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New Caledonia: An Uncertain Geopolitical Future Amid France's Indo-Pacific Strategy

By Paco Milhiet

SYNOPSIS

French President Emmanuel Macron's visit to New Caledonia – a Pacific Ocean archipelago still under French sovereignty – was largely dedicated to local political issues. The results of the three referendums held between 2018 and 2021 to settle the political status of the territory have not been accepted by those in favour of independence. The growing political tensions in New Caledonia could have a negative impact on France's Indo-Pacific strategy.

COMMENTARY

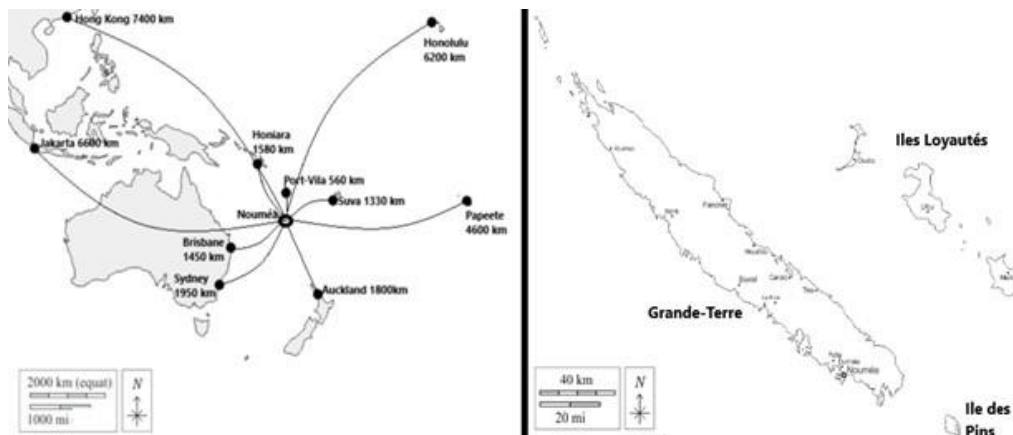
French President Emmanuel Macron visited New Caledonia from 24-26 July 2023 for the second time during his presidency as part of a trip that also took in Vanuatu (27 July) and Papua New Guinea (28 July). Five years earlier, in 2018, it was from New Caledonia that he implemented an Indo-Pacific strategy and clarified the role that the territory was to play regarding France's new geopolitical ambition.

Macron's strategy for the French Indo-Pacific was to legitimise and enhance French assets in the region. The exercise of sovereignty in the overseas collectivities of the Indo-Pacific is a central component of the new narrative implemented by France. However, this geopolitical narrative is likely to be undermined by domestic political imperatives in New Caledonia.

Indeed, this French territory of 18,600 sq km in Melanesia is a cornerstone of French strategy in the region. Strategically located in the Southwest Pacific astride a region facing growing US-China rivalry, it is the world's fourth largest producer of nickel.

New Caledonia lies 1,200 km east of Australia and 1,500 km north of New Zealand (see map from author's personal drawing). Inhabited by Melanesian populations,

mostly Kanaks, for more than 3,000 years, it was discovered by the British navigator James Cook in 1774 but proclaimed French in 1853, amid growing religious and political competition between European powers in the region.



Unfinished Decolonisation Process

Like Australia under the British, New Caledonia was first used by the French colonial power as a penitentiary settlement. With successive waves of immigration by European and Asian settlers (mostly Vietnamese and Indonesians) and the scourge of diseases, wars, and alcoholism, the Kanaks found themselves rapidly marginalised in their homeland.

After living through discrimination and land spoliation under the colonial authority, the Kanak people gradually gained access to civil rights after the Second World War. However, they remained largely on the margins of economic development. The succession of independence in the Pacific region granted to the Samoa Islands (1962), Nauru (1968), Fiji and Tonga (1970), the Solomon Islands (1975), and Vanuatu (1980) led to cultural and nationalist claims by the Kanak people under the leadership of Jean-Marie Tjibaou.

From 1984 to 1988, the political situation in New Caledonia deteriorated into a civil war, reaching a climax in 1988 when four French policemen were assassinated by independence activists, and 26 were taken hostage on the island of Ouvéa. An operation to free the hostages was carried out by the French army, causing the death of 19 pro-independence militants and two French soldiers.

French Prime Minister Michel Rocard's mediation resulted in the signing of the Matignon Agreements in June 1988, which established a 10-year transitional statute. The following year, Jean-Marie Tjibaou, the pro-independence leader who was a signatory to the Matignon Agreements, was assassinated by a Kanak extremist. In May 1998, the transitional statute was extended by another 20 years with the signing of the Nouméa Accord, which provided for an independence referendum in 2018 and an economic transfer to the Kanak communities.

As for its international status, New Caledonia was recognised under UN Resolution 4141 as a non-self-governing territory, an explicit recognition of its unfinished decolonisation process.

Three Referendums, Two Opposing Societies

The year 2018 was crucial as the 30-year transitory period initiated during the Matignon Agreements in 1988 had come to an end. The population had to vote for its political future. The referendum question was simple: “Do you want New Caledonia to gain full sovereignty and become independent?”

According to French constitutional law, if the answer was negative, further referendums could be organised every two years, up to a maximum of three such public votes. As it turned out, 56.67 per cent of the people voted against independence in 2018. In the second referendum in 2020, 53.26 per cent of the people again voted “No” to independence.

As for the third referendum held on 12 December 2021, the main pro-independence parties had called for a boycott because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The result of the referendum – 96.50 per cent against independence – was therefore tainted by massive abstentions, with only 41.87 per cent of the electorate voting.

Independence Referendums in New Caledonia:

“Do you want New Caledonia to gain full sovereignty and become independent?”

	Yes	No	Participation
1st referendum: 4/11/2018	43.33%	56.67%	81.01%
2nd referendum: 4/10/2020	46.74%	53.26%	85.69%
3rd referendum: 12/12/2021	3.50%	96.50%	41.87%

The referendum process which was intended to lead to a consensual evolution of the statutes for or against independence now foreshadowed the beginning of a political confrontation. The pro-independence parties had already challenged the result of the third referendum and brought it before international organisations, including the UN, Pacific Islands Forum, and Melanesian Spearhead Group.

The French authorities had hoped that the process of reconciliation and economic rebalancing for the benefit of the Kanak community would have led to a consensual new political statute. But three referendums were not enough to decide the political future of the collectivity.

After more than thirty years of political transition, these electoral results highlighted a crude reality: ethnicity [decides](#) the vote in New Caledonia. The Kanak population voted almost exclusively for independence, while the other communities comprising Europeans, Asians and Polynesians, mostly voted to remain in the French Republic. Two different visions of the future co-existed within the same territory.

The Need for Mediation

Going by the French Constitution, the transitory statute in New Caledonia ended the day after the third referendum. New Caledonia remained under French sovereignty although the disgruntled Kanaks continue to contest the referendum's results. As local elections are due to be held next year, there is a vital need to reach a local agreement between various political stakeholders to define a new political statute.

A major stumbling block is the Kanak nationalists' insistence, on the basis of a historical claim, on excluding from voting anyone who had settled in the territory after 1994. This category numbered nearly 34,000 people, or 17 per cent of the electorate. However, now that the transitory period is over, the discrimination towards these other French citizens will no longer be constitutional.

Some scholars have [suggested](#) that questioning this historical right of the Kanaks would endanger the fragile peace. In other words, civil war is imminent once again. Emmanuel Macron's mediation is therefore essential to nudge local political leaders to reconcile and to move towards a future common destiny.

What this means for France's Indo-Pacific Strategy

In the French Indo-Pacific, French sovereignty is often questioned and sometimes contested from within the territories, and by [foreign countries](#). These could undermine the national ambition in the region. New Caledonia is not the latest French collectivity posing problems for France's Indo-Pacific strategy. There is an imminent independence conundrum in French Polynesia, another French collectivity in the Pacific, where an independent government, [elected in April 2023](#) is being questioned. Macron's government must actively mediate to reconcile differences in these troubled territories if its Indo-Pacific strategy is not to unravel.

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