

The future of France in the Indo-Pacific region in relation to the upcoming independence referendum in New Caledonia

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Key points:

- Until now, France guaranteed security and stability in the Indo-Pacific region; it provided, for instance, support to local states.
- On December 12, 2021, the third and last referendum will be taking place in New Caledonia.
- As a result of the upcoming referendum in New Caledonia, raised independence movements in French Polynesia as well as the defence agreement between Australia, the UK, and the US announced in September 2021, the presence of France in the region is uncertain.
- If New Caledonia gained independence and if the independence movements in French Polynesia were to develop, France would lose its position in the Indo-Pacific region.

The French Republic differs from other European states. It is the only EU member to own territories in the Indo-Pacific region, which makes it number one in the rankings of the size of the exclusive economic zone¹. France's Indo-Pacific strategy (fr. *la stratégie de la France dans l'Indopacifique*) was published in 2018 and updated in 2021. One year later the state has adopted the French Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific (fr. *la stratégie de défense française en indopacifique*). The former document recognizes the need to conduct activities in, inter alia, military, political, economic, and cultural fields; though one of the main goals of activities in the region is to protect the environment. French Polynesia was given the key role in that regard.

The most important aims of the latter, i.e., the French Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific, are defending the integrity of France, protecting its territory and interests, promoting co-operation as well as ensuring safety in the region and of the sea routes². Both strategies fit into the French plan to rebuild France's position as a global power.

Until now, France guaranteed security and stability in the Indo-Pacific region; it provided, for instance, support to local states. In the territory of both New Caledonia and

¹ *Countries With The Largest Exclusive Economic Zones*. World Atlas.
<https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/countries-with-the-largest-exclusive-economic-zones.html>. Accessed: 19.11.2021.

² *La stratégie de défense française en indopacifique*. Ministère des Armées.
<https://www.defense.gouv.fr/dgris/action-internationale/enjeux-regionaux/la-strategie-de-defense-francaise-en-indopacifique2>. Accessed: 18.11.2021.

French Polynesia French troops are stationed – in November 2021, there were respectively 1,450 and 900 soldiers³.

As a result of the upcoming referendum in New Caledonia, raised independence movements in French Polynesia as well as the defence agreement between Australia, the UK, and the US (known as AUKUS) announced in September 2021, the presence of France in the region is uncertain. What is important, France's position is being called into question in its former colonies in Africa by China, Russia, or Turkey.

The Referendum in New Caledonia

New Caledonia is a French overseas collectivity consisting of islands in the Coral Sea and the south of the Pacific Ocean. Ever since 1840, France would carry out the activities of religious missions there in order to spread Christianity. Shortly afterward, due to aggression by indigenous people, the missionaries applied for protection by the naval forces that would brutally suppress all protests of Kanaks, i.e. native population of the area whose rights were limited and who were forced to live in specially designated reserve areas, and whose rights were gradually restricted in the XIXth century. **According to the data provided by the *Institut de la statistique et des études économiques*, i.e., a New Caledonia public institution responsible for collecting and analyzing statistics concerning the economic and social situation in New Caledonia, in 2019, the Kanak people accounted for 41,2% of the population of the territory⁴.**

The islands were gradually attached to France. In 1853 they were given the status of a French colony, in 1946 of overseas territory and 1998, as a result of the Nouméa Accord signed that year, of a *sui generis* community with a broad autonomy which includes the issues of the state civil service, the foreign policy and the defence, the migration control, the currency and the higher education and the scientific research.

In 1854 three types of penal colonies were created in New Caledonia. There were ones for transported people (fr. *transporté*) where forced labour for common crimes applied to those under 60. There were also ones for deportees (fr. *déporté*), i.e., for political prisoners. On top

³ *Dispositif opérationnel français déployé à travers le monde*. Ministère des Armées. https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/rubriques_complementaires/dispositif-operationnel-francais-deploye-a-travers-le-monde. Accessed: 16.11.2021.

⁴ *Une mosaïque pluriethnique*. l'Institut de la statistique et des études économiques Nouvelle-Calédonie. <https://www.isee.nc/population/recensement/communautes> Accessed: 17.11.2021.

of that, there were ones for banished (fr. *relégué*) who would repeat their crimes. In 1886, i.e., in the peak period, there were 7,600 condemned and 700 warders in the colonies⁵. Up until 1931, when the last colony was closed, more than 20,250 common criminals (ca. 250 of them were women) were on the islands. Between 1872 and 1880 ca. 4,250 people were deported there for crimes committed during the Paris Commune. After the uprising in Algeria in 1871 nearly 2,000 Algerians were displaced in New Caledonia, and between 1885 and 1894, more than 3,757 individuals were shipped out⁶.

In the 1980s, there were armed struggles between the French troops and pro-independence partisans in New Caledonia. The history of said period is marked with riots, attacks or even murders. As a consequence of these incidents, a state of emergency was introduced in the territory. Moreover, the French troops were assisted by anti-terrorist units. The events of 1980s led to signing of the Matignon Agreement in 1988 and the Nouméa Accord in 1998.

Under the 1998 Nouméa Accord, New Caledonia has the status of an overseas community as well as autonomy in the field of the state civil service, foreign policy and the defence, the currency, migration control, higher education, and scientific research. What is important, the Accord guarantees an independence referendum 20 years after accepting the contract and the possibility of repeating it within two years if the majority opposed New Caledonia getting full sovereignty⁷. For this purpose, it is required that at least a third of the members of the Congress of New Caledonia submit a request to organise new voting to the High Commissioner of the French Republic in New Caledonia (fr. *le Haut-commissaire de la République française en Nouvelle-Calédonie*). The second vote was to take place 18 months after the receipt of the request. The citizens were also allowed to hold a third and last referendum on the same terms as the previous⁸. The referenda are considered to be a part of the process of decolonisation.

⁵ S. Tonnerre-Seychelles. *Le temps de la colonisation pénale (1864-1931)*. Gallica. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/blog/25072018/le-temps-de-la-colonisation-penale-1864-1931?mode=desktop>. Accessed: 11.04.2021.

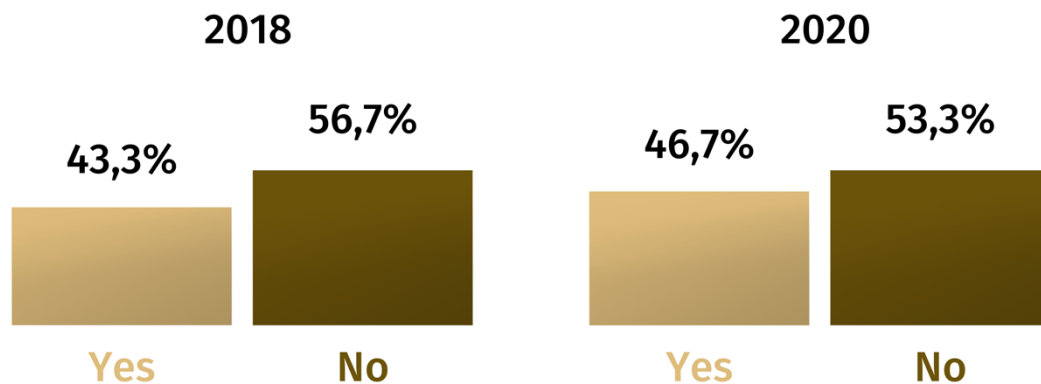
⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ LOI organique n° 2018-280 du 19 avril 2018 relative à l'organisation de la consultation sur l'accession à la pleine souveraineté de la Nouvelle-Calédonie, NOR : PRMX9801273X, JORF n°121 du 27 mai 1998.

⁸ *Organisation du referendum*. Les services de l'État en Nouvelle-Calédonie. <https://web.archive.org/web/20170729203202/http://www.nouvelle-caledonie.gouv.fr/Politiques-publiques/Referendum-2018/Le-referendum-de-2018/Organisation-du-referendum>. Accessed: 15.11.2021.

In this manner, **in 2018 and 2020 independence referenda took place. The majority of those eligible to vote, 56,67%⁹ and 53,26 %¹⁰ respectively, were in favour of maintaining the formal ties with France. On December 12, 2021, the third and last referendum is to be held.** The date was a subject-matter of dispute for local residents due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. However, a month before the planned date, the High Commissioner Patrice Faure announced that the referendum will be held as scheduled.

Do you want New Caledonia to accede to full sovereignty and become independent?



⁹ *Résultats définitifs Nouvelle-Calédonie.* Haut-Commissariat de la République en Nouvelle-Calédonie. <https://www.nouvelle-caledonie.gouv.fr/content/download/5127/39664/file/R%C3%A9f%C3%A9rendum%202018%20-%20R%C3%A9sultats%20consolid%C3%A9s%20synth%C3%A8se%20-%20Suffrages%20V07%2011%202018.pdf>. Accessed: 11.04.2021.

¹⁰ *Résultats définitifs, referendum du 4 octobre 2020, Nouvelle-Calédonie.* Haut-Commissariat de la République en Nouvelle-Calédonie. <https://www.nouvelle-caledonie.gouv.fr/content/download/6849/53341/file/R%C3%A9f%C3%A9rendum%20du%204%20octobre%202020%20-%20R%C3%A9sultat%20d%C3%A9finitifs.pdf>. Accessed: 11.04.2021.

The right to participate in a referendum doesn't apply to all citizens. One needs to meet, among other things, the following conditions:

- be born before the 1st of January 1989 and live in New Caledonia between 1988 and 1998;
- be admitted to participate in public consultation of November 8, 1998, which resulted in the acceptance of the Numéa Accord;
- prove 20-year period of uninterrupted residence in the territory of New Caledonia on the day of the referendum and no later than on December 31, 2014¹¹.

The supporters of independence for New Caledonia, mostly the Kanak people, as well as the Customary Senate (fr. *le Sénat Coutumier*)¹² which consists of 16 local politicians¹³ advocate for changing the date. **The Senate justifies their decision the necessity of announcing Kanak national mourning for the victims of COVID-19**¹⁴. The mourning would be introduced with a retrospective date; it would last from September 6, 2021 to September 6, 2022. For that reason, the Customary Senate issued a letter to the president of France, Emmanuel Macron in which they emphasised the inability to hold the referendum under the condition of the national mourning as well as of the existing restrictions that were introduced due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which prevents an information and election campaign from being carried out. As it is written, the death of nearly 280 citizens of New Caledonia (from September to the first half of November 2021)¹⁵ caused 'trauma' and 'psychological shock' to the community (fr. *on est traumatisés, il y a eu un choc psychologique*)¹⁶. In the letter they also raised the important question of consequences of the referendum results if it is held on December 12. According to the Senate, regardless of the

¹¹ Loi n° 99-209 organique du 19 mars 1999 relative à la Nouvelle-Calédonie (1), NOR : INTX9800159L.

¹² D. Chaillot. *Nouvelle-Calédonie : Le Sénat coutumier déclare un deuil Kanak d'un an et demande le report du referendum*. Outremers 360°. <https://outremers360.com/bassin-pacifique-appli/nouvelle-caledonie-le-senat-coutumier-declare-un-deuil-kanak-dun-an-et-demande-le-report-du-referendum>. Accessed: 09.11.2021.

¹³ *Les 16 sénateurs coutumiers*. Sénat Coutumier de la Nouvelle Calédonie. <https://www.senat-coutumier.nc/le-senat-coutumier/les-16-senateurs-coutumiers>. Accessed: 04.11.2021.

¹⁴ In October 2021, Louis Mapou, president of the New Caledonia government, announced that 56% of COVID-19 victims were Kanaks.

¹⁵ *Info Covid-19*. Gouvernement de la Nouvelle-Calédonie. <https://gouv.nc/coronavirus>. Accessed: 20.11.2021.

¹⁶ *Le sénat coutumier décrète un « deuil kanak » d'une année et se positionne en faveur du report du referendum*. Nouvelle-Calédonie la 1ère. <https://la1ere.francetvinfo.fr/nouvellecaledonie/le-senat-coutumier-decrete-un-deuil-kanak-d-une-annee-et-se-positionne-en-faveur-du-report-du-referendum-1149691.html>. Accessed: 09.11.2021.

referendum results, talks concerning Kanak customs and identity as well as the extension of political pluralism which stems from the Nouméa Accord of 1998, need to be resumed.

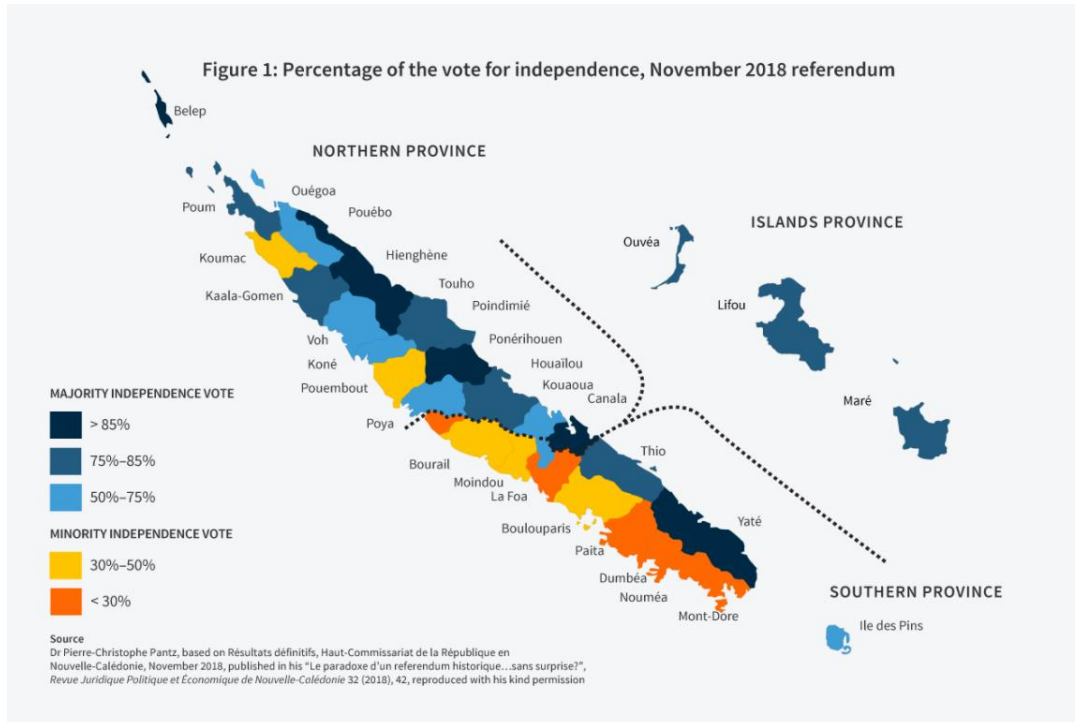
The supporters of independence call the people not to participate in the December referendum¹⁷. Formed in 1984, **the Kanak Socialist National Liberation Front** (fr. *le Front de libération nationale kanak et socialiste*, FLNKS) **announced on October 20, 2021, that the referendum results would not be recognized if the currently set date was maintained**¹⁸. In their response FLNKS, mentioned the October 2019 statement of Édouard Philippe, the prime minister of France between 2017 and 2020, in which he declared that the third referendum may be organised between September 2021 and August 2022 so that the date of national elections, for instance, the presidential elections planned for April 10, 2022, could be clearly distinguished from local votes. FLNSK emphasised that the aforementioned decision is immutable. Furthermore, the members of the Front threatened that if the third referendum was held on December 12, 2021, they would point out the many mistakes France made or let happen throughout their presence in New Caledonia.

The results of previous referenda clearly depict the ethnic divide in New Caledonia. **The Kanak people, living in the South Province or the Loyalty Islands Province, mostly vote for New Caledonia to gain full sovereignty in hopes to break up with the colonial heritage**; whereas the descendants of the settlers' from Europe and Asia want the territory to remain part of France for the sake the many benefits that come with it, like having a European passport. What is important, **in February 2021, for the first time since the Numéa Accord, the independence supporters won the majority in the collegial executive body.**

¹⁷ *Nouvelle-Calédonie : un référendum incertain en raison du Covid-19*. France24. <https://www.france24.com/fr/%C3%A9missions/outre-mer/20211025-nouvelle-cal%C3%A9donie-un-r%C3%A9f%C3%A9rendum-incertain-en-raison-du-covid-19>. Accessed: 03.11.2021.

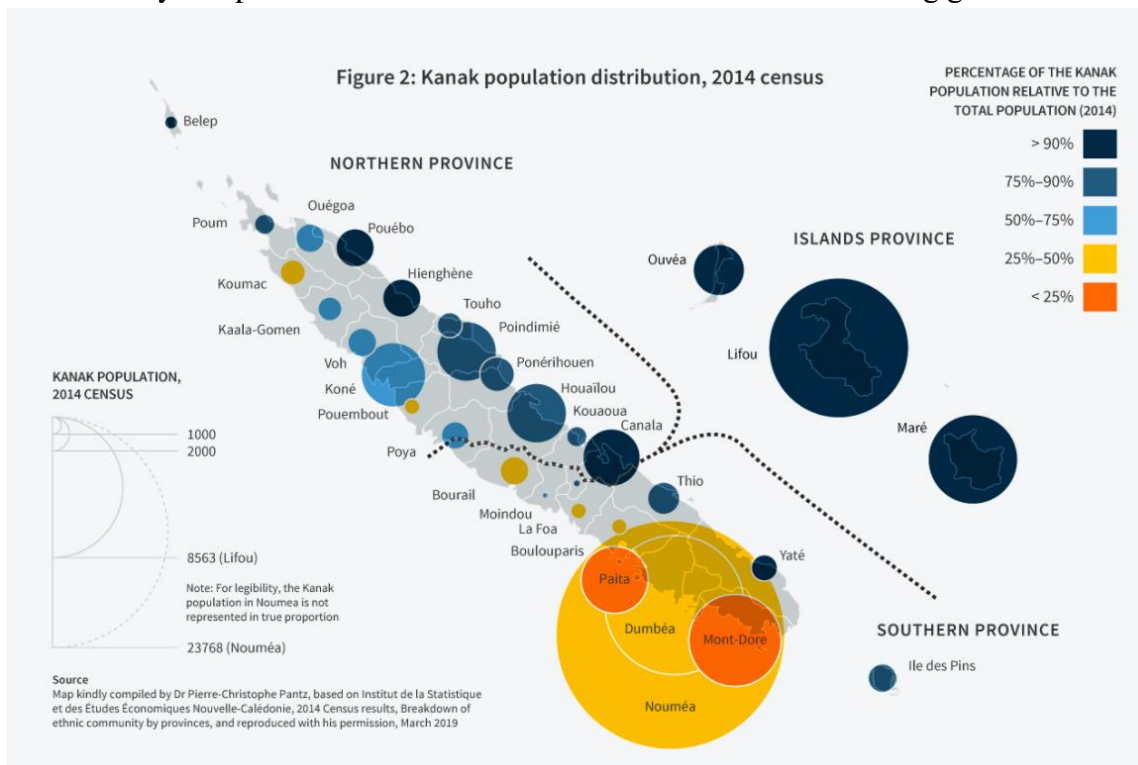
¹⁸ *Nouvelle-Calédonie : les indépendantistes «ne respecteront pas» le résultat du référendum*. Le Parisien. <https://www.leparisien.fr/politique/nouvelle-caledonie-les-independantistes-ne-respecteront-pas-le-resultat-du-referendum-09-11-2021-F7MBJYN52VBHRASJV7LS36R5NA.php>. Accessed: 09.11.2021.

Rys. 1: procentowy rozkład głosów za niepodległością w referendum z listopada 2018 r.:



Źródło: *New Caledonia's Independence Referendum: Local and Regional Implications*, Lowy Institute, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/new-caledonia-s-independence-referendum-local-and-regional-implications>, dostęp: 21.11.2021.

Rys. 2: procentowe rozmieszczenie ludności Kanaków według gmin:



Źródło: *New Caledonia's Independence Referendum: Local and Regional Implications*, Lowy Institute, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/new-caledonia-s-independence-referendum-local-and-regional-implications>, dostęp: 21.11.2021.

French Polynesia in the face of the referendum results

Without a doubt, the upcoming referendum results are going to affect French Polynesia. The French Polynesia islands were gradually attached. Since 1842 they were under the French protectorate, since 1880 they were a French colony, and since 1946 they were an overseas territory. Finally, as a result of a constitutional amendment introduced in March 2003, they became an overseas community with a wide-ranging autonomy in terms of, i.e., appointing representatives or making decisions concerning foreign policy and the defence.

Contrary to New Caledonia, there were no penal colonies in French Polynesia. However, a total of 193 atmospheric and underground atomic tests were carried out there between 1966 and 1996¹⁹; they led to severe pollution of its waters and soil²⁰. As a consequence, according to the data provided by the Ministry of Health and Prevention of French Polynesia, there was an increase in cancer reports from 93 in 1992 to 467 in 2017²¹. By March 2017, 63 Polynesians suffering from the effects of the atomic tests received compensation for the diseases caused by the radioactive contamination. It is estimated that 110 000 more people are entitled to compensation²². In 2018, at the UN, Oscar Temaru, the head of the *Tāvini huirā'atira* political party (eng. *People's Servant* or *Serve the People*) and a former president, announced that a complaint against France for committing crimes against humanity in the region has been submitted to the International Criminal Court.

Both New Caledonia and French Polynesia figure on the UN list of Non-Self-Governing Territories. The territories were first added to the list in 1946; however, removed a year later. New Caledonia was reinstated in 1986, and French Polynesia in 2013. Still, in 1946, according to the UN, there were 72 non-self-governing territories, now – 17. **Under Chapter XI of the Charter of the United Nations, territories with such status should be decolonized, as New Caledonia politicians in favour of gaining full sovereignty remind.**

¹⁹ K. Feldmann. *La Polynésie marquée à jamais par les essais nucléaires français*. Reporterre. <https://reporterre.net/La-polynesie-marquee-a-jamais-par-les-essais>. Accessed: 10.11.2021.

²⁰ *Rapport sur les incidences environnementales et sanitaires des essais nucléaires effectués par la France entre 1960 et 1996 et éléments de comparaison avec les essais des autres puissances nucléaires*. Office parlementaire d'évaluation des choix scientifiques et technologiques. <https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/legislatures/11/pdf/rap-oecst/i3571.pdf>. Accessed: 10.11.2021.

²¹ K. Feldmann, op. cit.

²² N. Bérubé. *La France aurait caché une « contamination massive »*. La Presse. <https://www.lapresse.ca/international/asia-et-oceanie/2021-03-11/essais-nucleaires-en-polynesie-francaise/la-france-auroit-cache-une-contamination-massive.php>. Accessed: 10.11.2021.

A part of Polynesian society supports New Caledonia's pursuit of independence. **Oscar Temaru**, who is involved in the struggle for independence of French Polynesia ever since the 1970's, speaks openly on the subject. What is more, he **calls for the organisation an independence referendum in French Polynesia**²³. In October 2021 Carlyle Corbin, who is a UN expert and correspondent of the *Tāvini huirā'atira* political party, announced that the existing 'internal reforms in territories such as French Polynesia are not part of the decolonization process, since the only real decolonization process is that under the supervision of the UN'²⁴.

Without a doubt, the results of the upcoming referendum in New Caledonia are going to influence the situation in French Polynesia. If New Caledonia is separated from France, the latter will deal with losing influence in the region. Moreover, there will be a gradual, dangerous for France, intensification of efforts to gain independence among the people of French Polynesia, encouraged by the positive outcomes of the actions of New Caledonia citizens. **The basis for a possible referendum in French Polynesia is the decision of the United Nations to reinstate it on the list of Non-Self-Governing Territories in 2013.**

The role of France in the Indo-Pacific region

The results of the 2018 and 2020 referenda proved persisting or intensifying ethnic divisions in New Caledonia. The potential independence of the territory may cause dangerous consequences in the non-military dimension. **The chances of New Caledonia gaining independence are big as long as the Kanak people**, who are encouraged to boycott the vote, **do not resign from participating in the referendum.** However, it comes with the challenge of establishing a new system in New Caledonia, for which local politicians may not be fully prepared.

France plays a special role in the region in terms of regional security. The enhanced military presence of French units in South Pacific guarantees the country i.e., the ability to defend its own interests and to exert influence in the neighbouring countries; it also provides it with an opportunity to be a constant, close observer of the dynamically developing markets in Asia

²³ A. Samoyeau. *Oscar Temaru : « Organisons un référendum »*. Tahiti Infos. https://www.tahiti-infos.com/Oscar-Temaru-Organisons-un-referendum_a194939.html. Accessed: 10.11.2021.

²⁴ *Quatrième Commission: retour des pétitionnaires, venus s'exprimer sur la décolonisation de plusieurs territoires non autonomes*. Nations Unies Couverture des réunions & communiqués de presse. <https://www.un.org/press/fr/2021/cpsd730.doc.htm>. Accessed: 18.11.2021.

and the Pacific. **If New Caledonia gains independence and if independence movements in French Polynesia progress, France will lose its position in the Indo-Pacific, which will directly affect the balance of power in the region.** Furthermore, **it will influence the perception of the country in the region as well as internationally; it may weaken the image of France, challenge its role and importance in other regions, and result in an increase cyber-attack,** most notably – disinformation. On the other hand, **independent New Caledonia may face increased activities of other external actors, particularly China, which may exert strong financial and political pressures to fill the gap made by France.** Until 2021, actions of PRC proved to be effective in the Republic of Vanuatu, the Republic of Fiji or the Independent State of Samoa, which were induced to join the One Belt, One Road initiative through China's checkbook diplomacy. Beijing is already one of the most important trading partners of New Caledonia and the most active player in the Pacific region. Previous attempts to gain independence have temporarily deprived China of any prospects of expanding its influence.

It is worth stressing that the uninhabited New Caledonia islands of Hunter and Matthew are the subject of disputes between France and the Republic of Vanuatu, supported by PRC. In 2018, information appeared about Beijing's efforts to open military bases in the Vanuatu archipelago; they were denied by both parties. Still, China provides financial and military support to the Republic of Vanuatu, i.e., by assuming its public debt²⁵. **If New Caledonia gains sovereignty, China will intensify its activities in relation to the territory in order to expand its influence in the region.**

Conclusion and recommendation

France is the most active European country in the Indo-Pacific region. Despite the tensions caused by the sudden announcement of AUKUS as well as the risk of independence for New Caledonia, France will not withdraw from Indo-Pacific or reduce the economic and military support provided to local nations so far. The presence of France in the region has great value not only for the country itself but also for the European interests. The debate concerning France's future in the region is of particular importance in relation to the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections in 2022.

²⁵ *Les bases militaires ultramarines françaises apparaissent vulnérables*. IFRI. <https://www.ifri.org/fr/espace-media/lifri-medias/bases-militaires-ultramarines-francaises-apparaissent-vulnerables>. Accessed: 17.11.2021.

Due to the current events, France should remain neutral on the decision of the people of New Caledonia, increase all kinds of aid for the region as well as encourage local authorities of its overseas territories, in order to be involved in regional agreements to strengthen its role and to maintain its influences in a situation unfavourable for the state of New Caledonia regaining independence. As a result of the aforementioned measures, France may come across as a neighbouring country, balancing American and Chinese influences, which is of particular importance for the dialogue with partners.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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