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Why France-US Relations Matter for the Pacific

Increased French-U.S. cooperation in the region should be welcome news to Pacific Island states.

By [Guy C. Charlton](#) and [Xiang Gao](#)

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U.S. President Joe Biden (left) hosts French President Emmanuel Macron for a state visit to Washington, D.C., Dec. 3, 2022.

Credit: [Official White House photo](#)

The December 1 meeting and joint statement between French President Emmanuel

Macron and U.S. President Joe Biden highlighted the new urgency in Franco-U.S. efforts to emphasize their status as Pacific powers. It seemingly puts to rest the year-long fallout from the Australian submarine contractual dispute, when Australia scuttled a French contract for conventional submarines in favor of nuclear-powered submarines under the AUKUS defense pact with the United States and the United Kingdom. The handling of the incident, which Biden characterized as “clumsy” on the part of the United States, damaged France-U.S. relations and led France to briefly recall its ambassador from Washington.

The meeting underscores a significant convergence in Franco-U.S. interests in the Pacific. [In the joint statement](#), the countries pledged to “expand their regional diplomatic, development, and economic engagement with a view to building resilience in the Pacific Islands,” while increasing maritime security coordination. The United States also pledged to increase its material contributions to French air and maritime deployments.

At the same time, the statement observes that France and the United States will assist Pacific Island states in sustaining a rules-based international order, transparent governance, fair economic practices, and respect for international law, including human rights, while working together with China on global issues like climate change.

This statement should be welcomed by Australia, New Zealand, and Pacific Island nations. While neither state’s record across the Pacific can be considered exemplary, they remain important Pacific powers who have provided a basis for stability and a rules-based order. Both France and the United States have an interest in avoiding the

continued militarization of the region and enhancing democratic values in their Pacific territories and in the Pacific Island states.

Moreover, the traditional French independent foreign policy, like that of New Zealand, provides the opportunity to bridge China-U.S. disagreements from a liberal rules-based perspective. This is particularly important today, as the region becomes an area of increasing instability, with the deepening entrenchment of China's sovereignty claims over the South China Sea and the concomitant military build-up in the region, and environmental challenges such as overfishing and climate change.

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France has a large footprint in the Pacific. France has three territories in the South Pacific: French Polynesia, New Caledonia, and Wallis and Futuna. These territories have historically been less integrated into the region due to linguistic barriers and their political and economic focus on Europe. At the same time, France has directed most of its aid to the region to its own territories, limiting its influence.

While they have a relatively small land area, these territories account for approximately one-third of the Pacific Islands' combined exclusive economic zones (EEZs). These EEZs are facing the challenges of overfishing, narcotics trafficking, and piracy. They also hold potential stores of minerals if deep sea mining proceeds in the region.

French Polynesia continues to grapple with the effects of nuclear fallout due to the dozens of nuclear tests that ended in the 1990s, and the increasing impact of extreme weather, sea level rises, and drought due to

climate change.

New Caledonia remains a major producer of nickel but has been subject to significant unrest and dissatisfaction on the part of the native Kanak people, many of whom have long advocated for independence and/or more autonomy from metropolitan France. In the 1990s, Paris entered into the Noumea Accords with Kanak representative groups, which called for three referendums on independence. In the third and final referendum held in December 2021, voters rejected independence by a margin of 96 percent to 4 percent. Nevertheless, these results have been contested as the vote was boycotted by key Kanak groups who had argued for a delay of the vote due to the impacts of COVID-19.

Despite the vote, it is clear that a large number of people in New Caledonia wish to have independence or a new constitutional arrangement with France. In February 2021, pro-independence parties gained a majority in the New Caledonian government for the first time.

France is the only European and EU state to maintain a permanent military presence in the region. According to France's Defense Strategy in the Indo-Pacific, published in 2019, French objectives in the region are: 1) to defend and ensure the integrity of France's sovereignty, and the protection of its nationals, territories, and exclusive economic zone; 2) to contribute to the security of regional environments; 3) to maintain free and open access to the ocean commons in a context of global strategic competition and challenging military environments; and 4) to assist in maintaining strategic stability.

French military assets in the Indo-Pacific

total approximately 7,000 defense personnel, 15 warships, and 38 aircraft, most based in the Indian Ocean. Approximately 2,800 personnel, ten ships, and 15 aircraft are based in the Pacific Ocean. These forces are regularly augmented by the rotation of French forces through the region. The forces focus on preventing narcotics trafficking, piracy, illegal fishing, and defending freedom of navigation.

As is evident in the February 17, 2022, National Assembly Report, France – like many other states – is worried about the possibility of a new “cold war” (*guerre froide*) and the polarization of the region. Yet France also shares U.S. concerns about the potential disruption of the current rules-based order and security arrangements by a more aggressive Chinese foreign policy. Since the ascension of President Xi Jinping, the Chinese government and the Chinese Communist Party have re-emphasized authoritarian rule and embraced a more militant form of nationalism. At the same time, China has embarked on a more aggressive and exclusively nationalist foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific.

The new Chinese policy, evidenced by the recent China-Solomon Island security pact, has the potential to undermine the 2018 Boe Declaration, where Pacific Islands Forum members – including Australia, New Zealand, French Polynesia, and Wallis and Futuna – agreed to address regional security challenges collectively. China’s “new era” foreign policy has utilized the growing military capabilities of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army coupled with the economic power of trade and investment.

It has also used discourse and rhetoric that emphasizes Chinese exceptionalism, anti-

Chinese racial attitudes held by Western states, pan-Asianism, and the history of colonialism to undermine Western values and national interests in the region. The alternative proffered by China suggests that the Asia-Pacific, under Chinese leadership, should resist non-Asian (i.e. Western) interference in the region, as this interference historically has led to war, economic deprivation, and loss of power and rights by Asian states.

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The re-invigoration of the France-U.S. relationship should assist geopolitical stability and a democratic rules-based order in the region. A more robust French military presence with additional U.S. assistance will better enable Western states to undertake freedom of navigation transits in the South China Sea while deterring and raising the cost of additional Chinese efforts to extend its control over the South China Sea. Moreover, an increased French presence inserts the European Union and European concerns into the area in a manner consistent with the recent February 2022 EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, which calls for the EU to step up “its strategic engagement” in the region.

An expansion of U.S. and French aid across the region will assist greater transparency and democratic rule in contrast to Chinese efforts through the Belt and Road Initiative, which places secondary importance on democratic governance. As is evident in Solomon Islands, Chinese efforts at securing a strategic foothold in the region can increase incentives for certain governments to lessen their commitment to engage in transparent, democratic governance practices.

At the same time, France's independent relationship with China can assist in lessening geopolitical conflict. Like French outreach to China in settling the Ukrainian conflict while supporting Ukrainian defense, French support for the current rules-based order in the Pacific and its good offices between the United States and China provides an opportunity to better manage relationships across the Asia-Pacific.

Moreover, the re-invigoration of the French-U.S. presence in the Pacific, as Pacific powers with Pacific concerns and a willingness to address the legacy of colonialism and climate change, has the potential to significantly improve livelihoods across the region. If the two states genuinely seek to settle outstanding historical grievances, such as the status of New Caledonia, indigenous issues in Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, and Marshall Islands, and compensation and reparations for nuclear testing and climate change, the Chinese critique of Western (including Australian and New Zealand) objectives toward the Pacific Island states will have less traction. This is particularly important given the increased multipolarity and geostrategic challenges in the region.

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