



**FRANCE AS AN “ENHANCER OF
SOVEREIGNTY” IN THE PACIFIC
ISLANDS**

BY ANTOINE BONDAZ

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Emmanuel Macron is gearing up for an unprecedented journey to the Indo-Pacific, making it the first visit by a French president to Pacific Island states. This upcoming visit to Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea, following a second visit to New Caledonia since his election in 2017, addresses the inconsistency between France's growing engagement in the region and the lack of a high-level visit until now.

Above all, President Macron should seize this opportunity to enhance communication by evolving certain criticized terms such as “balancing power.” In this regard, France must better conceptualize its engagement in the region and its willingness to assume a unique role, presenting itself as a proactive power, a provider of solutions, and an enhancer of sovereignty.

According to France's maximalist conception, the Indo-Pacific region comprises 52 states, spanning from Djibouti to Papeete, and from Pretoria to Tokyo. As a sovereign country, France boasts a significant presence in the region, with seven of its thirteen overseas territories situated there. Among them, three are in the Indian Ocean, and four are in the Pacific: New Caledonia, French Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna, and Clipperton. These territories represent over 90% of France's exclusive economic zone, giving the country the second-largest maritime domain in the world.

Over 1.6 million French citizens reside in the French territories, and in 2021, 190,000 expatriates were officially registered in countries within the region, with sizable communities in the United Arab Emirates, China, Australia, and Madagascar. Last year, the Indo-Pacific region accounted for over 35% of France's foreign trade, excluding trade with European Union countries. France has its largest trade deficit with China and its largest trade surplus with Singapore. Additionally, the region attracts over 120 billion euros (\$133 billion) of French investments.

France has built a dense and diverse network in the Indo-Pacific region. Diplomatically, 36 embassies, some with extensive geographical coverage, cover all countries in the region. In Oceania, there are no fewer than five embassies, situated in Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Vanuatu, and Papua New Guinea. For example, the embassy in Port-Vila, Vanuatu, serves as the only embassy of an EU member state in the country and also covers the Solomon Islands.

Furthermore, over 7,000 military personnel are stationed in the region, with three sovereign forces in the French territories and two presence forces in Djibouti and the United Arab Emirates. The armed forces of New Caledonia regularly participate in fisheries surveillance in the South Pacific on behalf of the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency. Force projection exercises are now a regular occurrence, with the ongoing unprecedented deployment of a dozen Rafales as part of the Pégase 2023 mission, which will visit several countries.

Culturally, 34 French institutes organize events, festivals, and support artist residencies. Cooperation in education is strengthening, with direct support for the development of the University of Vanuatu, for instance. In the Indo-Pacific, there are also 169 French Alliances that promote the French language, including in Vanuatu, where French is one of the official languages and the country is a member of the International Organization of the Francophonie.

Furthermore, France plays an active role in development aid. The French Development Agency (AFD) allocated 25% of its resources for 2022 to projects in the Indo-Pacific. The AFD's mandate in the

South Pacific has gradually expanded to include regional initiatives on climate change adaptation and mitigation, and biodiversity. One flagship project in collaboration with partners, including Australia, is the Kiwa initiative, which aims to help 19 Pacific countries adapt to climate change and preserve their biodiversity through nature-based solutions.

This French contribution is reflected in the involvement of state agencies such as Expertise France, which provides detached experts to national authorities, and France Volontaires. Over 200 young people have already benefited from the Oceanian Volunteer Service Program. France has also demonstrated its commitment to humanitarian aid in the face of natural disasters, as illustrated by the FRANZ mechanism with Australia and New Zealand, which is celebrating its 30th anniversary. This mechanism recently facilitated assistance to the populations of Vanuatu in 2023, Tonga in 2022, and Papua New Guinea in 2021.

As the intensification of the Sino-American rivalry in the Indo-Pacific is felt worldwide, France intends to offer additional options to the region's states. However, it is fundamental for the country to position itself appropriately and communicate effectively. The term "balancing power," in particular, is poorly defined, misunderstood, and even counterproductive. It creates unnecessary doubts among partners and fuels the stereotype of an arrogant country with ambitions disconnected from its actual capabilities. Two concepts could be used to better explain France's actions in the region.

Firstly, as a proactive power and provider of solutions, France aims to be a responsible country with a unique capacity for mobilization and impetus in the multilateral framework. This international activism translates into the implementation of projects that contribute to solving global problems for the benefit of populations and the mitigation of global imbalances.

Secondly, France also seeks to be an enhancer of sovereignty. Through its actions and cooperation, it facilitates the expression of its partners' sovereignty by presenting a distinct French and European offering that aims to enable decision-making without

constraints. This approach, which involves strengthening capacities and forming coalitions, empowers partners to fully defend their interests.

As proposed [in a recent paper for the Foundation for Strategic Research \(FRS\)](#), to materialize these two concepts better, France should propose the creation of a "Pacific Islands Security Forum." This forum would bring together citizens, experts, and officials from the region, mainly addressing environmental and human security issues, a priority clearly identified for the Pacific Island states.

This cooperation mechanism would add real value by positioning itself at the nexus of defense, diplomacy, and development, complementing existing forums such as the SPDMM and the IPESF. It would focus on the needs of the actors involved and explicitly aim to identify the levers to activate to assist them in meeting those needs. Far from being a simple forum for dialogue, this would be an action-oriented mechanism.

An annual summit could be first held in New Caledonia in 2024, then alternately in Nouméa and in one of the Pacific Island states' capitals, starting with Port-Vila in 2025. It would bring together regional players around unifying themes, while identifying and then implementing concrete projects on the appropriate scale. Amid other initiatives, this forum would serve as a symbol of France's dedication and resolve to collaborate with its regional partners.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.