

11. France's maritime security cooperation in the Pacific

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- France plays a significant role in Pacific maritime security, particularly through the active participation of its overseas territories and the contribution of its stationed armed forces to regional cooperation initiatives.
- However, uncertainties about the degree to which local authorities can independently or collaboratively exercise their competencies in maritime security and regional cooperation complicate France's role and contributions.
- Beyond its military presence, France can make substantial contributions to ocean governance in the Pacific. Its expertise and resources can support sustainable management of marine resources, enhance regulatory

frameworks, and promote cooperation on environmental conservation and climate resilience across the region.

France, the only EU state with overseas territories in both the Indian Ocean and the Pacific (New Caledonia, Wallis & Futuna, French Polynesia, Clipperton) was, in 2019, the first European country to adopt an **Indo-Pacific strategy**.³⁴⁵ France's Pacific territories encompass a vast Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of approximately 7 million km², more than 65% of the country's total global EEZ. Therefore, maritime security lies at the core of France's Indo-Pacific approach, with a priority concern to ensure the protection of its resource-rich maritime domain from Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, and other crimes at

sea, while contributing to regional stability and the rule of law at sea.

French overseas territories represent both a responsibility and a strategic asset for France, enabling it to contribute effectively to regional maritime security. In particular, French armed forces stationed in the region have a long record of cooperation in the neighbourhood. That said, the existing ambiguities surrounding the extent to which local authorities can exercise their competencies and autonomy—either independently or in coordination—regarding maritime security and regional cooperation policies may complicate France's contributions. Beyond its military role, France can also provide a significant contribution to ocean governance in the Pacific.



France as a significant maritime security provider in the Pacific

France maintains permanent military forces based in its overseas territories: with 1,650 personnel stationed in New Caledonia and 1,180 in French Polynesia. These forces are tasked with maritime surveillance and policing, crisis prevention, civil security, and participate in regional cooperation initiatives, offering support to Pacific Island countries to monitor their EEZs, and providing logistics for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR).³⁴⁶ The **Armed Forces of New Caledonia** (FANC) and **Armed Forces in French Polynesia** (FAPF) possess significant military assets comprising surveillance frigates, patrol ships, aircraft and helicopters.³⁴⁷ Although these capacities are aging and limited by the vastness of the region they cover, they are currently undergoing modernization.³⁴⁸ New **Oceanic Multimission Patrol Vessels** (POMs) will enhance the effectiveness of surveillance in the EEZ. Four units will be deployed in the Pacific by 2025, with the first two already stationed in New Caledonia and French Polynesia. Additionally, new patrol aircraft will be introduced by 2030 to allow more extensive and efficient coverage.³⁴⁹ This increased capacity will also bolster regional maritime security partnerships.³⁵⁰

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France collaborates as a member of the **Pacific Quad** with Australia, New Zealand, and the United States (US) in maritime surveillance operations in the EEZs of Pacific Island countries in support of the **Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency** (FFA). Since 1992, French forces have been coordinating with their Australian and New Zealand counterparts

under the **FRANZ arrangement** to provide HADR to Pacific Island countries, as extreme weather events increase due to climate change.³⁵¹ The armed forces of New Caledonia and French Polynesia alternately hold two annual multinational joint exercises focusing on HADR and known as 'Marara' and 'Croix du Sud'. France also participates in joint naval exercises, such as **Exercise Rim of the Pacific** (RIMPAC), and engages in defence dialogues such as the **Western Pacific Naval Symposium** and **South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting**. Since 2021, France has been holding an annual **South Pacific Coast Guard** seminar, alternating between New Caledonia and French Polynesia as host locations. This initiative seeks to enhance regional coordination among France, the Pacific Islands, and Pacific Quad partners, while protecting the sovereignty of Pacific Island countries. Despite the setback of the AUKUS deal in 2021, by which Australia suddenly backtracked on a submarine deal with France to acquire nuclear-powered submarines from the US and the United Kingdom,³⁵² the operational cooperation between French and Australian forces in their neighbourhood never ceased.³⁵³ France is, however, reluctant to associate with certain US-led initiatives, such as the **Partners in the Blue Pacific**, as it views them as overly antagonistic toward China.

The tricky coordination between France and its overseas territories of the Pacific

French Pacific overseas territories enjoy a degree of autonomy that allows their local governments to manage certain competencies, including environmental protection, the development of maritime resources, as well as regional policy. Hence, in 2016, New Caledonia and French Polynesia joined the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) as non-state members. France, for its part, is a Forum Dialogue partner. As the French central government retains control over defence and foreign policy for its overseas territories, it creates ambiguities regarding France's posture and complicates New Caledonia and French Polynesia's roles as Forum members, affecting their agency in regional initiatives and relationships with other members.

For instance, local governments are involved in fisheries management and environmental conservation, while national bodies contribute to broader maritime security, disaster response, and international maritime cooperation. This dual structure can complicate responses to maritime challenges, as it requires continuous alignment between local priorities and national policies.

The coordination between the French central government and its Pacific territories' local authorities has been complicated by the enduring tensions over progress on decolonisation, nuclear testing in the Pacific, and ongoing discussions on future institutional status of 'Le Caillou'.³⁵⁴ The outbreak of violence in New Caledonia in 2024, sparked by protests against the reform of the electoral body, has triggered a severe political and economic crisis in the territory.³⁵⁵ The question of decolonisation represents an ongoing vulnerability for France in the region³⁵⁶ as these territories are part of sub-regional groups that assert the identity and independence of their members and tend to challenge the legitimacy of the French presence. There are also growing concerns about foreign interference and attempts to influence or gain economic and political footholds in France's overseas territories.

This violence and uncertainty further erode regional trust and may hinder France's maritime security ambitions for the region, in particular, President Macron's plans to substantially enhance the New Caledonia military base with additional soldiers, a defence and security training academy in HADR, and an emergency response coordination hub.³⁵⁷ The US\$245 million initiative to enhance regional maritime security capabilities has potential to bolster France's reputation among civil security and defence forces in the region.³⁵⁸ However, the current instability casts doubt on the timing of these enhancements.

The non-military contribution of France

Constant patrols by armed forces stationed in Noumea and Papeete, complemented by satellite monitoring, have made cases of IUU fishing in France's EEZ almost non-existent. Hence, France has extensive experience in developing a policy and legal framework

to regulate fishing activities, as well as enhancing maritime monitoring, surveillance, and enforcement of the rule of law at sea. In particular, France is at the forefront of the **30x30 initiative**, which aims to protect 30% of the world's oceans by 2030, by establishing **Marine Protected Areas** (MPA) and other tools.

The **Coral Sea Natural Park** in New Caledonia, covering 1.3 million km², exemplifies the importance it places on large MPAs for preserving marine ecosystems. In French Polynesia, local authorities have come with the original model of 'managed marine areas' to reconcile protection and responsible exploitation, after extensive consultation with coastal community to incorporate Local and Indigenous Knowledge.³⁵⁹

Following the **Marquesas World Heritage designation** this year, further French Polynesian MPA announcements may be on the horizon as France hosts the **United Nations Ocean Conference** in 2025.³⁶⁰ France could, therefore, share its expertise in establishing, regulating, and implementing science-based MPAs with Pacific Island countries that are developing their national marine policies.³⁶¹

Ocean governance, science, and conservation present opportunities for external partners, such as France, to leverage strategic advantages by providing expertise and technical assistance in accessing valuable maritime data and developing comprehensive climate mitigation strategies. The French Development Agency committed \$AUS2.3 billion to its **Three Oceans Strategy**. Key initiatives are the KIWA funded projects operating in collaboration with the regional institutions - the **Pacific Community** (SPC) and the **Pacific Regional Environment Programme** (SPREP) - for nature-based solutions and regional climate resilience.³⁶² France is also actively developing scientific cooperation for the ocean, under SPC MOUs with the 2022 **French National Institute for Ocean Science and Technology** (IFREMER) and the 2023 **French Naval Hydrographic and Oceanographic Service** (SHOM) on ocean forecasting and warning, safety of navigation, oceanographic data acquisition and sharing.³⁶³

Therefore, France has much to offer in terms of maritime security in the region, as its approach reflects its broad understanding of the concept, encompassing a diverse range of concerns, both military and civil, aimed at ensuring the safety of navigation, protection of national territories, and environmental preservation. This includes managing natural and man-made hazards and securing maritime routes vital for global trade, peace and economic stability.

