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# Coral Sea neighbours - then and now: New Caledonia's significance to Australia and the world

## Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas Floyd, Australian Army

In case of a conflict between two great powers in the Pacific, their respective positions with regard to naval forces could perhaps be completely dependent upon whether France puts her ports at the disposal of one or the other of the belligerents.

Kintomo Mushakoji, Japanese naval officer, 1924<sup>1</sup>

Unlike some earlier periods in its eventful history, New Caledonia today rarely captures the public's languid eye—whether in Australia or internationally—except perhaps as a tourist destination. Nevertheless, its significance exists on many levels: some that ebb and flow in relative importance, others that are as enduring as the rugged nickel ore ranges that form the core of *Grande Terre*, the main island.

New Caledonia presents to its neighbours and the wider region an array of discontinuities. Throughout its history, its strategic overwatch of South Pacific 'approaches' has contrasted with its isolation, particularly when Europe and the Atlantic were the fulcrums of world power, while its richness and diversity of resources are challenged by both accessibility and vulnerability. On the eve of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic relations between Australia and New Caledonia, it is timely to consider this near neighbour's continuing strategic relevance.

## New Caledonia's historical significance

Since their arrival after the islands' annexation in 1853, French naval and military forces in New Caledonia were the enduring—and largely the most publicly recognised—threat to the sovereignty of Britain's colonies in Australia and to British interests in the Pacific during the colonial period. Without such a palpable, menacing presence, it is unlikely that British forces would have been needed—or even welcome—in Australia until 1870. And the clamour for a large, unified and effective defence force that followed the British naval and military withdrawal would not have reached such levels as it did by the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

At the same time, the French in New Caledonia understandably—but misguidedly—viewed the contemporary threats from Australia's vocal minority as portents of conflict. As 19<sup>th</sup> century anticipation of an Australian invasion waxed, metropolitan French resources and interest in countering such action waned. New Caledonia's penal colony was considered to be a distasteful heritage—even after transportation ceased—and uncertainty surrounding the status of the nearby New Hebrides caused further doubt on Nouméa's viability as a colony. As Britain's imperial might began to eclipse both French and Russian power projection in the 1890s, a fatalism over the impending loss of France's possessions discouraged further

investment in her colonial defences—and New Caledonia was no exception. Nonetheless, local military efforts to optimise Nouméa's abilities to repel attack remained resolute, even after the signing of the *Entente Cordiale* (between France and the UK) in April 1904.

As it turned out, the British, Dominion and French alliance during the Great War extinguished any foreseeable prospect of Franco-Australian conflict, and the shared battlefields of the Dardanelles, Palestine and the Western Front forged a mutual amity. Nevertheless, as this new rapport between Australia and New Caledonia developed, Australia's divergence from British foreign policy towards Japan gave Canberra greater impetus to follow its own diplomatic agenda. Growing suspicions of British inability to counter effectively a two-ocean threat—even with the development of the much-vaunted Singapore bastion—finally galvanised Australia's acceptance of self-reliance. This cast renewed focus on New Caledonia and, once again, the islands' strategic position to Australia.

## Prologue to war

The maintenance of cordial relations between Australia and New Caledonia was of mutual interest in the interwar period. Additionally, the conduct of official fleet visits, such as the cruiser HMAS *Canberra's* visit to Nouméa in 1931, was instrumental in its maintenance. However, British imperial power was declining—globally and regionally—as naval fleet reductions enforced by the League of Nations bit deep and the myth of invincibility of the British Empire became seriously challenged. Australian—and French—suspicions of Japanese intentions grew and Britain's Singapore strategy attracted considerable criticism, notably from senior Australian naval and army officers. Australia's attempts to make the best of relations with Japan were themselves hampered by its participation in the Singapore strategy and by its 'White Australia' policy. It was a shortfall not lost on French observers of the day, with one remarking:

It is evident that the Commonwealth [of Australia] continues to live and evolve in the orbit of the British Empire from a political viewpoint. The unity of race within the Empire, and the loyalty of Australians to the Crown, permits no doubt of it.<sup>2</sup>

## How war came to the Pacific

After the fall of France in May 1940, Britain and the fledgling 'Free French' administration embarked on a desperate bid to win over or neutralise French colonial and overseas naval power. In the Pacific, French Polynesia, New Caledonia and the joint-administered Anglo-French 'condominium' of the New Hebrides faced the dilemma of choosing between Vichy and Free France. Indo-China's decision to remain Vichy was swift—and prudent, given nearby Japan's anticipated actions in the coming months. But for the isolated island colonies, the choice was less clear.

For New Caledonia, there were economic considerations too: it was becoming more heavily reliant on Japanese trade in nickel, and Japan's links with Germany promised a valuable conduit to its critical armaments industry, a market that was cut off from virtually all other nickel

sources. In contrast, such trade benefits were neither matched nor guaranteed by Britain or her Dominions. A French analyst at the time concluded:

When Japan ... considers her interests at stake, whether or not she has previously been consulted, she will not hesitate to act and will do so—and this is to be feared—abiding by her treaties or not.<sup>3</sup>

Japan clearly had options to ensure continued access to the minerals she required: maintain friendly relations with New Caledonia or occupy the island. Either way, it is unclear to what extent Australia was mindful of Japanese resources investment in New Caledonia at the time.

Prior to the Second World War, Australia had supposedly demonstrated expansionist designs on her Pacific neighbours—whether real or imagined—in her capture and annexation of German territories during the Great War. New Caledonia and France feared substitution of one colonial power for another. Yet, at the same time, Australia was regarded as a somehow kindred colonial entity. As war threatened to engulf the Pacific, Australia became increasingly conscious of the strategic stepping-stones to its north. Australia could not risk New Caledonia becoming a base for hostile forces. And as the entry of Japan into the war became ever more likely, Nouméa assumed this would trigger an Australian occupation.

## New Caledonia's 'rallying' to Free France

There is dispute as to whether Australia jumped or was pushed into her short-lived yet pivotal role in New Caledonia's '*ralliement*'. Australia's then Minister for External Affairs, Sir John McEwen, asserts he battled against Cabinet inertia and indecision to pre-emptively act against Nouméa's pro-Vichy government, particularly in light of Japan's actions in Indo-China. However, according to John Lawrey (assistant to the Australian Government representative in New Caledonia from December 1940 to 1943), the Australian Government was reluctant to act against an outpost of Vichy France, which by this stage was an implicit ally of Germany and thus Japan. Regardless, Menzies' Government was cognisant of Nouméa's declaration for Vichy. Furthermore, Canberra was certainly attuned to Britain's calls to neutralise or redeem all French possessions on the Gaullist's behalf.

The Anglo-Free French plan envisaged the insertion, by naval vessel, of a suitable pro-de Gaulle official—Vila's Free French governor, Henri Sautot—and deposition of the Vichy administration in New Caledonia. However, because the Australian Naval Station was obliged to carry out British Admiralty directives in this area of the Pacific, a conflict of interest was emerging. Indeed, it can be argued that Australia's hesitation to act as an unquestioning *agent provocateur* for Britain was the catalyst—and even the beginnings—of increasing divergence between British and Australian foreign policy and war aims.

While it is likely that Australia eventually accepted the task because of pressure from Britain, Canberra had prudently directed HMAS *Adelaide* to Vila beforehand, ostensibly to search for the German raider *Orion*. *Adelaide* was the only ship in the area capable of outgunning the Vichy French sloop *Dumont d'Urville* which, since 23 August, had been at anchor in Nouméa

harbour, providing moral and implicit military support to the Vichy administration's shaky authority. Eventually, on 21 September 1940, the Gaullists consolidated their position and Sautot was delivered by HMAS *Adelaide*. Local reaction to his arrival was euphoric. However, Australia's role was largely overshadowed by the *ralliement* itself and general relief on all sides that it had been bloodless.

## Post-ralliement legacy

By 17 April 1941, Australia had conducted a provisional assessment of New Caledonia's defence requirements and in December inserted an independent rifle company to continue reconnaissance and train the locals. Even so, actions towards improving defences were slow, despite the assessment having recommended immediate construction of three air bases and the development of other infrastructure.

Australia was keen for direct liaison between the new Free French administration and the Menzies Government. However, de Gaulle refused to sanction such an arrangement—through fear of losing control of the colony—and, as a foretaste of future behaviour, insisted that all decisions affecting New Caledonia's military and economic preparedness be staffed through his London headquarters. Within a few months, French opinions regarding the Allies' plans for the island became largely academic after the US entered the war in December 1941. Her immense involvement essentially marginalised such relatively petty squabbles.

New Caledonia's role became pivotal as the war in the Pacific progressed. Nouméa served as the headquarters for successive Commanders-in-Chief, Pacific Fleet and a staging base from mainland US. From 1942, it became home to the American-Caledonian (Americale) Division, which formed the backbone for many subsequent US offensive operations in the South Pacific. Admiral Nimitz, Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Fleet, stated at the time:

After the early success of the Japanese in the South Pacific, New Caledonia became a stronghold where the Americans regrouped their forces and from where the main offensives against the Solomons and Philippines were launched.<sup>4</sup>

Given the importance of New Caledonia to the Allies' prosecution of the remainder of the war, it can be argued that the *ralliement* in New Caledonia was the most significant of all the French colonies. From 1942 to the end of the war, development of Nouméa's port and her airbases—started by the Australians and completed by the Americans—was critical for the back-loading of battle-damaged ships, aircraft and men, and as a reinforcement and resupply node. Had New Caledonia remained Vichy by the time Japan entered the war, its potential role as forward base for Japanese operations would undoubtedly have changed the course and possibly the outcome of the war in the Pacific.

As Australian perceptions of New Caledonia continue to evolve and fluctuate, it is worth considering the effect of these events on the evolution of Australia's strategic interests. From origins of enmity in 1853, transitioning through rancour and intimidation, to alliance and finally to redemption in 1940, New Caledonia's presence remained an undeniable influence on Australia.

## **New Caledonia's significance today**

A country's strategic importance can be assessed in various ways. Its value in terms of purely military-industrial strategic potential and capacity is a critical and enduring yardstick. But the measure of a country's living potential can and should be considered also, as it is of growing relevance for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond. This more holistic approach is vital in properly acknowledging capacity to cradle and support humanity, and to play a sustainable role as part of our shared biosphere. With both these sentiments in mind, the next section explores why New Caledonia remains significant to Australia and the wider world in terms of its geo-location and resources. It will be argued that New Caledonia has advantages and challenges in both and that, on reflection, its geo-strategic significance to Australia's north-eastern approaches and her regional role in Australia's foreign policy remains largely unchanged.

## **Endemic resources**

Today, New Caledonia's resource portfolio continues to remain influential, with substantial deposits of nickel, as well as chromium, iron, cobalt, manganese, silver, gold, lead and copper. It has over 25 per cent of the world's nickel ore reserves. And although price fluctuations in the world market have recently been volatile, there is no question that this metal will remain—if not grow—as a key component of many strategically-important manufacturing industries, including vehicles, armaments and a range of construction materials. What remains unknown is how valuable these minerals will become and the extent to which New Caledonia will develop indigenous refining and value-adding processes.

New Caledonia's mineral export partnerships are slowly shifting and will likely continue to do so as the industrial thirst of Asia's developing economies grows. While scope exists for some future competitive tensions with a fellow mineral export giant, such as Australia, it seems most likely that the world market will remain firmly to the suppliers' advantage. However, just as one of Japan's aims in the Second World War was to secure New Caledonian nickel for Axis armaments production, it is very likely that similar designs may arise in the future. Foreign investment in New Caledonia and its neighbours in Melanesia is already disproportionate to other less well-endowed Pacific countries and this trend will undoubtedly continue. It will be in Australia's interest that New Caledonia's mineral resources remain in 'sound hands' for the foreseeable future.

Even though New Caledonia's per capita GDP is larger than New Zealand's, its imbalanced economy poses a challenge to its political future. Currently, its inequity in trade sectors can be ameliorated across France's broader economic trade portfolio. However, if future circumstances see New Caledonia no longer part of such a coherent trade framework, its economy will need comprehensive restructure, to avoid vulnerability to key trade sectors, including by forming replacement linkages with new trade partners.

One such vulnerable sector is energy. New Caledonia's renewable energy sector is growing and currently meets 16 per cent of the country's domestic needs, notably via wind generation but also solar. However, New Caledonia's indigenous conventional energy resources are very modest, with heavy dependence on imported fossil fuels. Additionally, the vast quantities of energy that mineral extraction consumes leads to an unwanted trait shared with Australia—one of the highest per capita carbon footprints in the Pacific.

New Caledonia's living resources paint a contrasting picture. The archipelago boasts a diversity of terrestrial animals, plants and bird life, unmatched in such a comparatively small area, and considered one of the most important in the world. Over 74 per cent of its 3,270 plant species and nearly 90 per cent of its reptiles are endemic. New Caledonia's barrier reefs form the second largest living structure in the world. They comprise the world's most diverse concentration of reef structures and rival Australia's much larger Great Barrier Reef in coral and fish diversity.

However, scale and diversity are not the only reasons why New Caledonia's biosphere is so important. The archipelago sits astride the East Australian current as it approaches Australia from the equator, linking the food chains and life cycles of the two with the rest of the South Pacific in a symbiosis that humankind still does not comprehend. Collapses in marine ecosystems in one may irrevocably affect pelagic fish stocks in neighbouring countries. This underscores the importance of collaboration with Australia and other Pacific neighbours, not only to protect marine resources but also to share information on maritime security more broadly.

New Caledonia's sea-life assets are not its only marine resources. Its economic exclusion zone (EEZ) is 1,740,000 square kilometres—bigger than metropolitan France and its EEZ combined. Furthermore, France has recently won a dramatic increase in New Caledonia's offshore territory, through its successful 'extended continental shelf' (ECS) submission in 2009 to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf. Those resources that lie beneath the sea will become ever more valuable as humankind continues to consume the world's terrestrial resources and as exploration and extraction technologies improve. The ZoNéCo (*Zone Économique de Nouvelle-Calédonie*) project, currently underway to map and understand the under-seabed resources within New Caledonia's EEZ and ECS, will hopefully reveal in time their true potential richness.

## **Strategic geo-location**

New Caledonia's resources alone are thus sufficient to deserve regional and global consideration. However, New Caledonia's very presence in the South Pacific is equally significant. Even before Capitaine Tardy de Montravel established the outpost of Port-de-France (now Nouméa) on 18 August 1854, European sandalwood and bêche-de-mer traders, explorers and missionaries alike had seen and understood the strategic promise of its natural harbour. Few other ports in the South Pacific, beyond Port Jackson, rivalled its potential. And, during Australia's colonial

years, it was often perceived—by an isolated and occasionally jittery population—as a potential mounting base for invasion forces. Later, during the Second World War, Nouméa’s potential as a staging base was first coveted by the Japanese and then exploited by the Allies, to such an extent that only San Francisco handled more tonnage by war’s end.

Beyond the land itself, New Caledonia’s EEZ flanks those of Australia, Fiji, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands, with the EEZs of New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and the Polynesian and Micronesian island countries nearby. New Caledonia therefore assumes a regional centrality that makes it a logical staging base for all manner of trans-Pacific endeavours. This unchanging trait strongly influenced France’s original decision to annex the territory in 1853 and remains a key factor in the tripartite France-Australia-New Zealand (FRANZ) agreement for cooperative maritime surveillance, disaster responses and humanitarian assistance in the Pacific.

The 2009 Australia-France Defence Cooperation Agreement brings the bilateral relationship (and indeed rapprochement) to new levels, particularly by providing a legal framework for combined activities. Regular activities, including the multilateral Exercise *Croix du Sud*, the command post Exercise *Equateur* and increasingly frequent real-life emergencies, demonstrate the importance and benefits of such a close and effective entente. At the global level too, France and Australia share views on issues such as counter-terrorism and international crime, as well as intervention and stabilisation actions in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

While France retains a strategic presence in the Pacific, its relationship with the surrounding Pacific island nations will undoubtedly continue as a valuable contributor to maritime security and development assistance, and a willing agent of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. For as long as this endures, France and its likeminded partners of Australia, New Zealand and the US can be expected to develop progressively closer cooperative arrangements. A putative future independent New Caledonia must consider the merits and viability of continuing such a collaborative partnership, both for its own interests and those of the region.

Naturally, there is a corresponding French perspective to Australia’s consideration of New Caledonia as a strategic waypoint for its involvement in and support to Pacific affairs. New Caledonia gives France a means to project power and influence. But its remoteness from Europe means it makes sense to work together with nearby countries to achieve mutual goals—hence the remarks of France’s Defence Minister in 2008 that:

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.<sup>5</sup>

New Caledonia’s isolation from its European patron is at once a liberation and a constraint for its inhabitants. Regardless of its political destiny, it is incontestable that New Caledonia is and will remain a fundamental player in Pacific strategic affairs. Whether it remains part of France, is given greater autonomy or even granted independence, New Caledonia must—and is in train to—develop and deepen ties with its Pacific neighbours and its Southeast Asian trade partners. Attaining full membership of the Pacific Islands Forum and formal representation at peak bodies, such as the Melanesian Spearhead Group, provide New Caledonia with vital opportunities to engage and foster mutual trust, confidence and understanding within the



region. New Caledonia's ongoing active participation in organisations such as the Secretariat of the Pacific Community and the Forum Fisheries Agency also adds strategically significant cohesion to the Pacific hemisphere. In each of these, English is the dominant operating language, which is unlikely to diminish in an increasingly globalised and anglophonic Pacific region.

In knowledge and technology too, New Caledonia offers useful and beneficial programs for its neighbouring countries, as much as for itself. The Nouméa-based *Institut de Recherche pour le Développement* and the University of New Caledonia exemplify France's regional portals for highly-skilled and well-resourced science, research and development programs. They and their counterparts deserve greater integration into other Pacific endeavours. However, this requires an equal effort from both New Caledonia and its neighbours to acknowledge and encourage the mutual benefits of doing so.

## Conclusion

New Caledonia's mineral resources will continue to remain important in an increasingly industrialised world economy. And its location astride important trade routes and ecological conduits provides a unique position of overwatch for the traffic that sustains the South Pacific. Even so, the way in which New Caledonia engages with its neighbours and partners will continue to define the calibre of its influence in the region and beyond. This will be the case whether New Caledonia remains part of France or becomes its own sovereign nation. Regardless of any other consequence, the last 160 years of European annexation has secured New Caledonia a strategically significant legacy, both in natural and manmade resources, and in its strategic geography. Whichever path New Caledonia takes, its future role is certain to remain equally salient to its neighbourhood, including Australia and beyond.

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## NOTES

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2. Fernand Pila, French Ambassador to Japan in a letter to *Ministère des Affaires Etrangères*, Paris, 22 May 1934, in *Asie-Océanie /Australie '30-'40, 22 - For. Pol - Gen 4/30-11/34*, folios 186-8.
3. Quoted in Aldrich, *The French Presence in the South Pacific*, p. 263.
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