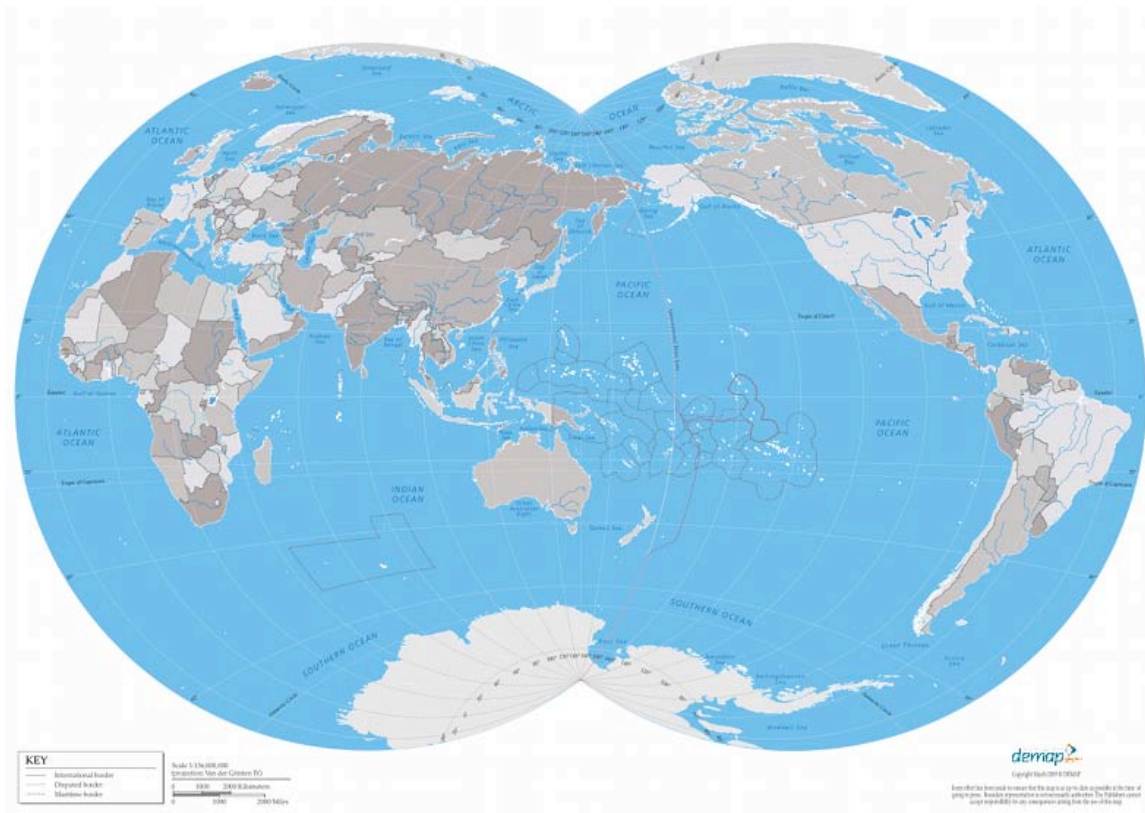




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The Australia-France Defence Co-operation Agreement

Implications for France in the South Pacific



Nic Maclellan
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Synopsis

Journalist Nic Maclellan writes that the new “Agreement between Australia and France regarding Defence Cooperation and Status of Forces” has come at a time when France is restructuring its armed forces and rationalising its overseas bases around the world. In the Pacific, Maclellan writes that France’s renewed focus on New Caledonia as a major regional base for military activities may conflict with moves in that country towards a new political status. Maclellan discusses what implications this new agreement with France has for Australia, at a time when New Caledonia is moving towards an act of self-determination after 2014. He argues that “the increasing defence co-operation between the two countries will raise interesting dilemmas if, in the future, Australia decides not to support French military deployments in the region, as occurred during the 1980s when there were armed clashes in New Caledonia between the French military and activists from the Kanak independence movement.”

Permalink

<http://www.globalcollab.org/Nautilus/australia/apsnet/policy-forum/2009/Australia-France-Agreement.pdf/view>

About the Author

Nic Maclellan works as a journalist and researcher in the Pacific islands, and is co-author with the late Jean Chesneaux of *La France dans le Pacifique - de Bougainville à Moruroa* (Editions La Découverte, Paris, 1992) and *After Moruroa – France in the South Pacific* (Ocean Press, New York and Melbourne, 1998). This article draws on the author’s reporting for *Pacific Magazine* and *Islands Business* magazine, with thanks to editors Samantha Magick and Laisa Taga. Thanks to Denise Fisher, David Chappell and Richard Tanter for comments on early drafts, though none are responsible for the author’s conclusions! Thanks also to John Waddingham for his maps.

Introduction

Diplomatic relations between France and Australia soured in the 1980s and 1990s, in large part because of disputes over the French nuclear testing program at Moruroa and Fangataufa atolls and colonial policy in France's three Pacific territories, New Caledonia, French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna.

However relations have improved markedly over the last decade, since the end of nuclear testing in French Polynesia in 1996 and the signing of the Noumea Accord for New Caledonia in 1998. This level of rapprochement has now been highlighted by increasing military co-operation in the region and the entry into force of the *Agreement between Australia and France regarding Defence Cooperation and Status of Forces*.¹

For many years, Australia and France have maintained programs of defence co-operation in the Pacific region, through frequent exchanges and officer contacts at high levels, port visits, joint military exercises, and major equipment procurement programs. Since it was signed on 22 December 1992, the France-Australia-New Zealand (FRANZ) agreement has provided a mechanism for joint co-operation in the South Pacific on humanitarian and maritime surveillance operations. The *Southern Cross* military exercises held every two years in New Caledonia also provide a level of regional military co-operation.

However the new Australia-France Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA), which entered into force in July 2009, provides a legal framework to these existing programs of military co-operation in the Pacific. The DCA also potentially covers a much wider range of areas, according to the Department of Defence:

“The DCA will enhance bilateral defence engagement by facilitating cooperation in a range of mutually agreed fields including the conduct of military exchanges, exercises and training, defence materiel, logistics support and capability planning, activities to enhance and broaden the interaction of our respective military cultures, science and technology and the exchange of space-based information, including military geospatial information.”²

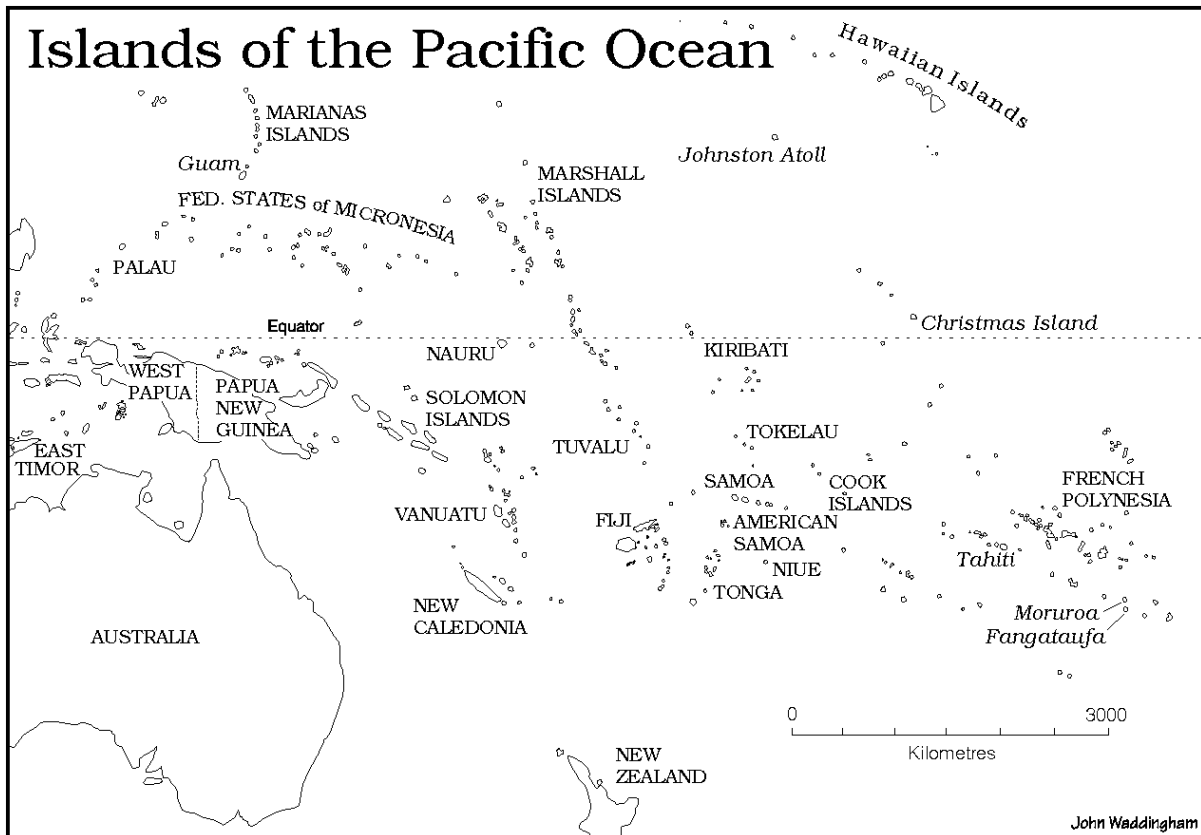
The 2007 election of a conservative President in France and a Labor Prime Minister in Australia has not slowed military co-operation between the two nations. As explained by Michel Vauzelle, rapporteur for the French National Assembly's Commission on Foreign Affairs:

“There have been differences of opinion, notably concerning our engagement (or non-engagement) in the conflict in Iraq. But since the election of the Labor leader Kevin Rudd in November 2007, our visions are more and more convergent concerning the approach to be taken on the problem posed by the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan. The interest for both France and Australia in such an agreement between our two defence policies is evident, both at the political level and at the geopolitical level.”³

According to the Australian government, the DCA is based on common political interests:

- Australia and France share concerns over global threats to security, as well as a commitment to assist the Pacific region in its own stability and security.
- France, in cooperation primarily with Australia and New Zealand, actively contributes to maritime surveillance, humanitarian and disaster relief assistance and support to regional defence and police forces in the Pacific and Southern Oceans.

- France is an important part of the European defence industry and there is an increasingly significant level of materiel activity between Australia and France.⁴



As discussed below, the DCA provides a legal framework for joint operations in the Pacific region by Australian and French forces. But today, counter-terrorism operations and joint deployments in Afghanistan loom larger than the South Pacific in the new rapprochement between the two countries. The conclusion of a study of the DCA by the Australian parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Treaties (JSCOT) notes:

“France is believed to be a valuable interlocutor and potential future coalition partner for Australia, due to its capability to undertake coalition expeditionary activities....Both nations' commitment to international counter-terrorism operations is significant and this Treaty will allow for greater cooperation in those vital activities.”⁵

This focus on counter-terrorism raises interesting dilemmas, given the deployment in the 1980s of French military forces to counter the so-called “terrorism” of the *Front de Libération Nationale Kanak at Socialiste* (FLNKS) in New Caledonia – the independence movement that has the support of the vast majority of the indigenous Kanak community. As this paper will outline, the strategic importance of New Caledonia for France raises policy dilemmas for Australia as the islands move towards an act of self-determination.

DCA and MLSA

The *Agreement between Australia and France regarding Defence Cooperation and Status of Forces* is Australia's first Defence Co-operation Agreement (DCA) with a European country. As a treaty, it replaces a *Statement of Objectives relating to Defence Co-operation* (May 2004), a non-legally binding agreement between the Australian Department of Defence and the French armed forces.⁶

The DCA entered into force on 7 July 2009, but was originally signed in Paris on 14 December 2006 by then French Minister for Defence Michele Alliot-Marie and Australia's Brendan Nelson, Defence Minister in the conservative government led by Prime Minister John Howard (which lost office in November 2007).

This DCA is one of the most detailed Status of Forces agreements for Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel that are available to the public.⁷ There are 11 articles and two annexes, with agreements covering the status of Australian forces deployed on French territory and vice versa, and the responsibilities of each party undertaking common activities (military exercises, humanitarian deployments, maritime surveillance etc), especially in cases of accident or damage.

Visiting forces are expressly forbidden to participate in acts of war, actions to maintain public order or matters relating to national sovereignty (section 1). The agreement includes provisions which allow the Visiting Force to possess and carry arms in certain circumstances (Annex 1, Section 6); grant exclusive competence for the sending state regarding disciplinary matters (Annex 1, Section 2) but also criminal jurisdiction for the receiving state over visiting personnel (a matter of some importance, after a visiting Australian sailor murdered a 79-year old New Caledonian woman during a drunken rampage in December 2006, when *HMAS Melville* was making a port call to Noumea⁸).

The annexes set out details of taxation, visas, financial obligations, medical support and evacuation in cases of accident.

Under the DCA, Canberra foresees an increase in intelligence sharing with the French military, with the provision of material such as the geospatial mapping undertaken by Australia's Defence Imagery and Geospatial Organisation (DIGO) of Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste and other Pacific island countries.

Above all, the agreement creates a mutual obligation on both countries to facilitate logistics support, to aid interoperability between the two defence forces (article 4). Under this provision, both countries have agreed to negotiate a Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement (MLSA), which will, according to the French Senate commission on the DCA, "allow Australians to benefit from the military installations in New Caledonia and for French military to access Australian installations."⁹

The National Interest Analysis (NIA) of the DCA tabled in the Australian Parliament on 28 August 2008 notes that "to facilitate cooperative logistics support, the Agreement provides that the Parties shall negotiate a mutual logistics support instrument which shall, amongst other things, include costing and financial details and the conditions under which various transactions may occur."¹⁰

Negotiations for the MLSA were discussed during the September 2008 visit to Australia by French Defence Minister Hervé Morin. According to Morin, the MLSA will “allow Australia to use New Caledonia a base for logistic support (mainly for naval forces, but for all Australian operations) and it’s well understood equally that Australia could be a point of similar support for French forces, in particular naval forces.”¹¹

In response to questions on the current progress of negotiations, the Australian Department of Defence declined to give any detail on the status of the MLSA talks - a Defence spokesperson simply stated: “Negotiations are going well and we expect an outcome by the end of the year.”¹²

Promoting arms sales

As well as providing a legal framework for joint operations, the DCA also opens the way for co-operation on a broader range of military activities.

For French politicians, one crucial reason for the DCA was the potential opening it creates for increased arms sales to Australia. With about six per cent share of the global arms market, France is the world’s fourth largest exporter of armaments and a growing area of common activity is arms procurement and production.

During the National Assembly debate on the DCA, Socialist Party deputy Michel Vauzelle (rapporteur for the Commission on Foreign Affairs) noted:

“This co-operation may permit France to sell some armaments to Australia because...you will have seen, like I have, that the Australian budget allocates billions of dollars to aircraft, submarines and long-range missiles, which for the large part are not made in France. But we have the feeling that the interoperability which derives from joint operations between the Australian army and elements of the French army, making these armed forces more complementary in their operations, provides the opportunity for Australian soldiers to be trained using French materiel. This may make Canberra more open to the idea of making a few purchases in areas where we can offer them some benefit. I’m thinking of tanks, of torpedoes and also of attack helicopters which are produced by Eurocopter.”¹³

In 2005 and 2006, Australia was the second largest purchaser of French armaments in the world.¹⁴ Australia’s Defence Materiel Organisation (DMO) and its French counterpart, *Délégation Général Pour L’Armement*, are developing a strong relationship and have held a series of annual meetings after the signing of a co-operation agreement in February 1999.

A major component of the arms trade is the purchase of new helicopters for the ADF from Eurocopter, a subsidiary of the giant European Aeronautic Defence and Space company (EADS). French and Australian agencies are working on the introduction of Eurocopter’s Multi Role Helicopter (MRH90) and Armed Reconnaissance Helicopter (Tiger) into the Australian army. The contract for 22 Tiger helicopters, signed in 2001, was the first major success for Eurocopter in Australia. The corporation is also managing the contract for the production of the 46 MRH90 helicopters at the Brisbane plant of its local subsidiary Australian Aerospace. In June 2005, Australia also agreed to purchase 150 MU90 torpedoes from France.

The French government is also hoping to sell the EADS NH90 naval frigate helicopter – a maritime version of the MRH90 – to the Royal Australian Navy (RAN). Government ministers are reported to favour the European aircraft, given the multi-billion investment in European

helicopters for the army, even though Australia's defence chiefs favour the Sikorsky MH-60R Seahawk from the United States.¹⁵

Since 2006, the French aerospace and military corporation Thales has also been a major player in the Australian defence sector, after its acquisition of Australian Defence Industries (ADI, now Thales Australia). Thales is a strategic industrial partner of the ADF, supplying and sustaining a range of munitions, weapons, optronics, armoured vehicles and command, control, communications and computer (C4) systems. Former ALP Senator Stephen Loosley sits on the board of Thales Australia, highlighting the Australian labour movement's ongoing interest in the arms industry.¹⁶

Beyond arms manufacture, common policy on counter-terrorism, the war in Afghanistan and concerns over nuclear weapons proliferation have drawn the two countries closer. A DFAT briefing paper on France-Australia relations notes:

“In recent years Australia and France have developed a good working relationship in the counter-terrorism field, including as founding members of the Proliferation Security Initiative to combat the trafficking in weapons of mass destruction.....Australia works closely with France in arms control regimes such as the Australia Group, the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, Missile Technology Control Regime and the Proliferation Security Initiative, to strengthen export controls and non-proliferation norms.”¹⁷

Ironically, in spite of this supposed commitment to arms control, the old debate over France's nuclear policy still lingers. In an interlude in the French parliamentary debate, the rapporteur of the Commission on Foreign Affairs Michel Vauzelle stressed to the National Assembly that nothing in the DCA would hinder France's deployment of strategic nuclear weapons:

“This text will...in no way lead to a discussion with the Australians about our decisions on nuclear strategy. The Australian and New Zealand governments are very sensitive about these questions but we are protecting our independence in the nuclear domain and there is nothing in this agreement which might concern or worry the Australians and their way of looking at things.”

Another politician, Jean-Paul Lecoq asked: “To be more precise, will it be possible to deploy French nuclear weapons on Australian soil?”

Vauzelle replied: “This possibility, which is not dealt with in this agreement, does not seem conceivable to me.”¹⁸

The other central plank of Australia-France military co-operation is joint operations within the South Pacific region. New Caledonia is the hub for this activity, as noted in the Commission on Foreign Affairs report to the National Assembly:

“New Caledonia's proximity [to Australia] allows regional co-operation, driven by the French armed forces in New Caledonia (*Forces armées en Nouvelle-Calédonie* - FANC), with whom the Australian authorities have a privileged relationship.”¹⁹

Australian and New Zealand personnel participate in joint military exercises and training with the FANC in New Caledonia. Other regional police and military forces from Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea and Tonga also join French and ANZAC forces in the *Croix du Sud* (Southern Cross)

wargames, which take places every second year. These exercises combine scenarios for humanitarian response with those involving civil and political unrest in a fictitious island country. French military forces also participate in Australian military exercises such as Pitch Black and Kakadu, and run training programs for Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF) commandos, the Tonga Defence Services (TDS) and Vanuatu's mobile police force.

Improved relations between France and Australia have led to a greater range of high level military exchanges, such as the February 2008 visit to Canberra by the FANC Commander (*Commandant supérieur des forces armées en Nouvelle-Calédonie* - COMSUP FANC); the May 2008 Perth visit of the Admiral commanding French forces in the Indian Ocean (ALINDIEN); and a meeting of headquarters staff from FANC and the ADF in December 2008. From February 2009, Wing Commander Chris Cornhall, from the Joint Operations Centre of the ADF, has been working with FANC headquarters in Noumea, to improve this engagement.

In November 2008, Australia's then Parliamentary Secretary for Pacific Island Affairs Duncan Kerr travelled to Noumea in a French military aircraft and noted that military links are "a very good and successful part of our common relationship":

"On the military side of course, that is still an issue that is essentially the responsibility of metropolitan France. But there we have very, very good relationships. I met the Commanding French General just yesterday and I don't think that we could have better relations in terms of preparing, for example, against disaster relief, to plan for possible instances where military force can be drawn on for rescue at sea, to deal with illegal fishing, a whole range of issues where, in the past perhaps, cooperation might have been more difficult. And we're doing joint military exercises. This is a very good and successful part of our common relationship."²⁰

However this relationship is expanding at a time when France is restructuring its military facilities in the Pacific, after the 2008 French Defence White Paper, and also when New Caledonia is moving towards a decision on its future political status under the 1998 Noumea Accord. There are potential flashpoints, as independence activists worrying that defence spending and base restructuring in New Caledonia may hamper their path to sovereignty.

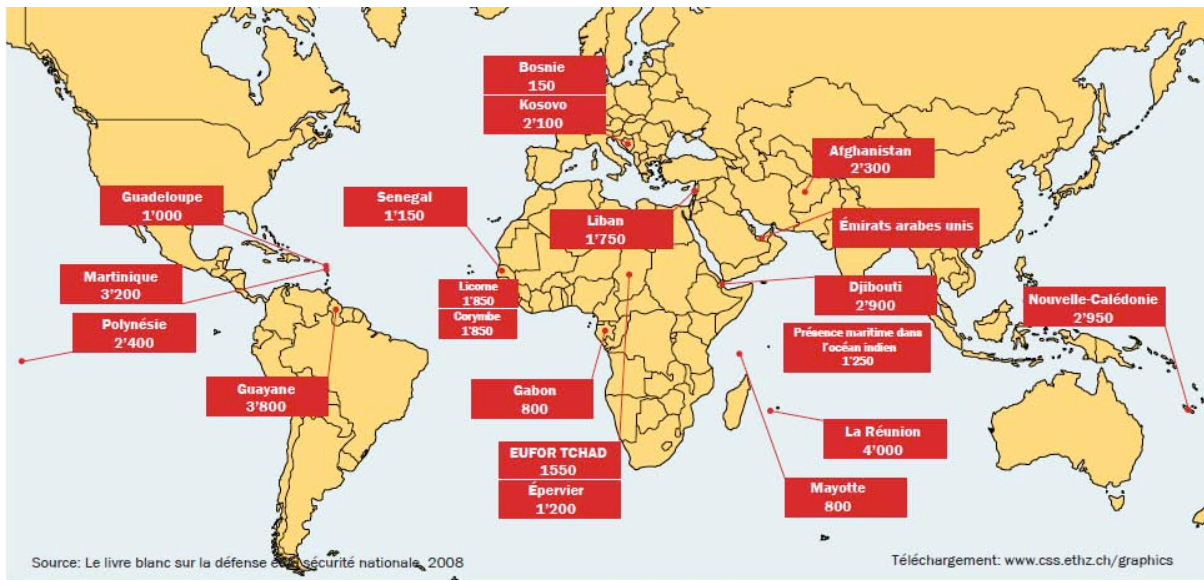
The French Defence White Paper and the Pacific

France deploys its military forces overseas in a range of operations: those distributed throughout France's overseas departments and collectivities are known as "sovereignty forces", while those deployed in allied countries of strategic importance to France are called "presence forces". But these French military deployments face cutbacks under two general policy initiatives begun by French President Sarkozy after his election in 2007.

The French Defence White Paper (*Le Livre blanc de défense et sécurité nationale*) foresees major restructuring of the French armed forces, with reductions in overseas deployments, rationalisation of France's global network of military bases and cuts to the numbers of troops deployed as sovereignty forces.²¹ At the same time the French Ministry of Defence is facing staffing and budget cuts under the *Révision générale des politiques publiques* (RGPP), a major public sector reform program initiated by the current French government.

The White Paper pays relatively little attention to the Pacific islands region²², but includes proposals for the reduction of forces in France's overseas dependencies: "the military forces in French Polynesia, the West Indies and New Caledonia will be reduced and rationalised."²³

In spite of this policy, the French military are actively trying to justify their presence in New Caledonia because of its perceived strategic importance in the Pacific basin.



These arguments have a long history, over more than a century. In 1898, as the United States Navy expanded its footprint across the Pacific with the Spanish-American war, the occupation of Guahan (Guam) and the annexation of Hawai'i, the *New York Times* reported on the naval policy of other colonial powers in the Pacific. The *Times'* edition of 26 November 1898, in a report datelined Sydney, New South Wales, noted:

“The French government has decided to make Noumea, capital of the French colony of New Caledonia, its naval headquarters in the Pacific. A large dock and naval works will be based there.”²⁴

French military forces were deployed to crush Kanak revolts in 1878 and 1917, and continued this colonial role into the 20th Century. During the conflict of the mid-1980s in New Caledonia, Jacques Chirac's conservative RPR party stressed the islands' strategic importance, as Kanak activists called for independence from France:

“Because of its geography, New Caledonia controls air and sea lanes which place it in a strategic position. Within reach of the Australasian bloc – Australia and New Zealand – and offering exceptional naval and air facilities, New Caledonia is an immense aircraft carrier moored in the midst of the Pacific. A French New Caledonia assures peace and security in a zone prone to the covetousness and manoeuvres of the superpowers.”²⁵

Again this decade, the commander of France's Pacific naval contingent Vice Admiral Amaury du Chéné has justified the Navy's ongoing role in the region, arguing that France has a role to play in the face of China's rising naval power:

“The Pacific basin presents some notable geopolitical peculiarities, the first of which is the importance of naval power....France also has its interests to defend in the Pacific - she has the desire to be a player there and wishes to maintain a base of influence from its

territories in New Caledonia and French Polynesia....The French Navy, with its regular deployment of naval vessels, is one of the principal elements of our regional activities and of our presence in the Pacific.”²⁶

French officials have also argued that overseas military installations play a vital role in evolving European Security and Defence Policy, as NATO forces deploy overseas under UN or US leadership.²⁷

It is clear from statements since the White Paper was released that military deployments in New Caledonia will largely be spared and most of the cuts in the Pacific will fall on French Polynesia. The then FANC commander General Martial de Braquilanges stated in 2008 that:

“The Defence White Paper indicates that pre-positioned forces overseas will reduce in number, whether those are the presence forces deployed overseas (especially in Africa) or whether it is the sovereignty forces which are based in France’s overseas departments and territories. While some heavy blows will fall on French Polynesia and the French Antilles, New Caledonia will be relatively spared from the cuts, first at the level of its operational capacity and then at the level of numbers of troops.”²⁸

With the end of France’s nuclear testing program in 1996 and the closure of the Pacific Testing Centre (CEP), there is significant redundant military capacity in French Polynesia, with bases spread across Tahiti and the atolls of Hao, Moruroa and Fangataufa. While there will still be military forces in French Polynesia, including aerial and naval capacity to monitor the five million square kilometre Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), most of the resources, including support and command, will be based in New Caledonia after 2011.

Discussing the major operational and intervention capacities of the French armed forces, the White Paper notes that New Caledonia will be one of three regional focal points for the rationalisation of overseas military deployments:

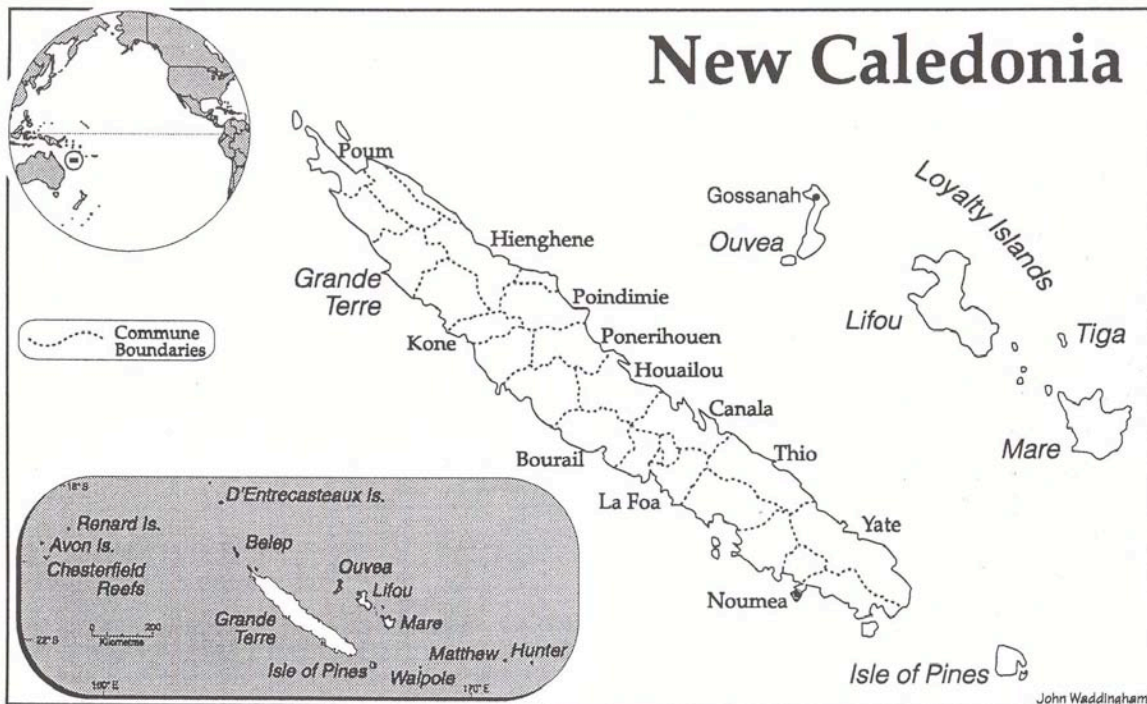
“In the overseas departments and territories (DOM-COM), co-ordination of civilian and military resources will be strengthened and forces will be reorganised according to the following principles....redefinition of a predominantly air and sea force in each collectivity to carry out public service missions and combat all forms of trafficking and establishing theatre resources in French Guyana, Reunion and New Caledonia capable of rapid intervention in the three zones....”²⁹

New Caledonia’s military bases

To house its armed forces in New Caledonia - the *Forces armées de Nouvelle-Calédonie* (FANC) - France already maintains a number of military facilities around the main island of Grande Terre:

- the major ***Nandai military base*** near Bourail, which serves as the base for the *Régiment d’infanterie de marine du Pacifique* (RIMAP infantry battalion for the Pacific) and ***infantry barracks*** at nearby Plum;
- the new ***Alleyron headquarters*** at Pointe Artillerie in the capital Noumea, which unites the joint services in an operational headquarters for FANC, including the *Etat-major interarmées* (EMIA), the inter-service staff headquarters;
- the ***Gally-Passebosc barracks*** on place Bir-Hakiem, which administers national service programs, army administration and other functions;

- the **Pointe Chaleix naval base** in Noumea, which hosts the French Navy's small naval contingent including two patrol boats, the Batral transport vessel and the frigate *Vendemiaire*;
- the **Air Force base at Tontouta** (the main international airport 55km from the capital), which hosts the *Escadron de transport Outremer* (ETOM – overseas transport squadron), air force Puma and Fennec helicopters of the air wing of the gendarmerie police; and
- facilities in the northern towns of Koumac and Kone for military vocational and training programs, through the **Service Militaire Adapté** (SMA) scheme.



Plans for the bases restructuring program involves significant spending: the Alleyron headquarters, opened in October 2008, cost a billion Pacific francs (AUD\$13.5 million) to construct. The military have also committed funds for the improvement and expansion of the Gally-Passebosc barracks from 2011.³⁰ In October 2008, the then FANC commander Martial de Braquilanges noted: “With the recent renovation of the Gally-Passebosc barracks, and the use of the RIMAP base at Plum, the French State, through the defence department, continues to invest in New Caledonia.”³¹

For decades, the military have controlled prime real estate in the central business district of Noumea. With the opening of the new Alleyron headquarters, which centralises all military commands in one place, there are a number of prime locations up for grabs. In September 2009, the incoming FANC commander Brigadier General Olivier Tramond noted:

“Within this perspective, the army has been called on to give up part of its land holdings. At the Nandai camp at Bourail, we will maintain the firing range and ammunition dump. In Noumea, certain buildings will be handed over. But this won't be a sell off at bargain prices, even though other departments may be interested.”³²

FANC currently includes nearly 3,000 personnel, and under the White Paper Noumea could see a 15-20 per cent reduction in numbers over the next three years (a process which has begun with the disbandment of RIMAP's armoured squadron in June 2008, first deployed in New Caledonia 22 years ago during the armed conflict of the mid-1980s.)³³

In spite of this, the White Paper restructuring in the Pacific region will increase, not lessen, New Caledonia's strategic importance for France. This was stressed by French Defence Minister Hervé Morin when he visited Noumea in September 2008:

“We have in effect decided to make New Caledonia the base for the defence of the Pacific, because we have a number of high quality facilities here and we are undertaking an extremely important military co-operation with Australia, where the change of government has allowed us to relaunch dialogue on a number of subjects....It is therefore here in New Caledonia that certain key functions will be maintained and from here, a number of intervention forces could be deployed, for example if French Polynesia had need of extra military units. New Caledonia will therefore lose some 100 – 150 personnel, but will serve as our military base in the Pacific.”³⁴

Travelling on to Australia to meet with his Australian counterpart, Morin stressed the importance of New Caledonia as the hub for French military co-operation with Australia:

“France is in the process of restructuring its defence capabilities and we have decided that New Caledonia will become a major presence and major base in the Pacific. We decided to do this because New Caledonia is close to Australia and for us this base in New Caledonia will be the means through which we will grow our cooperation with Australia.”³⁵

In response, Australian Defence Minister Joel Fitzgibbon agreed the DCA allows for greater cooperation in the South Pacific: “this agreement of course gives us additional flexibility and a better capacity to deal with any contingencies that might arise in that part of the region.”³⁶

The importance of the White Paper restructuring is evident in the appointment of a new FANC commander on 1 August 2009. Before replacing General de Braquilanges in Noumea, Brigadier General Olivier Tramond served as deputy head of the military office for French Defence Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie between 2005 and 2007. He also served with the Prime Minister's officer in the inter-ministerial *Secrétariat général de la défense nationale*, where he played a key role in preparing the White Paper.

In September 2009, Brigadier General Tramond suggested that the French military plan to be present in New Caledonia for the long run, whatever the outcome of the referenda on political status scheduled after 2014:

“Looking out to 2020, New Caledonia has been called on to act as a support base in the Pacific. Even if the defence infrastructure has been reduced, it will be maintained.”³⁷

Australia, France and self-determination in New Caledonia

What does this military restructuring mean for New Caledonia, especially in the light of increasing Australia-France defence co-operation?

The 1988 Matignon–Oudinot Accords ended a period of conflict in New Caledonia, which saw armed clashes that pitted Kanak independence activists against the French army, police and right-wing militias supported by the settler community.³⁸ But while New Caledonia has dropped off the media agenda in Australia, the social and economic conflicts that led to violent clashes between 1984 and 1988 have not been completely resolved.

At the end of the ten-year Matignon agreement, most New Caledonian leaders wanted to avoid a referendum on independence, so a new agreement dubbed the Noumea Accord was signed in May 1998. The agreement created new political structures and electoral systems to encourage political co-operation between competing parties.³⁹

Under the Noumea Accord, France has been transferring powers from Paris to Noumea in the areas of health, education, agriculture and other sectors. After a 15-year transition between 1999 and 2014 (three 5-year terms of New Caledonia’s Congress), a referendum on New Caledonia’s future political status is scheduled to be held after 2014. This referendum will decide on whether Paris will cede the final “sovereign powers”, including foreign policy, finance, police, justice – and defence.

For this reason, decisions taken today about France’s military restructuring in the Pacific will have an impact on the decision on New Caledonia’s political status to be taken in five or six years time – a matter that is causing concern amongst some leading members of *Front de Libération Nationale Kanak at Socialiste* (FLNKS), the coalition seeking political independence in New Caledonia.

In an interview with the author, Roch Wamytan, leader of the FLNKS group in New Caledonia’s Congress and former FLNKS president, outlined key reasons why he was “fundamentally opposed” to current French policy on bases restructuring:

“The first is that New Caledonia is in a process of decolonisation, and in line with United Nations decolonisation resolutions, France as the administering power has no right to establish military bases in its territories. These actions are to the detriment of the future emancipation of New Caledonia. On the one hand, France is showing positive signs, accompanying us on our path to a new future. On the other hand, France is talking about making New Caledonia a regional base for its military. It’s like we’re being entangled in a net and we’ll find it hard to get out, if we want to in the future. My second concern is that a country on the path to emancipation should not be used as a platform, as a Trojan horse, for French policy in the Pacific region.”⁴⁰

Australia and France are enjoying the sunshine of improved political and diplomatic relations, but what happens if the weather sours, as some pro-independence forces in New Caledonia feel that their long quest for independence is being delayed again? The increasing defence co-operation between the two countries will raise interesting dilemmas if in the future Australia decides not to support French military deployments in the region, as occurred during the 1980s when there were armed clashes in New Caledonia between the French military and activists from the Kanak independence movement.⁴¹

When Australia’s parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on Treaties (JSCOT) investigated the DCA, there was no mention of New Caledonia or any possible issues arising from the scheduled referendum on self-determination.⁴²

This shows remarkable lack of awareness of history, given the potential for conflict in New Caledonia. In the 1980s, the Chirac's government's "nomadisation" policy saw French troops and police deployed to every island and village, and the mid-80s were scarred by armed clashes between the army and the FLNKS independence movement. Chirac's policy culminated in the Ouvea tragedy of May 1988, which left two soldiers and 19 Kanak independence activists dead, with at least three activists executed after they had surrendered. The officer commanding the troops threatened to use napalm against the caves where hostages and hostage takers were hidden, and Prime Minister Chirac, bidding for the French Presidency, authorised the use of force to release the hostages, culminating in a massacre that influences New Caledonian politics to this day.⁴³

Although the Noumea Accord process has currently ended the conflict that marked the mid-1980s, violent clashes between striking unionists and paramilitary police in the streets of Noumea during 2008 and 2009 show how conflict could escalate again.

New Caledonia's pro-and anti-independence politicians have built a remarkable process of reconciliation since the dark days of the 1980s. But the process is slow - this year was the first time that pro-independence members of New Caledonia's government have ever attended the annual military parade in Noumea on 14 July, to mark Bastille Day.⁴⁴ The role that Australia and New Zealand play in coming years will be vital, as New Caledonia seeks to integrate more into the Pacific region.

In November 2008, Australia's then Parliamentary Secretary for Pacific Island Affairs Duncan Kerr flew to Noumea to attend the French Pacific Regional Co-operation forum (meetings which bring together the French High Commissioners from New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna and French Polynesia and political leaders from the three territories, to discuss a range of French political and economic initiatives in the South Pacific). Before the trip, Kerr stated:

"We certainly respect the decision of the people of both French Polynesia and New Caledonia towards greater autonomy but we see a very healthy role for France in the region. It's an important ally with us in a whole range of areas; in national security concerns, in investment, and increasingly we have very significant economic links - particularly to New Caledonia as it develops quite large mineral resources in that country."⁴⁵

But many Kanaks are seeking an act of self-determination that will lead to political independence and sovereignty, not "greater autonomy" within the French Republic. As New Caledonia moves towards the end of the Noumea Accord process, there's a fundamental question for Australia, New Zealand and other Forum member countries: does "a very healthy role for France in the region" involve the ongoing presence of French military forces in the Pacific territories, even after independence?⁴⁶

Closer military co-operation in the region is currently focussed on humanitarian responses by the FRANZ treaty members, such as assistance to communities affected by cyclones and tsunamis. But there are broader political implications, as FLNKS leader Roch Wamytan told the author:

"Australia and New Zealand have long supported us on our path to emancipation. So I'm really astonished that Australia and New Zealand are engaged in this without even talking to us."⁴⁷

With sharp political differences emerging over the best way to determine New Caledonia's political status – the scheduled referendum after 2014 or another period of free association with France – will the new bases being built in New Caledonia become the “facts on the ground” as New Caledonians seek to lessen the influence of Paris in the South Pacific?

End notes

¹ *Agreement between the Government of Australia and the Government of the French Republic regarding Defence Co-operation and Status of Forces* [2006] ATNIF 29, signed in Paris, 14 December 2006; entry into force 7 July 2009.

² “Australia–France Defence Cooperation Agreement enters into force”, Department of Defence media release MSPA 256/09, Tuesday, 11 August 2009.

³ Michel Vauzelle, Rapporteur for the Commission on Foreign Affairs, from the debate in the French National Assembly, 5 May 2009: *Accord France-Australie concernant la coopération en matière de défense et le statut des forces (n° 1438)*, <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/13/cr-cafe/08-09/c0809053.asp>

⁴ “Australia–France Defence Cooperation Agreement”, media release, Minister for Defence Brendan Nelson, Monday 18 December 2006

<http://www.minister.defence.gov.au/NelsonMintpl.cfm?CurrentId=6269>

⁵ “Treaty between Australia and France Regarding Defence Co-operation and Status of Forces”, chapter 8 of Report 95, Joint Standing Committee on Treaties (JSCOT) for 4 June, 17 June, 25 June and 28 August 2008, p68,72.

⁶ *National Interest Analysis* (2008) ATNIA 25 on the *Agreement between the Government of Australia and the Government of the French Republic regarding Defence Co-operation and Status of Forces* [2006] ATNIF 29, tabled in Parliament, Canberra, 28 August 2008, p2.

⁷ For details of Australian Status of Forces agreements, see information on the Nautilus Institute website at: <http://gc.nautilus.org/Nautilus/australia/australia-in-east-timor/australian-security-general/status-of-forces>

⁸ The sailor was subsequently tried in a French court, convicted of murder and is serving a 12-year jail sentence in Noumea's Camp Est prison.

⁹ André Dulait: *Rapport fait au nom de la commission des Affaires étrangères, de la défense et des forces armées* No.185, Report from the Commission on Foreign Affairs, Defence and the Armed Forces to the French Senate, Paris, tabled 28 January 2009. http://www.senat.fr/rap/108-185/108-185_mono.html

¹⁰ *National Interest Analysis* (2008) ATNIA 25, op.cit. p3.

¹¹ “Australia and France to increase defence ties in the Pacific”, Pacific Beat, Radio Australia, 17 September 2008 <http://www.radioaustralia.net.au/programguide/stories/200809/s2367288.htm>

¹² Non-response from Department of Defence to a series of questions, October 2009.

¹³ Michel Vauzelle, Rapporteur for the Commission on Foreign Affairs, from the debate in the French National Assembly, 5 May 2009: *Accord France-Australie concernant la coopération en matière de défense et le statut des forces (n° 1438)*, <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/13/cr-cafe/08-09/c0809053.asp>

¹⁴ “L'armée vendra d'abord pour le service public” *Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes*, 16 September 2008.

¹⁵ Patrick Walters: “Military opts for US chopper”, *The Australian*, 23 October 2009.

¹⁶ In 2008, Loosley's role as chair of the community consultation process for the Australian Defence White Paper raised concerns over conflicts of interest amongst church and community groups, given his commitment to a major arms manufacturer. See for example MAPW: “Defence Consultation shows major bias”, media release, 23 April 2009 at <http://www.mapw.org.au/news/defence-consultation-shows-major-bias-mapw>

¹⁷ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT): France country brief (September 2009) http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/france/france_brief.html

¹⁸ Michel Vauzelle and Jean-Paul Lecoq, from the debate in the French National Assembly, 5 May 2009. <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/13/cr-cafe/08-09/c0809053.asp>

¹⁹ Michel Vauzelle: *Accord France-Australie concernant la coopération en matière de défense et le statut des forces (n° 1446)*, Report from the Commission on Foreign Affairs to the French National Assembly, Paris, 5 May 2009.

²⁰ Transcript of a media doorstep held by Duncan Kerr, Parliamentary Secretary for Pacific Island Affairs, at the Australian Consulate-General in Noumea, 14 November 2008.

<http://www.australianconsulatenoumea.embassy.gov.au/nmeafrench/media201.html>

²¹ *Le Livre Blanc* and all government media statements and background documents are available at:

<http://www.livreblancdefenseetsecurite.gouv.fr>

The policy paper is available in English translation: *The French White Paper on Defence and National Security* (Odile Jacob, New York, 2008).

²² In an article on the Lowy Institute's *Interpreter*, Australia's former consul general in Noumea has noted the lack of attention paid to Australia-France cooperation in both the Australian and French defence white papers. Denise Fisher: "France all but ignored in Defence White Paper", *Lowy Interpreter*, 28 May 2009 at <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2009/05/28/France-all-but-ignored-in-Defence-White-Paper.aspx>

²³ *The French White Paper on Defence and National Security* (Odile Jacob, New York, 2008), p202.

²⁴ "French naval base in the Pacific", *New York Times*, 26 November 1898.

²⁵ "Une base stratégique ou un immense porte-avion?" in *La RPR vous parle de la Nouvelle-Calédonie*, Paris, 1985.

²⁶ Amaury du Chéné: "Le Pacifique et la France", *La France et les outre-mers*, *Hermès* No.32-33, 2002, p495.

²⁷ For discussion, see James Rodgers and Luis Simon: *The status and location of the military installations of the member states of the European Union and their potential role for the European Security and Defence Policy (EDSP)*, briefing paper for Sub-committee on Security and Defence, European Parliament, February 2009.

²⁸ Interview with Brigadier Martial de Braquilanges, "Une réduction des effectifs militaires 'proche de 15 à 20 %', *Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes*, 20 June 2008.

²⁹ *The French White Paper on Defence and National Security* (Odile Jacob, New York, 2008), pp177-178

³⁰ "Terrains militaires à vendre?" *Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes*, 27 June 2008.

³¹ "Unité de lieu, unité d'action", *Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes*, 16 October 2008.

³² "Nous allons amplifier nos relations dans la zone", *Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes*, 23 September 2009.

³³ "La fin de l'escadron blindé du Rimap", *Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes*, 27 June 2009.

³⁴ Interview with Hervé Morin: "Nous sommes en Afghanistan pour faire la paix", *Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes*, 15 September 2008.

³⁵ "Australia and France to increase defence ties in the Pacific", *Pacific Beat*, Radio Australia, 17 September 2008 <http://www.radioaustralia.net.au/programguide/stories/200809/s2367288.htm>

³⁶ Transcript of minister Fitzgibbon's comments at:

<http://www.minister.defence.gov.au/FitzgibbonTranscripttpl.cfm?CurrentId=8224>

³⁷ Interview with Brigadier General Tramond, "Nous allons amplifier nos relations dans la zone", *Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes*, 23 September 2009.

³⁸ For a summary of the mid-1980s violence, see Jean Chesneaux and Nic Maclellan: *After Moruroa – France in the South Pacific* (Ocean Press, New York and Melbourne, 1998), chapters 8 and 9.

³⁹ For discussion of the Accord and the decolonisation process, see Nic Maclellan: "The Noumea Accord and decolonisation in New Caledonia", *Journal of Pacific History*, Vol.34, No.3, 1999.

⁴⁰ Interview by the author with Roch Wamytan, 14 October 2009. See the November 2009 edition of *Islands Business* (Fiji) for further details (www.islandsbusiness.com).

⁴¹ For information on French military operations in New Caledonia between 1984-88 and the 1988 Ouvéa crisis, see Edwy Plenel and Alain Rollat: *Mourir à Ouvéa* (Le Monde, Paris, 1988); Alain Picard: *Ouvéa – quelle vérité?* (Editions LBM, Paris, 2008).

⁴² In reply to questions, the Defence Department noted that "while there are two particular divergences in defence policy between the two nations – France's membership of NATO and its status as an independent nuclear power, neither should be seen as problematic". The report makes no mention of the Pacific defence restructuring. See "Treaty between Australia and France Regarding Defence Co-operation and Status of Forces", chapter 8 of Joint Standing Committee on Treaties (JSCOT) Report 95, tabled on 4 June, 17 June, 25 June and 28 August 2008.

⁴³ For details of the military operations and the political context, see Francois Audigier: "L'affaire de la grotte d'Ouvéa et l'élection présidentielle de 1988" in Jean-Marc Regnault (ed.) *François Mitterrand et les territoires français du Pacifique 1981-1988* (Les Indes Savantes, Paris, 2003). On post-conflict reconciliation in Ouvéa, see Nic Maclellan: "Conflict and reconciliation in New Caledonia – building the

Mwâ Kâ”, State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Project, *SSGM Discussion paper* 2005/1 (ANU, Canberra, 2005).

⁴⁴ Défilés militaires et populaires, *Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes*, 15 July 2009.

⁴⁵ “Australia endorses political progress in French territories”, Pacific Beat, Radio Australia, 10 November 2008. <http://www.radioaustralia.net.au/programguide/stories/200811/s2415546.htm>. Kerr’s decision to travel to Noumea in a French Air Force plane raised eyebrows amongst some independence leaders (Personal communication with members of New Caledonia’s Congress, Noumea, 2008).

⁴⁶ There is an interesting precedent in the 1962 Evian Accord which ended the war in Algeria. Under the agreement, France maintained its military installations in Algeria for five years after independence, even continuing underground nuclear testing at the In Eker test site between 1962 and 1965, while the new Pacific testing centre at Moruroa atoll in French Polynesia was under construction.

⁴⁷ Interview by the author with Roch Wamytan, 14 October 2009.

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