

## Pacific Partners Outlook

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### France: The Other Pacific Power

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When discussing Washington's partners in the Pacific, the conversation usually focuses on coordination with Australia and New Zealand. What is often overlooked is the role France plays in the region. The fact that France holds three territories in the South Pacific—New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, and French Polynesia—accounting for about one third of the Pacific Islands' combined exclusive economic zone (EEZ), is frequently forgotten.

France's territories have historically been isolated from the rest of the region by a linguistic barrier and their unique trading relationship with Europe. France also limited its own opportunities to engage the independent states of the Pacific by directing aid exclusively to its territories. This situation began to change in 1996 with France's decision to cease nuclear testing in the Pacific—long a point of contention with the rest of the region. France has signaled a willingness to participate in regional politics and has become a force to watch as it more actively engages the independent island states and reaches new milestones in decolonization.

The United States' relationship with France in the Pacific remains secondary to its partnerships with Australia and New Zealand. Few U.S. government statements even mention France as a Pacific partner, despite the two countries' strong trans-Atlantic cooperation. There are three main reasons for this. First, France's Pacific colonies are isolated from

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*French and U.S. servicemen commemorate the Fourth of July at a monument to U.S. soldiers who fought on New Caledonia during World War II. The U.S. and French militaries maintain limited cooperation in the Pacific in fisheries management, disaster relief, and other areas. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/usnavy/5913204562/>*

primary U.S. concerns in the region—too far away from the United States’ territories and associated states to the north, too stable to engender concern, and historically too detached from the rest of the region.

Second, France lacks significant strategic resources in the region, particularly since most of the French military presence left the Pacific once nuclear testing ceased. And third, engaging too closely could shine a light on the United States’ own controversial history of nuclear testing and relations with its Pacific territories.

U.S.-French cooperation in the Pacific has mostly been limited to the Quadrilateral Defense Coordination Group, in which the United States, Australia, and New Zealand work with France on shared interests such as [fisheries management](#). France also joined Australia, New Zealand, and other partner countries in contributing personnel to the U.S. Navy-led Pacific Partnership annual missions in 2011 and 2012, which provided aid and health care to nations across the Pacific and Southeast Asia. Pacific Partnership 2013 will see the inclusion of personnel from the [French Armed Forces New Caledonia](#).

But the limited attention the United States pays to French activities in the Pacific needs to change. Although France has common interests with Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, it has taken an independent approach to policy in the region, particularly in its engagement with Fiji. While the United States, Australia, and New Zealand have sought to pressure Fiji via isolation since its 2009 military coup, France has been more forthcoming in its engagement. France has actively supported the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), [hosting a mission in New Caledonia](#) in August. The MSG offers Fiji a partial alternative to the U.S.-favored Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), from which Fiji was suspended in 2009. France in October [also began to strengthen trade ties with Fiji](#).

In addition, the French territories in the Pacific are slowly gaining more autonomy, which will force the United States to pay them greater attention. December 6 marked the start of the final stage of the Noumea Accord, which dictates a staged and irreversible transfer of sovereignty from France to New Caledonia, culminating in a referendum on full independence in 2014 or 2018. The region is carefully watching the implementation of the accord, as it could offer an important precedent for French Polynesia and perhaps even the United States’ Pacific territories.

## France: The Other Pacific Power *(continued)*

If the referendum produces a fully independent New Caledonia, it could significantly alter the power dynamics in Melanesia. The increasing autonomy of French territories in the Pacific will lessen France's influence in the region, but it could also make French policy more independent and less likely to follow Australia's and New Zealand's lead.

The need to engage France more actively has not gone unnoticed in Canberra and Wellington. With disagreements about nuclear testing swept aside, Australia and New Zealand have rapidly improved relations with France. Recent signs suggest the three are pursuing closer ties at least in part as a reaction to the growing number of new actors entering the region. As developed democracies, France, Australia, and New Zealand share similar interests in the Pacific, including boosting stability, international norms of human rights, and economic prosperity.

Australia and France reached an important landmark on January 19, 2012, with the signing of a [joint statement of strategic partnership](#) that gave significant focus to their cooperation in the South Pacific. The document touches on all aspects of the bilateral relationship, but most notably it reaffirms shared global interests, pledges a joint commitment to Pacific institutions, and promises closer coordination on disaster relief, security, and aid in the region.

Other recent signs of warming ties with France included the development of [institutional relationships](#) between French and Australian universities and [strengthened ties](#) between New Zealand and French Pacific science agencies in 2011. Australia and New Zealand offered a particularly controversial signal of their ties to France in August, helping to [block French Polynesia's bid](#) for reinstatement to the United Nations decolonization list.

Not only is France the less-talked-about power in the Pacific; it is also a force in transition. How it handles the looming decolonization of New Caledonia will have broad implications for how it is perceived in the region and how long it will maintain a regional presence. But no matter what, the shifts in French influence will alter the landscape of power in the South Pacific and affect the interests of the United States and its partners. ▲



*Papeete, the capital of French Polynesia (Tahiti). If the Noumea Accord is successfully implemented, it may provide a model for the decolonization of French Polynesia. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/psykedelic61/7910201014/>*

# The Week That Was



*Australian currency. The Australian reserve bank is cutting rates in order to stave of economic stagnation. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/astro-dudes/913087028/>*

## AUSTRALIA

**Central bank cuts rate amid slowing economy.** The Reserve Bank of Australia December 4 cut its key interest rate, the official cash rate, for the sixth time this year, this time to a historic low of 3 percent. The decision was widely expected as Australia faces a slowing economy. The country's mining boom appears to have peaked earlier than expected and a strong Australian dollar is limiting investment in other sectors of the economy.

**Asylum seekers on Nauru protest detention.** Fifteen Iranian asylum seekers being held at Australia's controversial detention center on Nauru were charged in November with causing about \$24,000 of damage to the camp while protesting their detention. More than 30 asylum seekers meanwhile remain on a hunger strike, calling on authorities to close the facility and process their status as refugees. Human rights groups, including Amnesty International, allege that the detention center on Nauru is cruel, inhumane, and degrading for asylum seekers.

**Australia abstains from Palestine vote.** Australia November 29 abstained from a UN vote to upgrade Palestine's status in the organization to that of a nonmember observer state. The measure passed overwhelmingly despite opposition from the United States and Israel. Prime Minister Julia Gillard had hoped to oppose the bid, but her cabinet, led by Foreign Minister Bob Carr, argued that opposition to Palestinian statehood was no longer feasible. The government chose to abstain as a compromise.

**Australia and Papua New Guinea hold joint ministerial forum.** Foreign Minister Bob Carr joined Papua New Guinea (PNG) officials December 6 for a joint ministerial forum in Port Moresby, PNG. The meeting focused on immigration, defense cooperation, the negotiation of an economic cooperation treaty, and the establishment of a sovereign wealth fund for PNG. The visit marked Carr's first to PNG since assuming his position in March.

**Australia given permission to rescue asylum seekers in Indonesian waters.** Australia and Indonesia December 11 inked a deal allowing Australian planes to enter Indonesian airspace without prior permission in order to rescue asylum seekers in danger. Most asylum seekers bound for Australia leave illegally from Indonesia via boat, and hundreds drowned in 2012 during the crossing. The agreement is expected to help cut the number of deaths, as Australian forces assisting poorly equipped Indonesian rescuers had previously been slowed by the need to obtain permission from the Indonesian government before launching rescue operations.

## NEW ZEALAND

**Latest round of Trans-Pacific Partnership talks held in Auckland.**

Negotiators met in Auckland from December 3 to 12 for the 15th round of Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations. Canada and Mexico joined the negotiations for the first time, increasing the group's membership to 11 countries. Differences over state-owned enterprises, intellectual property rights, and tariffs on agricultural goods reportedly remained sticking points between the parties. The talks sparked protests from New Zealand industry and anti-globalization groups concerned with having a stake in the negotiations.

**Wellington hosts *The Hobbit* world premiere.** The world premiere of *The Hobbit*, the New Zealand-filmed prequel to the blockbuster *Lord of the Rings* series, was held November 28 in Wellington. Roughly 100,000 locals lined the streets to see stars including Elijah Woods, Hugo Weaving, and James Cameron walk down the red carpet. *The Lord of the Rings* films have provided an important boost to New Zealand's film and tourism industries, and *The Hobbit* is expected to continue that trend.

## PACIFIC ISLANDS

**Vanuatu prime minister avoids no-confidence vote.** Vanuatu prime minister Sato Kilman December 10 appointed an opposition lawmaker as agriculture and fisheries minister in order to avoid facing a no-confidence vote by the country's legislature. Kilman maintains a tenuous grip on power after cobbling together a multiparty ruling coalition November 19, three weeks after the country's general elections. Because no party holds a clear majority in parliament, observers expect Kilman to face another no-confidence vote in 2013.

**Fisheries commission fails to protect bigeye tuna during contentious meeting.** The Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission held its ninth meeting December 2-7 in Manila, Philippines, but failed to reach a much-needed agreement to halt overfishing of bigeye tuna. Discussions grew heated as delegates sought to develop new rules governing the Pacific's vast fisheries, particularly related to the unsustainable use of fish-aggregating devices and the conservation of threatened species. The commission did agree to increase the use of vessel monitoring systems to fight illegal fishing and offer greater protection for whale sharks. The commission includes 24 countries and the European Union.



*The set of Hobbiton from The Lord of the Rings remains a popular tourist destination in New Zealand. The Hobbit is expected to continue the tourism boom from the films. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/skellner/4207749955/>.*



*Greenpeace protesters demonstrate against illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing in the Pacific. To curb such practices, the West Central Pacific Fisheries Commission has agreed to track fishing vessels with satellites. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/ekkaia/2092270871/>*



*Papua New Guinea's prime minister, Peter O'Neill, has asked Australia to rethink how it directs its aid to the country. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/comsec/6288380896/>*

**African, Caribbean, Pacific group readmits Fiji; decouples from Pacific Islands Forum.** The 14 Pacific member countries of the African, Caribbean, and Pacific Group of States (ACP) November 21 endorsed Fiji's reinstatement to the group during a meeting in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. The Pacific ACP countries have traditionally held their meetings on the sidelines of the annual Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), from which Fiji was suspended following the country's 2009 military coup. Fiji's interim prime minister, Commodore Frank Bainimarama, had previously taken issue with the PIF's involvement in administering Pacific ACP meetings, which are focused mainly on economic issues. Papua New Guinea has offered to serve as a secretariat for the ACP group to help decouple the two bodies.

**Papua New Guinea asks Australia to rethink its aid policy.** Papua New Guinea (PNG) prime minister Peter O'Neill asked Australia to realign its bilateral aid program during a November 28 state visit to Canberra. He said Australia should move away from small aid programs targeting health and education toward larger infrastructure projects. The O'Neill government's 2013 budget increases government spending on infrastructure by 69 percent. Australian foreign minister Bob Carr, speaking at an Australia-PNG ministerial forum, said the Australian government would consider the request.

**French, New Caledonian officials discuss power transfer from France.** Officials from France and New Caledonia met December 6 in Paris for discussions on the transfer of autonomy to the French territory under the Noumea Accord. The 1998 agreement established a timeline for the phased transfer of power to New Caledonia, with a referendum on outright independence to be held between 2014 and 2018. The meeting, chaired by French prime minister Jean-Marc Ayrault, covered technical details of the handover, including the high cost of living in New Caledonia, and needed legal and commercial reforms. ▲

# Looking Ahead

**An assessment of the U.S. Asia “pivot.”** The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace will host Boston University’s Robert Ross and retired U.S. government China analyst Christopher Clarke December 14 for a discussion of the U.S. “pivot” to the Asia Pacific and its shortcomings. Carnegie’s Michael Swaine will moderate the discussion, titled “A Critical Assessment of U.S. Rebalancing to Asia.” The event will take place from 10 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. at the Carnegie Endowment, 1779 Massachusetts Ave., N.W. Please [click here](#) to register.

**Australia Day champagne reception.** The Australia America Association in Washington will host a champagne reception January 19 to celebrate Australia Day. The holiday commemorates the 1788 declaration of British sovereignty over eastern Australia. For more information about the event and the Australia America Association, please [click here](#).

**Annual Australia, New Zealand studies conference.** Georgetown University will host the 20th annual Australian New Zealand Studies Association of North America Conference from February 14 to 16. The conference is a forum for scholars across a range of disciplines to discuss their research on Australia and New Zealand and the two countries’ relationship to the Asia Pacific region, Canada, and the United States. For more information, please [click here](#).

**U.S.-New Zealand Partnership Forum.** The New Zealand Embassy in Washington will host more than 250 guests for the fifth U.S.-New Zealand Partnership Forum from May 19 to 21, 2013. The embassy plans to bring a large number of New Zealand officials, business leaders, and students to the event. The event will be held at the Grand Hyatt Hotel. More details will be announced closer to the event. For information, please contact Bill Maroni of the U.S.-New Zealand Council at (301) 802-3375. ▲

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