From Franconesia to Euronesia

What future for France, and the European Union, in the South Pacific?

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Résumé

La France a été longtemps critiquée en raison de sa présence coloniale dans le Pacifique Sud. En effet, si la dépendance n'est plus une option acceptable en ce début de XXIe siècle pour la plupart des entités geo-politiques de la région, la pleine indépendance politique ne garantit pas davantage la viabilité économique et sociale. En outre, alors que la mondialisation s'accélère partout, y compris dans cette partie de la planète, l'interdépendance semble devenir le mot-clé. Dans ce contexte évolutif, cette étude tente d'analyser le rôle que peuvent jouer la France, et au-delà l'Union Européenne, dans le Pacifique Sud de demain.

Abstract

France has long been criticised for her colonial presence in the South Pacific. As a matter of fact, though, if dependence is no longer an acceptable option in the early 21st century for most geo-political entities in the region, neither does full political independence give greater guarantee of economic and social viability. Besides, with globalisation on the rise everywhere, including in this part of the world, interdependence seems to be the key word. Taking this evolving context into account, this essay aims at assessing the role that France, and beyond her the European Union, can play in tomorrow's South Pacific.

What future for France in the South Pacific? The question may seem odd, and some might expect, or even hope, to hear the following answer: none. Yet the situation is not so simple as that, all the more so since the inclusion of the European Union in the title introduces one more complication. For the sake of clarity, and to make a point, this paper considers the issue in three time frames: the past, the present and the future.

Let us start with the past. France's presence in the South Pacific is nothing new. It goes back to the late eighteeth century, to the time of Bougainville, La Pérouse and d'Entrecasteaux, roughly, that is, to the same period as the early British navigators. The French and the British were not even the first Europeans to visit these shores. Others were present in the area before. The Spaniards held Guam until 1898, the Dutch kept what is now West Papua until 1962, and the Portuguese remained in East Timor until 1975. But these three European states were active on the westernmost fringes of the region only and thus were not in a position to leave a major impact on regional consciousness as a whole.

In comparison with these five European countries, Germany, the United States and Japan were late comers in the race for colonies. In the cases of Germany and Japan, their presence was short-lived and both nations were quickly ousted from the region, at the end of World War I in the case of Germany, at the end of World War II in the case of Japan.

For most of the twentieth century therefore, the whole effective business of colonialism concentrated on just three states: France, Britain and the USA.

The specific brands of Australian and New Zealand colonialism will be disregarded here, and this is done on various grounds. First, in the case of Papua and Norfolk Island, because Australia was granted colonial responsibilities by express delegation of powers of the Westminster parliament. Secondly, because in the cases of New Guinea and Nauru on the one hand and of Western Samoa on the other, the military invasion of these German territories was made at the express instigation of London, and London again exerted 'amicable' pressure on the League of Nations to have these territories placed under Australian and New Zealand trusteeship. Finally, because Australia and New Zealand had no proper and independent Ministries of Foreign Affairs

until about 1942. This explains why this essay will consider only the three states mentioned before, namely France, Britain and the USA.

Now, Britain and the USA very much shared the same religion, the same culture and the same values. Britain and the USA also spoke, and still speak, the same language, both literally and figuratively and, with minor downs under labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson and his conservative counterpart Ted Heath, the 'special relationship' between the two countries has held fast right into the present. France thus appeared as the odd man out, the country whose presence thwarted any potential plans to turn the South Pacific into an exclusively Anglo-Saxon lake, the country who frustrated any possible attempts at imposing a sort of Anglo–US, or Australasian, Monroe doctrine in the whole region. In one word, France appeared, and was made to appear, like a troublemaker in the Anglo-Saxon family backyard. So, rejection of France, and of the French, in the South Pacific also has a long history, dating back to the age of the eighteenth century explorers and little improved by the passage of the decades in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

But the mid-twentieth century rejection of France became much worse from the mid-1960s onwards, and tensions reached a climax in the 1980s on two grounds, colonialism and nuclear activities. Hence the oft repeated accusation of 'nuclear colonialism'.²

As the winds of change reached the region and the South Pacific archipelagoes became independent one after the other, France maintained her colonial presence in her three overseas territories of New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and Wallis and Futuna, and in the case of the Franco-British condominium of the New Hebrides (that is, present-day Vanuatu) she accepted only very reluctantly that she would have to pack up and leave.

France's colonial presence was perceived as all the more obdurate and obtrusive since Britain so easily relinquished control over all the archipelagoes under her jurisdiction, with the well-known exception of tiny Pitcairn far to the east, on the periphery, that is, of the South Pacific.³

In the nuclear arena, France was even more unpopular, and feelings of hatred ran high in some circles. In 1963, London and Washington signed the Partial Test Ban Treaty that put a final stop to Anglo–US nuclear experimentation

in the Pacific. Paris, on the contrary, not content with refusing to adhere to this treaty, started its own nuclear programme in 1966 and conducted nuclear tests virtually every year afterwards, first in the atmosphere, until France gave in to pressures from the International Court of Justice in the Hague in 1974, and then underground until 1992, with a brief but irksome resumption from July 1995 to January 1996.⁴

Nuclear weapons testing can be analysed from two distinct angles. Firstly, in spite of all precautions taken, it does, or can, have an impact, the environment and people's health, as the disaster at Chernobyl amply demonstrated. Now, the island environment is particularly fragile in the South Pacific. Secondly, nuclear tests indirectly encourage the arms race and are therefore inimical to peace worldwide.

All this was already quite enough to condemn France. But with the pathetic affair of the *Rainbow Warrior* in the harbour of Auckland in July 1985, the first and only example in the region of a state-sponsored act of terrorism, France was definitely in the dock.⁵ And it deserved to be.

Let us move on now to the present. The French nuclear age in the South Pacific is now over, for good, and France henceforth conducts simulation tests in a laboratory near Bordeaux. As for colonialism, the whole political situation had, of necessity, to be reassessed in the 1980s, and things did actually change.

French Polynesia, or Tahiti Nui to use the probable future name, obtained a substantial degree of self-government in 1984 and the extent of local power has increased steadily ever since. In New Caledonia or Kanaky, things were more difficult, but the whole political system was overhauled there too under the pressure of the serious troubles that shook the island in 1984–85, and again in 1988, when blood was shed.

From the late 1980s onwards and in the 1990s, New Caledonia undertook a painful reassessment of past colonial injustices, and also underwent a process of reconciliation similar to what was taking place at the same time in former British settler colonies: in Canada (with the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples), in Australia (with the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation), in New Zealand (with the expansion of the powers of the Waitangi Tribunal) and, after the end of Apartheid, in South Africa (with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission). The wrongs and sufferings of the colonial past were formally

acknowledged, and a process of power sharing between Kanak (the original inhabitants) and Caldoches of European descent, was set up.

Let us bear in mind that New Caledonia, unlike Tahiti but very much like Australia and New Zealand, is a settler colony, and that the present-day Caldoches, who have always accounted for more than a third of the total population, and at times nearly one half, are mostly the descendants of the Europeans who came in the second half of the nineteenth century, not as warlike conquerors, but often as convicts. And if Caldoches do not enjoy the same demographic weight as Pakehas in New Zealand or Aussies in Australia, Caldoches are very much in the same historical situation as them. Besides, in behaviour, in mental habits and even in outlook, rural Caldoches are almost indistinguishable from Queensland farmers in the Bush.

Power sharing between Kanak and Caldoches led to two major agreements, the Matignon Accords in 1988, and the Noumea Accord in 1998. The Matignon Accords of 1988 provided for a referendum on independence in 1998. However, as that date was coming closer, it was clear for all local politicians, whether Kanak or Caldoche, to see that independence would be rejected outright in 1998, leaving a sizeable minority of the population, mostly but not exclusively Kanak, frustrated and therefore prone to political agitation.

There was therefore a very broad agreement to negotiate the Noumea Accord. This can lead to complete sovereignty, if the people of New Caledonia so wish, after a transitional period of 15 to 20 years, that is in 2014 or in 2019, or some time in between. To this effect, a specific New Caledonian citizenship has been defined, automatic right of access to work is restricted to New Caledonian 'nationals' and the electoral rolls have been severely curtailed with strict conditions of residency applying (twenty years for people born outside New Caledonia, or whose parents were born elsewhere), so that only people genuinely concerned by the future act of self determination will be eligible to vote. Let us note in this respect that British citizens living in Australia and who have declined to take up Australian citizenship can still vote at all Australian elections—at the local, state and federal levels—provided they were registered on the Australian electoral rolls before 1984. And in New Zealand, foreign citizens may vote at all parliamentary elections as long as they are permanent residents.

In the meantime, New Caledonia, just like Tahiti, enjoys, in all fields, a very substantial degree of self government that can easily vie with the powers exercised by such states as Niue or the Cook Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands or Palau. And though France keeps the upper hand on such state prerogatives as defence and diplomacy, New Caledonia can still make agreements with other regional states of her own free will and has a say in all international affairs where she may be concerned. New Caledonia will also soon have her own anthem and flag, as is already the case with Tahiti.

Delegations of the Pacific Islands Forum have regularly visited New Caledonia in the last few years and monitored political progress, and the regional media have been kept better informed about French dealings in the area. These marked changes in French attitude towards the South Pacific have been welcomed by most regional politicians and the press alike, and the improved knowledge of France's activities in the area, and of the social and political realities of the French territories, has gone a long way in restoring France's image in this part of the world. The major role played by Gaston Flosse, the incumbent and indefatigable president of the Tahitian government, should be emphasised here. Flosse worked hard to increase French economic and cultural co-operation with various South Pacific states, and made strenuous efforts, not just with Tahitian words—his mother tongue—but also with concrete deeds, to present France as a respectable and reliable partner, especially in the fields of natural disasters⁷ and maritime surveillance.⁸

But more than in the political sphere, reconciliation is tangible in the minds and in the hearts of New Caledonians. After the painful troubles of the 1980s, people from all ethnic backgrounds live and work together again, they speak with and smile at one another. In the Greater Noumea area, a process of cultural creolisation, or hybridisation, is under way: young Caldoches and young Kanak dress alike, they speak with the same accents in French and use the same phrases, and they attend the same concerts of Kaneka, the modern and very popular Kanak music.

Let us now jump into the future. France's presence nowadays is definitely less obtrusive and less aggressive than it used to be. Does this mean to say that France is discreetly pulling out of the region, the way Britain did in the 1970s? Here again, it is difficult to give a clear-cut reply. The answer is all the more

complex as what emerges behind France is the European Union, of which France is an integral element, contrary to Britain, which has always tended to hover on the periphery, uncommitted to and uninvolved in most collective European concerns, as a sort of odd man out.

A short detour is necessary here to cast light on this point. Democracy is at its best when it is closest to the citizens it is supposed to serve. This means that in the future, in Europe, most of the decisions that affect the everyday lives of citizens will be made at the regional level, for conditions in specific fields may vary, and do vary, from Bavaria to Andalusia, or from Tuscany to Flanders. Cultural and linguistic affairs belong to this first infra-national category and there is much to bet that in the future, New Caledonia, even renamed Kanaky, French Polynesia even renamed Tahiti Nui, and Wallis and Futuna, in much the same way as Vanuatu already does, will maintain French, maybe not as the only official language, but as a major official language. Kanak and Tahitian leaders are perfectly aware that maintaining the status of the French language is in their best interests if they want to escape the all too pervasive influence of the regional giant, Australia. If only through this cultural element, France's permanent presence in the area in the future is secure.

But other major decisions require a much larger sphere and will inevitably be made at the supranational level: such is the case with defence and strategic affairs, with diplomacy and international trade. In the latter fields, Europe is bound, probably sooner than later, given the international context, to take precedence over France.

Those who, not so long ago, still said that France—when playing the superpower and arrogantly flexing its muscle in the South Pacific—was biting off more than it could chew, will be in a different position when it comes to Europe. The European Union is a global superpower, not *the* but *a* global superpower. As such, it has a major stake in maintaining a strong presence everywhere in the world, but in particular in the South Pacific.

The European interest in Oceania can be accounted for in at least two ways. First of all, in the future most of our means of livelihood, if not of sheer survival, might well come from the sea, be it in the form of fish, plankton, krill or algae, or in the form of seabed minerals. Now the South Pacific's combined

exclusive economic zones represent some 30,000,000 km², in other words the equivalent of the surface area of the whole African continent. What superpower can afford to neglect such an enormous area?

The second reason for the European Union's interest in Oceania is that it needs to be in close contact with, and in relative proximity to, the fast expanding markets of Asia, where at least one other superpower, China, will undoubtedly emerge in the near future.

In both cases, Europe will need to rely on the former French territories, and will probably use them as launching pads to carry these activities through.

But for various reasons, this European presence cannot be, and will not be, a new form of colonial subordination the way the French presence was in the past. Rather, it will be based on genuine partnership, and the reasons are not difficult to grasp.

To start with, in strict economic terms, Europe is already a major trade partner for most South Pacific states, and has proved much more generous in absorbing South Pacific exports, which do not compete with her own productions, than have other countries.⁹ And there is ample room for increasing this economic complementarity.

Secondly, Europe is, out of sheer necessity, built on diversity and variety, and cannot but advocate a genuine multiculturalism. In other words, Europe will be plural, or will not be at all. The vast majority of young Europeans, except maybe for Britons, have a sound knowledge of at least one foreign language, and often two, which is rarely the case with young United Staters or young Australians, notwithstanding their countries' official policies of multiculturalism. This European insistence on the values of unity in diversity should be reassuring for the South Pacific islanders, who also stress the need for cultural variety without abandoning their insistence on the recognition of their specificity.

Of course, the European presence in the South Pacific will probably disturb China, but even more so the USA and Australia, which sometimes tends to behave as the USA's appointed deputy in the region, an attitude clearly delineated recently in the famous 'Howard Doctrine'. Both Australia and the USA have long shown an inclination to consider the South Pacific as their own

personal backyard, the USA north of the Equator, and Australia south of it, to the displeasure of New Zealand where Polynesia is concerned. The fact is that in spite of the official discourse on western unity, Europe and the USA do have conflicting interests, in the economic, strategic and even cultural fields, and their respective visions of a new world order simply do not coincide.

Yet this should not worry South Pacific Islanders as these rivalries represent in fact a real asset for them. Small and fragile geo-political entities like those of the South Pacific have much more leeway when they can play one power against the other so as to be no one else's backyard. In this respect, millions of people agree that the world will probably be more balanced, a safer and better place for all of us to live in, when there emerge three, four or five global superpowers, instead of today's single one, striving to impose its views on the rest of the world in a way that is not exactly even-handed.¹²

In both human and political terms, dependence is no longer an acceptable option today. In a globalised world, independence is not viable either, and will undoubtedly be replaced tomorrow by interdependence.

Now, to go back to France and the European Union, and to conclude, the point is not to present Europe as an angel. That it definitely is not. Neither is the purpose to demonise Europe's major competitors: China, even though its human rights record, so far, is poor; or the USA, even though it maintains a substantial post-colonial presence in the South Pacific, ¹³ and sticks to the spirit of the arms race by perfecting nuclear weapons tested on Kwajalein in the Marshall Islands. ¹⁴

South Pacific Islanders are mature enough to be aware of all this. And in the future, it will be up to them, and to them only, to make decisions, united in their diversity as Polynesians, Melanesians and Micronesians, but also as Indo-Fijians, Caldoches and South Pacific Chinese. ¹⁵ It will be up to South Pacific Islanders to choose freely, according to their specific needs, who their partners will be, and when they will be their partners—and the plural form should be insisted on.

Notes

1 The phrase 'Australasian Monroe doctrine' was first coined by German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck in 1884 (quoted in Tate, 1961).

2 The phrase 'nuclear colonialism' was routinely used in the regional media after Bengt Danielsson published his book *Poisoned Reign: French nuclear colonialism in the Pacific* (1977; first published in French as *Moruroa, mon Amour* in 1974).

3 Independence was proclaimed as follows in the former British colonies (or protectorates, in the cases of Tonga and Solomon Islands): Tonga (4 June 1970), Fiji (10 October 1970), Solomon Islands (7 July 1978), Tuvalu (1 October 1978), Kiribati (12 July 1979), Vanuatu (30 July 1980).

4 Six blasts took place, on both Moruroa and Fangataufa, between 5 September 1995 and 27 January 1996. France signed the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty (also called the Rarotonga Treaty) in Suva, Fiji, on 25 March 1996, along with Britain and the USA. The Kingdom of Tonga became a signatory to the treaty on 2 August 1996. The Treaty of Rarotonga creates a nuclear-free zone in the Pacific south of the Equator by prohibiting the testing, manufacture, acquisition and stationing of nuclear explosive devices in the territory of parties to the treaty and also prohibiting the dumping of radioactive wastes at sea. Let us note that the Kwajalein test site, north of the Equator, is not affected by the Treaty.

5 The Greenpeace vessel *Rainbow Warrior* was sunk in Auckland harbour by French secret agents in the evening of 10 July 1985. The ship's Portuguese photographer, Fernando Pereira, was caught in a rush of water after the second explosion and drowned.

6 In Canada, the report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples was published in 1996. In Australia, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, set up in 1991, was replaced in December 2000 by a more independent commission, Reconciliation Australia. In New Zealand, the Treaty of Waitangi Act 1985 extended the scope of historical investigations back to 1840, that is to the time when the Treaty of Waitangi was signed. In South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, headed by Desmond Tutu, the Anglican Bishop of Johannesburg and Nobel Peace Prize laureate in 1984, was set up by the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act 1995.

7 In 1992, France, Australia and New Zealand set up the 'FRANZ Agreement' (an acronym of the initials of the founding members' names). The agreement provides for regional co-operation in emergency situations in the South Pacific area and for co-ordination and sharing of information on natural disasters. In times of need, the procedures established under the FRANZ Agreement are activated in order to bring relief to the victims, deliver assistance and assess the extent of material damage. There are also provisions for rehabilitation operations thereafter. Tonga benefited by the scheme in the wake of cyclone Waka and the devastation it wreaked on 1 January 2002, and so did Tikopia and Fiji more recently when they were swept over respectively by cyclones Zoe and Ami in January 2003. For more details on the FRANZ Agreement, see the following sites:

http://www.beehive.govt.nz/briefings/dta/defence/policy.cfm http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/FADT_CTTE/PNG/submissions/sub34.doc

8 South Pacific countries are regularly confronted with the Herculean, perhaps Sisyphean, task of patrolling, with very limited means, large exclusive economic zones against illegal immigration, drug and weapon trafficking or the entry of poaching vessels that mass harvest their resources. Since 1990, some of them, in particular Fiji, Vanuatu and the Cook Islands, have asked France to assume responsibility for aerial and maritime surveillance of their exclusive economic zones. As often as not, these surveillance duties are shared with Australia and New Zealand.

9 The special relations between the European Union and the ACP (African, Caribbean and Pacific) countries date back to the Treaty of Rome signed in 1957. At that time, the goal was to promote the economic and social development of those (former colonial) countries. Over the years, relations have developed as a unique combination of aid, trade, investment and political co-operation and bear witness to the European Union's commitment to supporting Pacific countries in their efforts to enhance exports and to reduce poverty. Today's relations are governed by the ACP-European Union Partnership Agreement (also known as the Cotonou Agreement, successot to the Lomé Conventions) signed in Cotonou (Benin) on 23 June 2000 and agreed and signed for a period of 20 years. Let us note that the European Union is the region's largest source of aid. The fourteen ACP members in the Pacific are: the Cook Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. For more information, see: http//europa.eu.int/comm./development/cotonou/ index_en.htm

10 According to Fred Brenchley (1999), the concept of the 'Howard Doctrine' implies that Australia act in a sort of 'deputy peacekeeping capacity in our region to the global policeman role in the US'. He further wrote that 'the PM himself [Howard] embraces the term'.

11 Trans-Tasman rivalries are not restricted to sports and trade but extend to the field of politics. Richard Woolcott, former Secretary of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade put it this way: 'Australia sometimes manifests what I would call the big brother syndrome while New Zealand sometimes manifests the smaller sibling syndrome' (1993: 167).

12 This can be observed at the global level. By launching a military assault on Iraq on 19 March 2003, without any prior approval of the Security Council of the United Nations, the USA has deliberately placed itself above international law. It thus runs the risk of being accused of behaving like the 'rogue states' that are objects of its repeated vituperation. The same could be said at the regional level. Under the Compacts of Free Association, the US government assumes responsibility for defence of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia and Palau, in return for the right to deny military access to third countries. Washington also, under the Compacts, maintains strict control over security related issues. For instance, it lodged a formal complaint with the government of the Marshall Islands in December 1997 when Majuro failed to consult the US armed forces before signing the Ottawa Convention, which bans the use and manufacturing of landmines, a treaty Washington has adamantly refused to sign. Marshallese officials felt bullied and expressed their discontent at being regarded as 'just a rubber stamp for the United States', as Phillip Muller, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, put it in December 1997 (quoted in Pacific Concerns Resource Centre, 2000).

13 Three territories are still dependencies of the USA. Their inhabitants, though most are US citizens, do not vote in US national elections. Guam and American Samoa are 'unincorporated territories' and send one delegate each, with non-voting rights, to the House of Representatives in Washington. The Northern Marianas is a 'commonwealth' and has a permanent 'resident representative' in Washington, DC (for more details see Douglas and Douglas, 1994; or the following site: http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos

14 In 1983, the Reagan Administration decided to launch the 'Strategic Defense Initiative', commonly known as 'Star Wars', and set up the US Space Command, located at Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands, in order to co-ordinate research on and testing of anti-missile missiles. The goal was to provide the USA with a nuclear shield by having the capability to destroy any warhead carrying weapons of mass destruction—nuclear, chemical or biological—that might enter the country. To this effect, ballistic missiles launched from Vandenberg Air Force Base in California were intercepted—a few minutes later, by an anti-missile missile launched from Kwajalein Atoll, over 7,000 kilometres away—and knocked out some 230 kilometres above the Pacific Ocean. The programme was revived under the Clinton Administration and has been maintained by George W. Bush. The new system is supposed to deter the threat of a missile attack from a 'rogue nation' like Iraq, Iran or North Korea, or a deliberate or accidental missile launch by China or Russia. For more details, see the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site on the Internet: http://www.smdc.army.mil/KMR.html 15 The Tahiti Chinese are known locally as Tinitos.

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