

Macron visits Pacific to bolster France's position amid escalating strategic tensions

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31 July 2023

Last week French President Emmanuel Macron conducted a five-day tour of the Southwest Pacific, taking in the French Pacific territory of New Caledonia as well as Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea (PNG). He capped off the tour with a one-day stopover in Sri Lanka on the way home.

Macron was accompanied by Foreign Affairs Minister Catherine Colonna who travelled to Fiji to meet with Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka and step-up France's "dialogue" with the region's second largest island country. She also held a meeting with Deputy Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Esala Nayasi.

The trip was designed to assert France's imperialist interests as a Pacific power. It was the first time a sitting French president had visited any of the island states outside France's Pacific territories. It coincided with a surge of diplomatic manoeuvres across the region, including visits by the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, ramping up Washington's escalating confrontation with China.

While seeking to advance France's global positioning, Macron is conducting a bitter war against the working class at home. The deeply unpopular "president of the rich" has this year unleashed a series of massive police operations to break strikes and protest movements against his pension reforms compounded by the recent police murder of a teenager.

In a major cabinet reshuffle in July, in order to prepare for escalating attacks in France and beyond, Gérald Darmanin, a former member of the extreme right-wing group Action Française who supervised the police repression, was retained as minister of the interior and overseas territories.

France has some 1.5 million citizens and 8,000 military personnel spread across the Indo-Pacific—the Indian Ocean islands of Mayotte and Reunion, and the Pacific Ocean islands of New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, and

French Polynesia. In 2016 New Caledonia and French Polynesia were granted full membership of the PIF—initially meant for independent countries only—after years of lobbying, thus boosting France's influence in regional affairs.

Macron's tour had a clear strategic-military purpose. In line with NATO's push into the Indo-Pacific, from July 22 to August 4 France is participating in the Talisman Sabre military exercise in Australia. Having been observers at previous iterations of the biennial exercise, France and Germany are contributing forces to "high-intensity warfighting training," involving 30,000 troops from 13 countries, aimed squarely at China.

Macron's primary objective was to cement France's hold over New Caledonia, making clear that his government will not countenance further discussions about so-called "independence."

The issue has a bloody and turbulent history, culminating in near civil war during the 1980s. In 1986, the then French Socialist Party government's gendarmes massacred 19 indigenous Kanaks who had taken police hostage on Ouvéa Island. The outcry over the killings ultimately produced the 1998 Noumea Accord under which France promised to gradually cede more political autonomy to the local territory.

Three independence referenda over five years were held under the Accord. The results were between 53 and 57 percent in favour of remaining part of France in the first two ballots. The final referendum held in December 2021 was widely viewed as illegitimate. With a 40 percent voter turnout, it resulted in a 97 percent vote against secession after Kanaks boycotted the process amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Class struggles have repeatedly erupted. November 2020 saw riots and clashes with police over the sale of the Brazilian-owned Goro Nickel plant, which threatened the jobs of 3,000 workers. Broad sections of the working

class, including miners, processing workers, truck drivers, airport workers and others have engaged in militant struggles over jobs and conditions, bringing them into conflict with both pro-and anti-independence factions of the ruling elite.

At a public rally in the capital Noumea last week, Macron bluntly told those in favour of “separatism” they should accept the pro-France votes. “After these three referendums, I do not underestimate the disappointed hopes of those who backed a completely different project,” Macron said. “But I say to them all, together we all have to have the grace to accept these results and to build the future together.”

Paris will now seek to introduce a new political statute for New Caledonia, replacing the Noumea Accord. Immediate reforms will unfreeze the electoral rolls for provincial and congressional elections to be held in May next year. That will allow thousands more French nationals to vote than are currently able to under the Accord.

The Noumea Accord is entrenched in its own clauses within the French constitution, so a process of constitutional change will begin next year.

France will not relinquish its hold over the strategically vital territory. The island is home to a French military base and holds nearly a quarter of the world’s reserves of nickel, essential in the manufacture of stainless steel and in the defence industry. Before leaving Noumea Macron announced measures to address a productivity crisis facing the nickel industry and to reinforce France’s military presence with another 200 troops, 18 billion CFP Francs (\$US17 million) in funds and a new Pacific Defence academy.

Macron used the remainder of his tour to posture as an “independent” actor in the region. His office claimed that the trip was not aimed at pressing an “anti-China policy,” but at encouraging regional powers to “diversify” their partnerships beyond Beijing and Washington. The trip was needed, the statement said, because of “new, more intense threats” to security, institutions and the environment.

In Vanuatu, Macron denounced “new imperialism” in the Pacific and declared that France would defend “the independence and sovereignty” of smaller states, including “the most fragile.” The chief target of these statements is unmistakably China.

As the US and its allies seek to counter China’s influence, France offered an “alternative,” a presidential adviser said, with plans for expanded aid and

development to confront natural catastrophes.

Visiting Australia in 2018, Macron had called for a strategic alliance of France, India and Australia to respond to “challenges” across the region. Macron couched his remarks in terms of ensuring that no single power exercised “hegemony.” 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” were protected.

French relations with Australia soured in 2021 with the unilateral decision by the Australian government to scrap a \$A90 billion submarine deal with France in favour of an agreement to acquire nuclear-powered submarines from the US and UK as part of the AUKUS pact. The move, which has seen Canberra align much more closely with the US, caused fury in Paris, which described it as a “stab in the back.”

In January, an Australia-France meeting of defence and foreign ministers in Paris lauded France as a “Pacific nation.” Australia pledged to extend military ties with France in the Pacific, with both countries agreeing “to deepen operational and logistical cooperation to support their commitment to shared interests in the Indo-Pacific.” Last month, the French government agreed to sell 26 Rafale fighter jets and three Scorpene-class submarines to India.

While in Vanuatu and PNG, Macron set a French footprint in two island states which are at the centre of intense diplomatic pressure by Australia and the US to sign up to strategic and defence pacts, and, in the case of PNG, establish permanent military bases.

Macron has, publicly at least, taken a more “soft power” approach, offering funding and private sector “partnerships” to promote “green” conservation projects, in a bid to appeal to deep concerns across Pacific Island states over climate change and rising sea levels. In PNG, Macron and Prime Minister James Marape signed an environmental initiative—backed by French and EU financing—providing backing to preserve the country’s rainforests.



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