

France, Australia and the First Nations foreign policy

by Nic Maclellan

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Australian Minister for Defence Richard Marles and Minister for Foreign Affairs Penny Wong with their French counterparts

Photo Credit: Senator Penny Wong/Twitter

Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong and Defence Minister Richard Marles have just met their French counterparts Catherine Colonna and Sébastien Lecornu in Paris, at a “2+2” ministerial meeting to rebuild the France-Australia strategic partnership in the Indo-Pacific region.

But what does this engagement mean for the Albanese government’s “First Nations foreign policy”, and the rights of colonised peoples in France’s Pacific dependencies?

As she stood before the UN General Assembly last September, **Senator Wong proclaimed** that “as Foreign Minister, I am determined to see First Nations perspectives at the heart of Australian foreign policy”. Those words have resonated in neighbouring islands such as New Caledonia, Bougainville and West Papua, given the central principle of any First Nations perspective – and international human rights law – is the right to self-determination.

Despite this objective, the Labor government seems to be privileging its geopolitical relations with France over its relationship with indigenous peoples, such as the Kanak of New Caledonia. As the Australian and French ministers met in Paris on 30 January to repair the rupture created by AUKUS, the issues of First Nations rights and France’s decolonisation obligations in the Pacific were not on the agenda.

Even before their electoral victory in May 2022, key members of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) were seeking to **rebuild the battered strategic partnership with France**, disrupted by AUKUS and Scott Morrison’s submarine fiasco. Congratulating Emmanuel Macron on his re-election to the French presidency, ALP deputy leader **Richard Marles proclaimed**: “France is our neighbour. France is a Pacific country. And as such, France deeply matters to Australia.”

The notion of France as a Pacific country surprises many of our closest island

neighbours. While welcoming engagement with Paris, members of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) see France as a European country and a colonial power in the Pacific, still administering territories seized in the nineteenth century. Indeed, President Macron's **Indo-Pacific strategy** is based on maintaining its colonial administration in New Caledonia, French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna.

The **communiqué of the 2+2 meeting** promotes “a strong Franco-Australian partnership to preserve the international order based on the rule of law and to work together to maintain an open, stable, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region where sovereignty and international law are respected”.

But despite Australia's First Nations foreign policy and this supposed commitment to international law and sovereignty, the communiqué makes no mention of **France's obligations towards decolonisation**, as an administering power of non-self-governing territories in the Pacific.

In contrast, MSG states such as Fiji and Papua New Guinea are members of the United Nations Special Committee on Decolonisation, and give **diplomatic and political support** to independence movements in the French Pacific dependencies. Last June's French legislative elections saw an unprecedented **electoral victory for the independence party Tavini Huira'atira**, which won all three seats allocated to French Polynesia in the National Assembly in Paris. In Noumea, President Louis Mapou is the **first pro-independence Kanak politician to lead the government** of New Caledonia in 40 years.

Can Australia rebuild a strategic partnership with France at the same time as independence movements in our closest neighbours are seeking a new political status? Australia's Minister for the Pacific Pat Conroy believes it's possible, telling me: “We're focused on rebuilding our relationship not just with France, but with all of the Pacific. We want to improve relations with all Pacific countries and territories as well as with the Government of France and we're confident that we can do both of those.”

It's a big call. At his first Pacific Islands Forum meeting last July, **New Caledonia's President Louis Mapou said**: “There is no doubt that France needs New Caledonia and French Polynesia for its Indo-Pacific strategy, facing other major powers in the region. But this is not our project – we want to integrate with our neighbours in the Pacific region.”

Despite this, France is moving away from its decolonisation obligations under international law. The Macron administration is considering changes to the French Constitution, which may roll back some autonomy measures granted to New

Caledonia in recent decades.

Meanwhile, the Kanak independence coalition Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS) is pushing for independence in September 2025. **FLNKS spokesperson Daniel Goa has said:** “Kanaky-New Caledonia is not a French land as some people think, but a land of Oceania. We no longer want to be stooges of ‘France Pacific’ and the nebulous Indo-Pacific axis.”

These issues were not addressed in the 2+2 meeting. The **final communiqué** focused on a range of areas for Franco-Australian cooperation, from manufacturing artillery shells for Ukraine, to action on climate change and improved programs for education, culture and people-to-people links. A central focus of activity, however, is extending the military partnership in the Pacific, “to deepen operational and logistical cooperation to support their commitment to shared interests in the Indo-Pacific”.

Australian Defence Minister Marles stressed the aim of the talks was to “grow and deepen the relationship between our two defence forces”.

France will host a South Pacific Defence Ministers’ Meeting in New Caledonia in 2023. There will now be an annual dialogue between Chiefs of Defence and a regional cooperation plan between the Forces Armées de la Nouvelle-Calédonie (FANC) and the Australian Defence Force (ADF). The communiqué notes that the ADF and FANC will have “mutual access to French and Australian defence infrastructure and step up joint exercising to strengthen interoperability in the Indo-Pacific”, including FANC joining Australia’s Talisman Sabre wargames for the first time this year.

The Australian government faces a dilemma as it strengthens ties with Washington, Paris and London, anxious about Chinese influence and seeking to be the security partner of choice in the Pacific Islands. It seems that the government’s focus on France as a geopolitical partner is overriding any public commitment to self-determination and decolonisation. Surely these principles are at the heart of a truly “First Nations foreign policy” – but will the Australian government ever speak out about France’s ongoing colonial role in the Pacific?

Author/s:

Nic Maclellan

Nic Maclellan is a correspondent for Islands Business and a contributor to Pacnews, Inside Story and other regional media. He was awarded the 2015 “Outstanding Contribution to the Sector” award by the Australian Council for International Development and the Walkley Foundation’s 2020 Sean Dorney Grant for Pacific Journalism.

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