Caledonians would indicate by free choice their wish for a 'French destiny'. He quotes de Gaulle saying 'New Caledonia must be part of a bigger whole. Of what whole could it be part, if not the great French whole?' Implicitly affirming his commitment to the scheduled referendum, he notes that, in the term after the next presidential term, New Caledonians would be called upon to make a decisive vote, as foreshadowed in the Noumea Accord. He writes that some New Caledonians believed that independence could be a solution for the future, but states that, while he respects their choice, 'it is not mine'. Nonetheless, he reaffirms the importance of respecting the Noumea Accord, listing his belief in a policy of consensus, the role of the provinces, the collegial government and, somewhat oddly given his earlier statement of viewpoint, the impartiality of the French State.

He then proceeds to seek to 'persuade' the independentists that staying with France was possible with a 'very large autonomy' for New Caledonia relative to the *métropole*. Further, he asserts that if Noumea Accord partners wanted New

Caledonia to evolve and engage in new perspectives within the Republic, then they could count on his support. He pledges innovative judicial solutions to guarantee the personality and powers of New Caledonia within France.

He then lists French State responsibilities in New Caledonia (justice, public order, defence, foreign affairs, currency, part of national education, tertiary education, immigration control) in all of which he states that he would apply the same commitments to French people in New Caledonia as he had made to those elsewhere in the Republic. He emphasises security measures, which he had introduced as interior minister since 2002 (and which had represented a firm hand on disturbances and, hence, a reminder of the firm control of the French State). And he pledges the State's respect for commitments on development and economic rebalancing under the Noumea Accord, noting support for the nickel project in the south and that at Koniambo.

Finally, he writes that he wants to be president of all the French people (i.e., not just those from the *métropole*) and of the Republic, which would defend with energy and conviction the place of New Caledonia *within France*.

That he had gone a little too far in expressing a preference for New Caledonia within France quickly became apparent. Frogier, the local R-UMP president, apparently taking his cue from the UMP presidential candidate in metropolitan France, proceeded to write his own 'letter to young Caledonians' on 16 May 2008. He notes that it was the independentists who had chosen the path of violence 25 years before, and described the Ouvea (Gossanah) events as an attack on the police brigade in the Loyalty Islands, noting the killing of four policemen without mentioning Kanak losses, and affirming that there was no need for shame at what France had done at that time. He underlines the suffering and memories of that time, which had not healed. He refers to the importance of the handshake between Lafleur and Jean-Marie Tjibaou, the foundation of the Matignon and Noumea Accords. He then states that it is legitimate to question the intentions and motivations of those who wanted to reopen these wounds, and to refuse a 'partisan, erroneous and deformed' vision of history. This letter was seen by the pro-independence groups as provocative.

By December 2007, newly installed as president, Sarkozy shifted tack. In his message to the committee of signatories to the Noumea Accord, he reaffirms his commitment to respect the letter and the spirit of the Noumea Accord (Sarkozy 2007b). He restates the paradoxical active role of the French State 'not only the role of an arbiter', with the State conducting itself 'impartially' in the search for consensus which must prevail in the application of the Accord, as it comes to its conclusion. Bearing in mind the caution of Tjibaou on the primacy of the State's role as an actor rather than judge (see Chapter 2), this reference was one calculated to appeal to both sides. He notes economic rebalancing,

social cohesion, and co-operation with the South Pacific countries as essential questions for the future of New Caledonia. He states that the principle of the transfer of responsibilities was provided for in the Noumea Accord, and there was no room for debate about that (putting paid to hopes Frogier had raised that there could be a turning back of the clock). The task remained to devise a timetable and the modalities, while preserving the quality of public services for all Caledonians. He indicates that the State would intervene financially, with tax exemption measures, to support the northern nickel project, and did not mention that of the south.

But, once again, Sarkozy reiterates that, when New Caledonians made their choice with the end of the Noumea Accord, his preference was to continue its path with France, in a new relationship yet to be defined. This 'personal and transparent expression of this preference naturally was not at all contradictory with respect for the Accord and its deadlines in all impartiality. I commit myself to that personally'. He then urges participants not to lose sight of what was at stake in the dialogue process, which was not the victory of one side over the other, but the construction of a common destiny.

More recently, at the seventh meeting of the follow-up committee to the Noumea Accord in December 2008, Sarkozy once again reaffirmed that the French Government would respect its commitments, although reiterating that it was an active player despite claims of impartiality: 'We will go to the completion of this process. The State will not shy away ... and will play an active role in this phase of our history, it will not just be a passive referee' (*Flash d'Océanie* 10 December 2008). As High Commissioner, Yves Dassonville restated this approach in his 2009 new year message, saying 'I will work to represent a State as much a participant as arbitrator, firm in the exercise of its powers, but always ready to invite dialogue, a State present without being overbearing ...' (*'je m'efforcerais d'être le patron d'un État acteur autant qu'arbitre, ferme dans l'exercice de ses compétences, mais toujours prêt à privilégier le dialogue, un État présent sans être pesant ...'* New Caledonian government website <<http://www.nouvelle-caledonie.gouv.fr>> accessed 4 February 2009).

In his New Year's address to Overseas France in January 2010, as outlined above, Sarkozy drew a red line at independence for Overseas France, which, in its application to New Caledonia, was at the least ambiguous, and at worst, begged questions about how he was to implement fully the commitments of the Noumea Accord relating to a self-determination referendum on the future status of New Caledonia (see Fisher 2010a).

In the same speech, Sarkozy made some specific comments about New Caledonia, which were also ambiguous. He noted that transfers of responsibility were under way, and that the vote '*on self-determination*' (my italics) would be

organised after 2014. In a new and refreshing tone of impartiality, he remarked that the State would be faithful to all partners of the Accord, whether they were in favour of retaining New Caledonia in France or were independentist. But he said that it was essential that all Caledonians begin discussion so that the *vote foreshadowed in the Accord 'translated into a result approved by a very large majority of voters'* (my italics). Since Sarkozy had ruled out independence, his words suggest that he does not have in mind a vote directly on the independence issue, as envisaged by many pro-independence parties and as implied in the Organic Law (relevant articles appear under the heading 'Vote on the accession to full sovereignty' Titre IX, Organic Law 1999). Sarkozy went on to say that, while the discussions should be between Caledonians, the State would help them and assume to the end its role as signatory to the Accords (Sarkozy 2010a). These discussions began in March 2011, when the French hosted a colloquium in Noumea on the Destinies of the Pacific Political Collectivities. It canvassed a range of alternative models for the future, but skirted the independence option, and included only one session focused on the financial costs of independence.

Through his appointments to key positions in New Caledonia, Sarkozy has also sent mixed messages. He appointed close advisors Christian Estrosi and subsequently Jégo as secretaries for Overseas France, suggesting the importance he attached to the positions. Estrosi did not last long in the job, partly because of heavy-handed response to a protest in Noumea during his first visit there (Chapter 4). But Sarkozy's subsequent appointment to the role of his collaborator Jégo, and of Dassonville (a senior advisor to Estrosi) as High Commissioner in Noumea, underlined his intention to handle protests firmly. Indeed Dassonville said as much on his arrival, when he indicated that the disturbances betrayed an underlying need for better social dialogue (i.e., handling industrial disputes), in which the French State would become involved, although it was not strictly its responsibility, and that it would do so with firmness (*Nouvelles Calédoniennes* 10 November 2007). In his public statements following violence in the Caribbean territories and Réunion, Sarkozy stated unequivocally that he would not tolerate violent protest in Overseas France (Sarkozy 2009, 2010).

Noumea becomes preminent base for France's Pacific military presence

The Sarkozy government's defence white paper, issued shortly after assuming government, defines significant overarching defence reforms based on reducing personnel, sharpening equipment priorities and enhancing intelligence-gathering (Defence White Paper 2008). The few references to France's South Pacific collectivities imply that their continued possession by France is a

given. The paper specifies that it would be New Caledonia that would provide the principal base for France's military presence in the Pacific, including the capacity, mainly aero-maritime, for rapid intervention at times of crisis.

The assignation of this role expressly to New Caledonia was a significant change, in that the entire Pacific naval presence had, to that point, been commanded from Papeete. The changes were proposed take place gradually until 2015. The presence of the strongest contingent of the French regional military presence in New Caledonia would therefore coincide with the most important transition period spelled out by the Noumea Accord, that from 2014 to 2018 when votes would be taken on the future, including, specifically, defence responsibilities.

The shoring up of a defence presence, including construction of expensive French military headquarters in Noumea in 2008, with responsibility for the entire French Pacific military presence, well before the vote on the final five sovereign powers, of which defence is one, as provided for under the Noumea Accord, reaffirms Sarkozy's commitment to meet violence or protests with a firm hand, and raises questions about France's commitment as an Accord signatory (see Chapter 4).

French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna

Sarkozy has paid only belated attention to French Polynesia, and with limited success. In his 2010 New Year comments to Overseas France, Sarkozy referred to the 'vast comedy' of French Polynesia's political representatives 'where yesterday's enemies become today's allies'. He noted that political stability had still not been found, and that this was intolerable for Polynesians. He foreshadowed a further reform of the voting and institutional system to guarantee more stability to majority elected representatives. But, as shown in Chapter 5, the March 2011 draft reforms submitted to the French Polynesian Assembly for its consideration provoked more controversy, precipitating yet another change of leadership.

Also in 2010 Sarkozy announced he would consider proposals to modernise the organisation of the territory of Wallis and Futuna. No indication of these proposals had been released by mid 2012.

From the foregoing efforts, France clearly wants its collectivities to remain French, and continues to be prepared to back this objective through force. And France derives sufficient strategic benefit, including more recently, actual and potential economic benefit, from its resident presence in the Pacific to continue to pay for them to remain French. Will it continue to do so?

Future motivations

This analysis is being finalised as François Hollande assumes the French presidency in May 2012. There is little to guide a judgement about his stance on the French Pacific possessions, although he flagged in his campaign that he would respond to the wishes of the local people of New Caledonia (rather than publicly advocating retaining New Caledonia within France, as Sarkozy had done). But, historically, there has generally been bipartisanship over issues relating to Overseas France, as exemplified in the disastrous support by both Mitterrand and Chirac over the Gossanah cave attack in the midst of the presidential election campaign (Chapter 2).

Possible future policy motivations can be surmised, drawing from past practice and policy reviewed earlier in this chapter. These are likely to derive from strategic interests, commercial factors, and the protection of domestic interests, including the protection of French citizens.

Strategic motivations

France is likely to see continued strategic advantage deriving from its Pacific presence. First, a Pacific presence will continue to provide justification for its claims to retain its seat as one of the elite Permanent Members of the UN Security Council. In this respect, presiding over a successful decolonisation of New Caledonia under the auspices of the UN would be important. France has already signalled a more forthcoming approach to the Decolonisation Committee.

Second, France, through its Pacific presence will be able also to retain its status as the second largest sovereign EEZ in the world, second only to the United States. Third, a continued sovereign presence in the Pacific will facilitate France's maintaining a self-reliant defence posture within the EU and NATO, based on the nuclear deterrent. Retaining the South Pacific collectivities facilitates the presence of French naval and other armed forces in the region. It also keeps vast areas of the Pacific Ocean under French control, including infrastructure at Moruroa and Hao, all of which are potentially useful contributions to Europe's space program.

Fourth, France will also see its Pacific presence as bolstering its status as a member of the Western alliance beyond that of NATO and the EU in Europe. By virtue of its Pacific presence, France can contribute to prevent or at least balance foreign forays in the region, notably by China. It can also provide a balance to the predominantly Anglo-Saxon influence in the South Pacific. Its military presence supplements those of the allies, particularly Australia and New Zealand, including by providing refuelling and rest and recreation stops;

protecting access to sea lanes in the event of the Malacca Straits being blocked; and enabling emergency assistance, cooperative disaster relief and sharing of regional marine resource intelligence. Its presence also contributes to Western (as distinct from European, mentioned earlier) capabilities for tracking missiles and satellites in space. Finally, France's resident regional presence enables it to promote scientific and technological research in the region (Hage identifies many of these points, 2003, 86–87; and de Deckker and Faberon 2008, 278).

Commercial interests

Whereas commercial returns were secondary for France in its early history in the region, more than ever before, France stands to gain specific future commercial benefits, in the context of global concerns about renewable energy and sustainable development, well into the twenty-first century, as known reserves of key resources decline.

It is here that France's status of sovereignty over the second largest global EEZ is relevant. The extent of economic resources accruing to France by virtue of its extensive EEZ in the Pacific Ocean is as yet unknown. France's intensive research into suspected hydrocarbons offshore from New Caledonia and specific investigations in waters around Clipperton suggest, however, that these resources are of some interest to France.

More immediately, France is expanding exploitation of the nickel resource in New Caledonia. Having incorporated the idea of extending nickel production into the formula for responding to Kanak concerns, and having supplied important fiscal backing and private investment from metropolitan France into the massive nickel projects in New Caledonia, France is already a major producer of a valuable global resource, and is poised for greater production. And, as Sarkozy has signaled, France will not relinquish its control of the major investor, Eramet.

Protection of domestic interests and French settlers globally

France shows a continuing commitment to protect the presence and security of its overseas residents, specifically its overseas settlers from metropolitan France, notably in New Caledonia, the French overseas collectivity where they are the most numerous. France is likely to continue to show a desire to head off a potential domino effect on its chain of other overseas possessions, which is particularly important in Guyana (its space launching site), and Corsica (closer to home) but also, in principle, important to all of its other collectivities. It is likely to continue to ensure a low level of domestic metropolitan public interest in the

overseas possessions. It is likely to continue to do this through a policy of '*pas d'ennuis*' (heading off trouble) in the Pacific entities, backed by military force, through a program of consolidating relations with Pacific island neighbours and through appropriate responsible behaviour in the international arena (for example, as UN administering authority in New Caledonia and meeting its nuclear compensation commitments in French Polynesia). It will continue to claim a desire to meet its statutory commitments, particularly in New Caledonia, without prejudicing its other objectives

Future policy implications

On the basis of these motivations, and its past practice, French policy approaches are likely to include continued efforts to meet its legal commitments in New Caledonia under the Noumea Accord. It is likely to seek to do this within UN decolonisation principles, with a minimum of violence, although whether it will offer a genuine independence option as required by UN principles, is less clear. There will be challenges, given the strong possibilities of either a blurring of an independence option, or of rejection of an independence option if it is clearly put, with possible accompanying violence by pro-independence elements. France can therefore be expected to urge local parties to agree on imaginative and innovative solutions, including post-Accord arrangements that maximise autonomy within the French republic.

France can be expected to continue to provide lavish expenditure in all three of its Pacific collectivities, both to encourage their continued commitment to French sovereignty and to head off domestic public interest back home in metropolitan France, which might result from opposition or instability in Overseas France.

France is likely to continue its long-term pursuit of the most valuable of the economic resources in the Pacific, particularly exploitation of nickel, and potentially hydrocarbons, in New Caledonia, and the conduct of aquatic scientific research around all of its Pacific possessions, including the remote ones such as Clipperton.

France will continue to maintain a regional military presence consistent with its other objectives, and the will to exert military pressure when necessary to ensure law and order. It will continue its defence co-operation with large regional powers and selected island states, especially focused on disaster response and the protection of fisheries. France will continue to use its capacity as a western ally to head off intrusion by foreign powers, and this is likely to be accompanied by a tendency to overplay the significance of activities in the region undertaken by foreign powers.

France is likely to continue with the institutions handling its Pacific collectivities in a way that is not commensurate with the strategic return they deliver to France. The domestic affairs of the collectivities will continue to be managed by the interior ministry and its Overseas France secretariat, and military institutions, with the foreign affairs and defence ministries responsible for policy in the wider region. It is not certain that the day-to-day coordination of these various ministries will improve, which carries risks.

France's aid efforts in the wider region are likely to continue to be low-key and modest, multilaterally through the SPC and PIF, and through selective bilateral programs. France will continue to spearhead EU aid and other engagement in the region. There is likely to be continued lip-service to encouraging the regional participation of France's Pacific entities, without building the capacity for them to do so effectively. This will limit the support for, and acceptance of, France and the French collectivities by the region's independent island leaders.

Conclusion

France derives significant strategic advantage from its resident, sovereign presence in the South Pacific. Apart from providing continued credibility to France as a democratic, global power bolstering its claims within the UN, EU and NATO, the French Pacific presence now represents for them a real and potential economic asset, and a resource in future space exploration and exploitation . These are strong motivations leading to France's desire to remain present in the region, even at considerable financial cost and diplomatic and political investment.

Having established France's likely motivations and strategic returns from its Pacific presence, and pointed to likely future policy directions, the next chapter will examine elements of risk undermining its ability to continue to pursue these interests and policies, with the potential to undermine regional stability; and identify actions which might be taken to minimise these.