

French imperialism in New Caledonia and Pacific targets China

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French president Emmanuel Macron chaired a Pacific-France summit on June 10, on the sidelines of the UN Oceans Conference held in Nice from June 9-13.

Leaders from Papua New Guinea, Palau, Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, Marshall Islands, Kiribati, the Federated States of Micronesia, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, the French territories of New Caledonia, French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna were present, along with a Pacific Islands Forum delegation headed by secretary-general Baron Waqa.

Macron underscored France's "cooperation" with the Pacific at "strategic and military" levels. He referenced the "Pacific Academy," a Nouméa-based training facility for defence and security forces from across the region, as well as regular joint military exercises to foster "common credibility to protect our zones and fight against illegal fishing."

Combating "illegal fishing" is the coverall used by the United States and other imperialist powers to justify their military build-up against China. Alongside expanding military bases and provocative naval exercises, armed US Coast Guard cutters are permanently deployed to American Samoa and Guam to counter "Chinese activity" and provoke Beijing.

In July 2023 Macron conducted a five-day tour of New Caledonia, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea to assert France's imperialist interests as a Pacific power. He postured as an "independent" actor in the region, encouraging local governments to "diversify" their partnerships beyond Beijing and Washington.

Over the past six months, French warships, led by the aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle, have participated in a series of multinational exercises; La Pérouse, Pacific Steller and Southern Cross, in the Indo-Pacific, all aimed at strengthening "interoperability" between the respective forces, plus a two-month deployment involving the French Carrier Strike Group.

Macron also told the region's leaders he would maintain France's diplomacy "in very close connection with our common interests in the Pacific," including the opening of a

new Embassy in Samoa. Macron acknowledged the "central" role played by the Pacific Islands Forum, which will receive €2 million towards a Pacific Resilient Facility Fund.

The meeting's thinly disguised anti-China agenda was underscored by New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters, who urged Pacific nations to "stand together as a region" against "external forces" seeking to "coerce, cajole and constrain." He declared New Zealand welcomed "France's long-standing commitment to the Pacific and the contribution it makes to regional stability."

Peters this week withdrew \$NZ20 million in essential aid funding from the Cook Islands, a neo-colony of New Zealand, in retaliation for it recently signing a strategic agreement with China. Peters insisted he should have been consulted over the text before it was signed, a claim flatly rejected by Cooks' Prime Minister Mark Brown.

Peters has made several trips to New Caledonia, the most recent in May, supporting the French Minister for Overseas Territories, Manuel Valls, and the "continuation of dialogue on New Caledonia's institutional future." Peters falsely claimed the discussions signified the "good faith efforts underway to return peace and stability to New Caledonia."

Following last year's uprising by indigenous Kanak youth, Valls has convened three rounds of multi-party talks regarding the territory's political future. Widespread rioting saw 14 people killed, mostly by French gendarmes, with damage estimated at €2.2 billion. Fuelled by social inequality, unemployment and economic desperation, the rebellion brought a substantial section of Kanak youth into conflict, not only with French colonial oppression, but with the territory's political establishment, including the Kanak pro-independence parties.

A proposal tabled by Valls during a closed-doors "conclave" early last month contained a form of "sovereignty with France," including transfer of key powers—defence, law and order, currency, foreign affairs, justice—from Paris to New Caledonia and dual Kanaky-France citizenship. Hard-line pro-France "Loyalist" parties

opposed the proposal, saying it failed to take into account three referendums between 2018 and 2021 that all rejected independence.

The talks have been aimed at creating a new document to replace the 1998 “power sharing” Nouméa Accord and bring New Caledonia closer to having its own Constitution. The pro-independence movement split in December: while the Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front (FLNKS), is calling for full sovereignty, the “moderate” factions want a shared arrangement with Paris.

Valls has said he is determined to “finalise New Caledonia’s decolonisation” process. In response, leaders from the right-wing Les Républicains (LR) and Rassemblement National (RN), vice-president François-Xavier Bellamy and Marine Le Pen, visited Nouméa last month. Bellamy told a rally of supporters that the “decolonisation” process prescribed by the 1998 Nouméa Accord “is now over.”

The talks have been in stalemate for six weeks. Macron told the Pacific leaders’ gathering that he will convene a fresh summit in Paris within weeks “to bring together all stakeholders again and manage to come up with a new project.” He declared that “building a political solution for New Caledonia is still work in progress.”

Macron said he was aware of regional concerns about “the events that destabilized New Caledonia a year ago.” He insisted the French state had “respected its commitments” by organizing the referendums. “But a year ago, violence broke out, triggered by several factors... which we took very seriously,” he said.

Macron’s praise for the referendums is a complete fraud. The results in the third and final plebiscite saw a 96.49 percent vote against independence and just 3.51 percent in favour, with a low 43.9 percent turnout. The Kanak population boycotted the poll as it was pushed through while COVID-19 was spreading.

Last year’s uprising was the direct result of France’s ongoing colonial rule in the territory. A unilateral change by the French parliament to voting eligibility at New Caledonia’s local elections was the immediate trigger for the 7-months of riots. The constitutional amendment was designed to “unfreeze” the electoral roll, which only allows people born in the colony or residing there before 1998 to vote.

Indigenous Kanaks feared the move would further marginalise them politically as they face worsening economic and social conditions. France responded with a brutal police-military crackdown. The number of security personnel in the colony escalated to over 7,000. Kanak villages, targeted as pockets of resistance, were subject to permanent roadblocks, body searches including children and

police harassment.

In a new development Christian Téin, accused by French authorities of being the “ringleader” of the rebellion, was last week released from a French prison where he has been incarcerated awaiting trial for almost a year. In a ruling on June 3, three magistrates found there were insufficient grounds to keep him in custody. Téin’s release conditions require him to remain resident in France while on remand.

Téin was the most prominent of seven pro-independence activists arrested during an early morning raid in Nouméa on June 19 last year. They were indicted and, without warning, flown to mainland France to be held in custody pending trial. Téin and 10 other members of the CCAT (Field Action Coordination Committee), alleged to be the main organising group behind the riots, still face charges ranging from organised destruction of goods and property to incitement to murder or attempted murder of police.

The intervention of the far-right leaders in Nouméa suggests the fate of New Caledonia could well become a major issue in French politics. Whatever the outcome of the current impasse, however, nothing will be done in the talks to resolve the fundamental issues behind the anti-colonial unrest which was triggered by poverty, inequality, unemployment and social desperation.

France, moreover, will not agree to any arrangement that threatens its geo-strategic position in the Pacific, including its key military base in Nouméa, as the US-led push for war against China accelerates. Any form of “independence” will be highly circumscribed and subservient to the major capitalist powers and financial institutions.



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