

French president calls for new Indo-Pacific “axis” against China

Mike Head
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Increasingly besieged at home by working class struggles against his draconian labour laws, French President Emmanuel Macron travelled to the other side of the world this week for a six-day visit to Australia and the nearby French outpost of New Caledonia.

While Macron is undoubtedly seeking to use the trip to shore up his position domestically, it has taken to a new level moves by France and other European imperialist powers to assert their interests in the Indo-Pacific region under conditions of rising Chinese influence and waning US hegemony.

For now, Macron and other European leaders are manoeuvring in the context of a continuing drive by Washington to confront China and, if necessary, go to war against Beijing, to maintain the post-World War II dominance of the US. However, Macron’s trip underscored the efforts being made to bolster European geo-strategic interests independently of the US, and potentially against it.

Paris regards Australia as a useful platform for this push, as well as the five tiny territories where France has about 1.5 million citizens and 8,000 military personnel spread across the region—the Indian Ocean islands of Mayotte and Reunion, and the Pacific Ocean islands of New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna and French Polynesia.

In a speech at an Australian naval base in Sydney on Wednesday, on the first leg of his trip, Macron called for a strategic alliance of France, India and Australia to respond to “challenges” across the region.

“This new Paris-Delhi-Canberra axis is absolutely key for the region and our joint objectives,” Macron said. “We’re not naive: if we want to be seen and respected by China as an equal partner, we must organise ourselves.”

Macron couched his remarks in terms of ensuring that no single power exercised “hegemony” over the region. He said France would work with Australia, and was willing to use its frigates, submarines and aircraft to

ensure that “neutrality” and “freedom of circulation” are protected.

At an earlier joint media conference with Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, both men were at pains to deny journalists’ suggestions that their quest for closer strategic and military ties was directed specifically against China. The ruling classes in the two countries are each wary of too openly denouncing China because of the huge markets it offers, as well as promised benefits of President Xi Jinping’s “One Belt One Road” infrastructure project to link China to Europe.

Nevertheless, Macron and Turnbull insisted on “rules-based” conduct in the region, a code phrase for challenging China’s military, aid and investment activities.

“China’s rise is very good news for everybody,” Macron said. “What’s important is to preserve a rules-based development in the region, especially in the Indo-Pacific region, and to preserve the necessary balances in the region.”

Likewise, Turnbull said: “We welcome the benefits of the growth of China. But of course we are committed to the maintenance of the rules-based international order.”

In a crude jibe against China, Turnbull cited a quote from former Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew, saying: “Big fish cannot eat little fish, and little fish cannot eat shrimps.” Macron added: “And especially New Caledonian shrimps.”

Macron had visited China in January, where he warned Beijing that its “One Belt One Road” initiative should not be “one-way.” He then flew to India in March, where he committed to strengthening a military partnership that has already seen New Delhi buy French warplanes in 2016.

This followed February’s Munich Security Conference, where the European powers took advantage of Trump administration’s “America First” demands for increased military spending and declared they would establish a

new multi-polar world. A conference document stated:

“The European Union as a whole could play a stabilising role for the liberal international order—as could other groupings of liberal democracies, such as the renewed ‘Quad’ [US, Japan, India, Australia] in the Asia-Pacific.”

Macron arrived in Australia having just joined the US and Britain in illegally attacking Syria with more than 100 cruise missiles after further fabricated reports of the Assad regime using chemical weapons. That attack endeared Macron to the Trump administration, which feted him in Washington last month, but it also highlighted France’s predatory interests in the Middle East, where it once controlled Syria and Lebanon.

Macron’s visit was only the second by a French president to Australia. From the 1960s to the 1990s, France was regarded as a Pacific Ocean rival to the imperialist interests of Australia and New Zealand, which denounced French nuclear weapons testing in the region. Now the relations are shifting in response to the global instability created by the visible slippage in Washington’s position.

French imperialism also views China as a potential competitor in France’s former colonies in Africa, where it maintains a political and military presence. Since 2011, Paris has launched military interventions in Libya, Ivory Coast, the Central African Republic, Chad, Mali and the Congo, and it has a military base in Djibouti.

At the Sydney naval base, Macron said increasing tensions over “sovereignty” were a threat to peace and stability, making it important for Australia and France to strengthen their defence ties. He thanked Australia for sending forces to fight in France during World War I and II and celebrated with Turnbull the fact that a French company, Naval Group, was awarded the contract to build Australia’s new fleet of 12 submarines, under a \$50 billion deal.

A series of agreements were announced, including to boost military inter-operability, maritime cooperation and cyberwarfare. Both countries, along with India and eight Pacific countries, will take part in the biennial Croix du Sud, or Southern Cross, military exercises, off New Caledonia later this month.

Much of the media coverage focussed on Macron’s awkward reference to Turnbull’s wife Lucy as “delicious.” Far more significant was a terse exchange with a journalist, in which Macron angrily denied that he had travelled 15,000 kilometres to escape from the strife in France, including the violent police attacks on May

Day demonstrators.

“Do you think that the government properly anticipated what happened or not?” a reporter asked. “Next, do you fear the protest might get more and more radical?”

Fuming, Macron declared that his government would “stand firm.” It had made arrests and all “the right decisions.” He added: “My temperament is not to try to evade anything. I am continuing to work; the reforms will continue to be imposed.”

Macron, a former economy minister in President François Hollande’s reviled Socialist Party government, is trying to strip away workers’ rights, raise retirement ages and impose deep cuts to social spending. He faces strikes by railway workers, stoppages by Air France staff, agitation on university campuses and hostility from public sector workers.

On Thursday, Macron arrived in New Caledonia on a mission to defeat a long-promised “self-determination” referendum in November. On Saturday, he will attend ceremonies marking the 30th anniversary of a notorious 1986 massacre in which the Mitterrand Socialist Party administration’s gendarmes killed 19 pro-independence Kanak men who had taken police hostage on Ouvea Island. The outcry over that massacre ultimately led a pledge to conduct an independence vote in 2018.

Macron’s participation in the commemoration, which his office says has been carefully coordinated with local tribal chiefs, is a sign of nervousness over the referendum, despite media polls indicating it may fail. About 40 percent of the territory’s 270,000 people are Kanaks, for whom the social conditions remain appalling—even though the territory profitably supplies a quarter of the world’s nickel—and unrest has been rising.



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