

When China knocks at the door of New Caledonia



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Special Report

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Executive summary

New Caledonia (*Nouvelle-Calédonie*, Kanaky, ‘le Caillou’)—a *sui generis* collectivity of France in the Southwest Pacific—has long been on the radar of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). China has strategic, economic, political, military and ideological interests in the territory, which it describes as ‘strategically important’. A 1987 Chinese Foreign Ministry assessment observed, ‘Once New Caledonia’s national independence movement is taken advantage of by a superpower, changes that are unfavourable to the United States will take place in the strategic balance in the South Pacific.’

Yet, until recently, New Caledonia had very limited relations with China. From 2016, there was a rapid expansion of contacts. A New Caledonian newspaper talked up the possibilities of this in an article headlined ‘When China knocks at the door of the country’. As this report details, China has knocked hard at the door of New Caledonia using foreign interference tactics and, so far, got some of what it wants within a long-term strategy. Local elites

have also actively courted China’s assistance, working with Chinese Communist Party (CCP) front organisations.

New Caledonia is strategically important due to its position near to the sea lines of communication that connect the Indo-Pacific. The territory is rich in mineral resources, notably nickel and cobalt, which are crucial minerals for the military modernisation and expansion project of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). In 2011, New Caledonia’s trade to China was a mere 6.9% of total exports.¹ By 2022, 62.3% of all New Caledonia’s exports, the bulk of which were minerals exports, were going to China.²

France has key military and intelligence installations in New Caledonia. In 2021, a report written for the New Caledonian independence group *Front de libération nationale kanak et socialiste* (FLNKS) proposed that New Caledonia could become a ‘Djibouti of the Pacific’ and generate income by charging rent to foreign troops and hosting military bases from China and other interested states. FLNKS has made it very clear that it



Source: iStockphoto/Rainer Lesniewski

will immediately ramp up relations with the PRC if New Caledonia achieves independence.

This report analyses China – New Caledonia relations, especially China’s alleged foreign interference activities, and considers the extent to which such activities are playing a part in New Caledonia’s changing political status and evolving political and economic policies. It considers the role that China’s New Caledonia interests and policies play in the CCP’s overall foreign and military agenda in the Indo-Pacific, which is currently the main theatre for geostrategic competition.

This report is timely. Successive months of violence and unrest in New Caledonia in 2024, which have been described by commentators as bringing the territory to a state of near civil war,³ have heightened regional and international awareness of the uncertain future of Kanaky / le Caillou, and the role of China in that future. The unrest erupted after France pushed through legislation extending voting rights in the territory.

Assessing the extent of China’s foreign interference in New Caledonia is a legitimate and necessary inquiry. The debate about China’s interests, intentions and activities

in the territory has indeed been, as one commentator lamented, lacking concrete, publicly available evidence until now.⁴ Such public conversation as there has been in New Caledonia has also lacked a thorough knowledge of the role that foreign interference plays in CCP foreign policy, or an assessment of the PRC Government’s overall agenda and interests in New Caledonia. This study aims to help fill that lacuna.

Identifying and addressing China’s foreign interference activities requires both an internal, classified assessment by government agencies and a factual public conversation to raise understanding and provide a basis for action. This report aims to help catalyse a more in-depth conversation on these issues. The report draws on open-source data collection and analysis in Chinese, French and English. It was also informed by interviews and discussions that took place during my visits to New Caledonia and France in 2018, 2019, 2022 and 2023, as well as conversations in New Zealand.

Key findings

1. The future of New Caledonia and the territory’s role in Pacific security is a black swan situation in the Pacific. If New Caledonia were to become independent without France’s continued financial and security support, that would weaken regional security in the Pacific. France makes a significant defence contribution to the FRANZ arrangement and the Pacific Quad. New Caledonian society must have a public conversation about the relationship that the people want with China. French and New Caledonian leaders must find a way to end the social unrest that erupted in May 2024 and plan for a new future.
2. PRC entities and their agents have engaged in a range of foreign interference activities in New Caledonia over five decades, targeting political elites, and attempting to use the ethnic Chinese diaspora and Chinese companies as tools of CCP interests. Some local elites have also courted China’s assistance, working with CCP front organisations. France, and regional partners such as Australia, New Zealand and the US, should bring New Caledonia fully into the Pacific security conversation. This would be a visible demonstration that they support New Caledonian autonomy and resilience and will help better inform New Caledonian society of the risk.
3. New Caledonia is now dependent on the Chinese market for its exports. That’s a strategic risk. The territory needs to rebalance its economy and return to a more diversified portfolio of markets. France, as well as the US, the EU, Australia, New Zealand, Taiwan, Japan and the Republic of Korea, should consider how to help diversify and rebalance the New Caledonian economy to support greater resilience and autonomy.

Introduction

In September 2021, New Caledonian fishing crews trawling for tuna in the northern waters of New Caledonia were startled to see a PLA Navy (PLA-N) electronic reconnaissance vessel operating alongside them.⁵ While sailing in New Caledonia's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) is permitted, news of the sighting of a Chinese Navy ship caused much alarm. The vessel had come from three weeks of cruising along the Australian east coast near sensitive military installations. The sighting of the vessel left many New Caledonians—who were under a strict Covid-19 lockdown and only months away from a critical referendum to decide the territory's political future—feeling understandably vulnerable.

The official response to the spy boat's incursion was muted, but New Caledonian social media lit up with concern. Until recently, the Chinese Navy was seldom seen in South Pacific waters, let alone New Caledonia's large maritime zone. Visits from PLA-N boats have surged in the Pacific in the past few years.⁶ The spy vessel stayed in New Caledonia's EEZ for a week, trailed by a French Navy frigate, then travelled on to New Zealand's EEZ.⁷

In 2016, when relations between China and New Caledonia were expanding rapidly, a New Caledonian newspaper wrote an article headlined “When China knocks at the door of the country”.⁸ As this report will detail, China has certainly knocked hard at the door of New Caledonia and it has got some, but not all, of what it wants. China has a long-term agenda towards the Pacific and the place of New Caledonia within it.

France is acutely aware of China's interest in New Caledonia, as are New Caledonia's local leaders. During his first ever visit to New Caledonia in 2018, French President Emmanuel Macron spoke frankly about his concerns regarding China's activities in the Pacific, stating, ‘In this region of the globe, China is building its hegemony, step by step. It is not a question of raising fears but of looking at reality.’ He acknowledged that China is an economic partner for France, but said, ‘if we do not organise ourselves, [China's power] will soon be a hegemony that will reduce our freedoms and our opportunities, and we will suffer.’⁹ Only days before, while visiting Australia, Macron announced France's new Indo-Pacific strategy to develop the role of France in the area, including countering PRC expansion in the Pacific.¹⁰ Macron's statement signalled a startling

about-face in French policy. Only one year prior, the New Caledonian and French governments had actively encouraged the expansion of economic and political relations with China via a CCP united front group, the New Caledonia – China Friendship Association (新喀里多尼亚中国友好协会).¹¹

China has long paid close attention to the changing political atmosphere in New Caledonia. An independent New Caledonia would weaken France's global military and economic power. An independent New Caledonia could also be an influential political force in the Pacific. As a PRC media outlet noted in 2021, if New Caledonia gains independence, it would be the fifth-largest nation in the South Pacific, slightly larger than the Fiji islands, and one of the most populous countries in Oceania.¹²

The PRC has become an influential player in the Pacific region over the past 10 years. Much research has been done on the PRC's interests in the anglophone Pacific, but there's been relatively little scholarly attention paid to the PRC's relationship with the francophone Pacific. This report surveys China's growing interest in both the anglophone and the francophone Pacific and considers where New Caledonia fits into the CCP's overall geopolitical agenda.

China's activities in New Caledonia have attracted increasing controversy and attention in recent years,¹³ and many are concerned that China may be engaging in covert foreign interference in the French territory, as it does elsewhere in the Pacific.¹⁴ In 2021, one French-based analyst asserted that ‘There is not yet really any tangible evidence of the influence of China in New Caledonia but it is obvious that this is set to develop in the next decade.’¹⁵ Other commentators talk of China positioning its ‘pawns’ within the independence movement.¹⁶ Pro-independence voices in New Caledonia say that ‘allegations of Chinese influence are shamelessly and baselessly exploited in New Caledonia to justify the French presence.’¹⁷ Meanwhile, the Chinese state media accused French commentary on China's interests in New Caledonia of ‘demonising’ China.¹⁸ This is a standard phraseology used by the CCP globally to shut down criticism and analysis of the party and its activities.¹⁹

The definition of ‘foreign interference’ used by the Five Eyes is the ‘coercive, deceptive, and clandestine activities of foreign governments, actors, and their proxies, to sow

discord, manipulate public discourse, bias the development of policy, or disrupt markets for the purpose of undermining our nations and our allies.²⁰ As this report details, China's foreign interference activities in New Caledonia have been deceptive and clandestine; they have put New Caledonia at risk of economic coercion due to increased economic dependence on the Chinese market, and they're linked to China's cross-Pacific efforts, which could reshape security in the Indo-Pacific.

Foreign interference activities—what the CCP calls 'international united front work' (国际统战工作²¹)—are at the heart of CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping's aggressive foreign policy.²² Xi-era foreign policy follows a three-pronged approach: (1) state-to-state interactions; (2) the employment of military force; and (3) covert operations conducted via foreign interference and espionage.²³ The CCP supports foreign interference activities in every state and territory of the Pacific. China's efforts have undermined Pacific political systems, created debt dependency, threatened sovereignty and security, and affected the rights of Pacific Chinese residents to freedom of speech, association and religion.²⁴ Those threats have been allowed to occur as the individual countries have prioritised economic prosperity, and larger regional countries have remained mostly silent.

In 2014, Xi Jinping gave a speech on the importance of united front work, calling it one of the CCP's 'magic weapons'.²⁵ The CCP is a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary

political party, and the united front was a basic tactic of Lenin. United front work is a crucial part of the CCP's underground or covert work (隐蔽战线工作). United front work is the task of all party members and party-state-military-market agencies, not simply one organisation. At least 70% of the CEOs of major Chinese companies are party members. This means that their companies are required to take part in united front work. The CCP describes its approach to foreign relations as 'total diplomacy'.²⁶ That means that every possible channel is used to support the CCP's interests.

In New Caledonia, the main vectors of CCP foreign interference activities appear to be China's efforts to utilise ethnic Chinese links and activity in the territory, the targeting of New Caledonian economic and political elites, and attempts to loop New Caledonia into the Belt and Road Initiative. This is consistent with CCP foreign interference activities across the Pacific region. New Caledonia, a territory with a mix of divided and devolved political powers, is an interesting case study to compare with the sites of other CCP foreign interference efforts worldwide. This report evaluates whether those shared political powers, political instability and economic inequality make New Caledonia more vulnerable to CCP foreign interference activities. It concludes with recommendations on ways to strengthen resilience against China's foreign interference in New Caledonia and across the Pacific.

Why China is interested in New Caledonia

China has direct interests in New Caledonia, such as in purchasing nickel, and in the future political status of the territory, as well as broader strategic and security interests throughout the Indo-Pacific region. New Caledonia features prominently in Chinese reports on some topics, such as on sources of nickel. It also appears within broader Chinese-language conversations on geopolitics in the Pacific. Here, I survey those interests and explain how they connect to New Caledonia, its people and its development.

Geopolitics

China has strong geostrategic interests in New Caledonia. A 1987 article stated that New Caledonia 'has great strategic importance in the South Pacific'.²⁷ A 2018 report noted that:

the geographical location of New Caledonia is very important. It is situated near the Tropic of Capricorn and is the third largest archipelago in the Pacific Ocean. It has a small territory, but it guards the sea passage from the North Pacific to Antarctica. It is a crucial site for sea and air routes and submarine cables on all continents. There are hundreds of them. Sea and air transportation routes pass by here. [New Caledonia] is an extremely important location [from the point of view of] international transportation strategy.²⁸

In 2021, another official source described the island territory as 'an important military and strategic base for France in [the Pacific] region'.²⁹

The island archipelago of New Caledonia has been of interest to great powers of every era. New Caledonia shares maritime borders with Australia, Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Historically, Tahiti and New Caledonia were staging points for France's connections to South America and Antarctica. The territory is a landing point for two internet cables in the Pacific, and it will soon have a third.³⁰

New Caledonia is of particular interest to China because it's a strategically important territory for France, Australia, New Zealand and the US, as well as all the island states of the Pacific. In 1946, the US Congress Territories Committee identified New Caledonia as part of the US defence line.³¹ If a hostile power controlled New Caledonia—or its neighbour, Solomon Islands—it could block access from Australia, New Zealand and the island territories of the Pacific to the US, into the Indian Ocean, and up to Southeast and Northeast Asia. The small island states of the Pacific, like most small states, are unable to defend themselves in a time of conflict. The 2021 New Zealand Defence Assessment asserted that, if a state that didn't share New Zealand's values and security interests (in other words, the PRC) set up a military base or dual-use facility in the Pacific, that 'would fundamentally alter the strategic balance of the region'.³² Australia's 2020 Defence Strategic Update says that Australia is very concerned by the potential for 'the establishment of military bases, which could undermine stability in the Indo-Pacific and our immediate region'.³³ In 2022, US President Biden and New Zealand Prime Minister Ardern issued a joint statement that echoed those concerns.³⁴

During World War II, New Caledonia played a crucial role as a military base for US and New Zealand troops who were defending the wider Pacific. It was a key site for Australia and New Zealand's forward defence to help keep Imperial Japan from becoming established in the South Pacific. When France fell to the Nazis in 1940, New Caledonia settlers voted to support the Free French and ousted the pro-Vichy governor. Australia assisted by bringing in a pro-Free French replacement governor on a Royal Australian Navy vessel, and soon after stationed a garrison of Australian Army soldiers in New Caledonia.³⁵

From 1942 to 1945, Noumea, the New Caledonia capital, was the main South Pacific fleet base of the US Navy. Some 15,000 New Zealand soldiers and 100,000 US

soldiers were stationed in New Caledonia during World War II, more than double the entire New Caledonian population at that time. During the war, around 1 million American combatants spent time in New Caledonia. Along with Vanuatu's (New Hebrides) Efate and Espiritu Santo islands, the territory was the launch pad for the US's crucial battles against Japan at Guadalcanal in Solomon Islands, at Midway Island, and in the Coral Sea.

China's activities in the Southwest Pacific draw lessons from the actions of Imperial Japan in the Pacific in World War II and the Soviet Union in the Pacific during the Cold War.³⁶ However, instead of kinetic warfare, China is using grey-zone and foreign interference activities to achieve its aims. The Australian Defence Force defines grey-zone activities as military and non-military acts of assertiveness or coercion aimed at achieving strategic goals.³⁷ In the past 10 years, China has provided military vehicles and vessels, uniforms, training and military infrastructure to the military forces of Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Tonga, and to the police forces of Vanuatu, Samoa and Solomon Islands. China now appears to be using recent humanitarian crises in the Pacific to normalise and escalate the PLA's presence in the region.³⁸ The PLA's Southern Theatre Command in Guangzhou, which has run extensive military exercises in the Western Pacific in the past two years, leads that initiative. Guangzhou is also the location of China's permanent disaster relief platform for crises in the Pacific.

In February 2022, two PLA-N vessels laser-targeted an Australian Defence Force aircraft observing them in the Arafura Sea just north of Australia, then transited the Torres Strait choke-point through to the Coral Sea.³⁹ In May 2022, a PLA-N spy ship made a beeline to Exmouth, Western Australia, which is the site of Naval Communication Station Harold E Holt, a joint Australia–US naval communication station—the most powerful transmission station in the Southern Hemisphere.⁴⁰

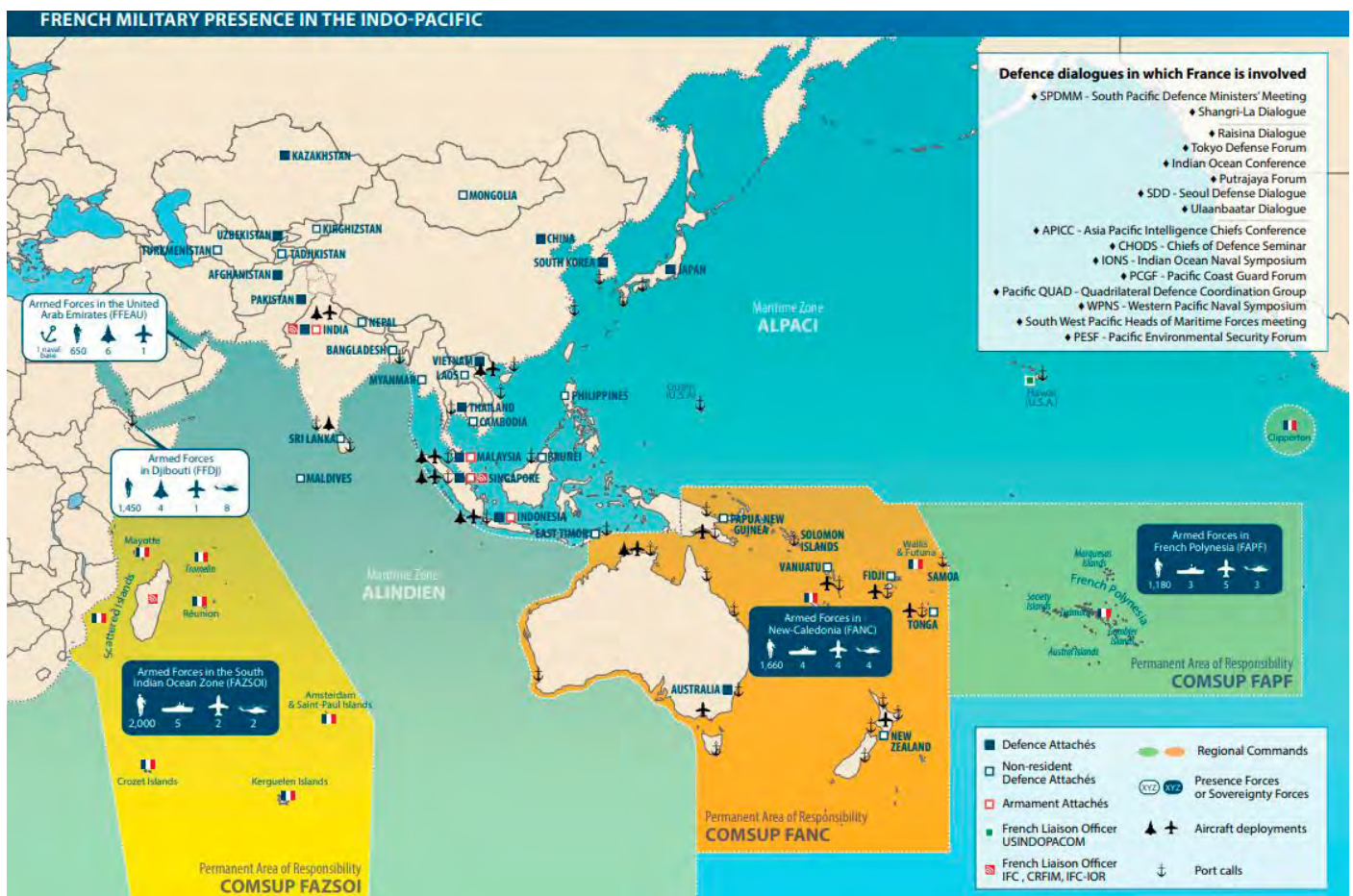
In March 2022, the alarming news broke that Solomon Islands was planning to sign a security agreement with the PRC, opening the way for a permanent military base and intelligence listening posts.⁴¹ The agreement was signed in April 2022. It has implications for the security of the broader Pacific region. According to the draft version of the agreement, China can send military personnel, intelligence and information support, police and other armed personnel upon the request of the Solomon

Islands Government. With a success in the Solomons under its belt, in May 2022, China announced plans for a security agreement with 10 Pacific Islands Forum states, excluding forum members Australia and New Zealand. Most of the Pacific island leaders refused to sign the proposed agreement, but many of the aspects of the agreement appear to have been implemented in some states *ad hoc*. In June 2023, the Solomon Islands Government signed a policing agreement with China. China's Public Security Bureau (PSB) is part of China's intelligence sector, responsible for counterintelligence and controlling dissident activity in China and among the Chinese diaspora.⁴² China has stationed PSB officers in Fiji, Kiribati, the Solomons and Vanuatu, and is negotiating to do the same in Tonga.⁴³ In June 2024, China extended its coastguard presence into all the fishing zones across the Pacific. The China Coast Guard, which is widely used for grey-zone operations in disputed waters, is now legally allowed to board any foreign fishing vessels on the high seas in the First, Second and Third Island Chains.⁴⁴

New Caledonia's role in France's global military and intelligence presence

The South Pacific and Southern Ocean are priority regions for French political and military strategy,⁴⁵ and they're vital to France's broader Indo-Pacific strategy.⁴⁶ French President Emmanuel Macron has described New Caledonia as one of France's 'anchorage' in the Indo-Pacific.⁴⁷ France's New Caledonia-based military forces, along with the Royal Australian Navy, sail regularly through the Torres Strait choke-point, the most direct route between the Indian and Pacific oceans, and the Jomard Entrance, which connects shipping traversing the North Pacific and South Pacific. If the Malacca Strait and other key Indonesian straits were blockaded, the Torres Strait could become a critical waterway for global trade.⁴⁸ Imperial Japanese forces used the Jomard Entrance to attempt to invade Port Moresby in 1941. Chinese analysts have taken note of New Caledonia's importance for France's strategy in the region. A 2018 report in Xinhua's

Figure 1: French overseas military forces



Source: Directorate General for International Relations and Strategy, *France and security in the Indo-Pacific*, Embassy of France, Washington DC, May 2019, online.

Global magazine commented, ‘the existence of overseas territories has greatly extended France’s military presence and is an important piece of France’s global strategy.’⁴⁹

French military assets are one of the factors standing in the way of China changing the power balance in the Indo-Pacific, and in the South Pacific more specifically. France and the US are the only actors in the region with networks of military bases worldwide (Figure 1), and with global military communications networks based on sovereign territory.⁵⁰ If France were to lose any of its Pacific territories, and access to the vast maritime area they provide, its global influence and status would decline significantly. That situation would suit the interests of China and Russia.

France’s Pacific territories of New Caledonia and French Polynesia provide a major logistics base for NATO military assets and the European Space Agency.⁵¹ In 2008, France constructed a new military headquarters in Noumea for its Pacific military forces. The Armed Forces in New Caledonia (*Forces armées en Nouvelle-Calédonie*, or FANC) consist of about 2,000 soldiers, reservists and civilians based in Bourail, Tontouta, Mont-Dore and Noumea.⁵² French forces in New Caledonia are supported by the whole of the French Armed Forces (*Forces Armées Françaises*), including the aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle*.⁵³ On several occasions, French Air and Space Force (*Armée de l’air et de l’espace*) fighter aircraft and air tankers have demonstrated their ability to operate in the Pacific.⁵⁴

New Caledonia is also important for the French military’s intelligence capabilities. In 2005, France’s *Direction générale de la sécurité extérieure* (General Directorate for External Security) set up a listening post at 186 Lieutenant Paul Klein air base, which shares the runway with New Caledonia’s Nouméa – La Tontouta international airport. This is part of an international network that’s France’s equivalent of the US National Security Agency’s signals intelligence setup. The 186 Lieutenant Paul Klein air base is also used for tracking missiles and satellites in space.⁵⁵

New Caledonia is also of military significance as a useful site for near-space research and satellite ground stations. The PLA’s Yuan Wang-class space-tracking vessels deploy to the Pacific during missile and satellite launches, using Papeete and Suva as their ports of call. China uses its Pacific embassies and consulates as sites for Beidou global-navigation service ground stations. Beidou,

like GPS, is a military technology crucial for C4ISR.⁵⁶

China doesn’t yet have an embassy or consulate in New Caledonia, so it doesn’t yet have a Beidou ground station there. Instead, it makes use of commercial operations to host Beidou-equipped reference stations in New Caledonia; one is in Noumea, and the other is in Koumac.⁵⁷ Ground stations and reference stations work together to provide centimetre-level accuracy for satellite positioning and targeting.

If New Caledonia were to become independent without France’s financial and security support, that would immediately weaken regional security in the Pacific. France makes a major defence contribution to the FRANZ arrangement,⁵⁸ which is a partnership between Australia, France and New Zealand signed in 1992 that frames coordination between the three governments to aid Pacific island countries (PICs) hit by a disaster, when they request it.⁵⁹ Australia, France, New Zealand and the US (with the UK and Japan as observers) have established the Pacific Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Forum (the Pacific Quad), helping to monitor and protect the EEZs of the PICs and the regional high seas and contributing to the building of the PICs’ capacities and capabilities. Working through their bilateral and multilateral mechanisms, France, New Zealand, the US and Australia provide defence and security training to other Pacific partners such as Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu in joint exercises and study programs.

Without a strong French military presence in the Pacific, the Pacific island states and territories could be easy targets for a hostile power, just as they were in 1941. Australia and New Zealand would have to spend a lot more money defending themselves and the countries of the region, and in a time of conflict they could be cut off from their military partners, such as the US and Japan.

In 2021, a report issued by the pro-independence group FLNKS proposed two scenarios for the defence of an independent New Caledonia: (1) New Caledonia could establish defence agreements with a neighbouring power, which could be Australia, or France, or ‘another country’; or (2) it could follow the Djibouti model.⁶⁰ Djibouti overlooks the key shipping route between Europe, the Persian Gulf and Asia: the Bab el-Mandeb strait. Djibouti is where the PLA has set up its first ever overseas base with several thousands of military personnel and a large wharf regularly

used by PLA vessels. Djibouti's debt to China is equivalent to 43% of its GDP.⁶¹ Djibouti is also home to a 4,000-strong US base, 1,500 French soldiers, the Japan Self-Defense Forces' only foreign base, and a UK, German, Italian, Spanish, United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabian military presence. The various states continually spy on each other's capabilities. There are almost as many sex workers as military personnel, and it's a hub of sex trafficking of vulnerable women and children.⁶² It isn't an attractive model for New Caledonia's future.

If New Caledonia did indeed follow the Djibouti model or else invited 'another country' to establish a defence presence, that could accelerate great-power tensions in the Pacific region, which would drastically change the strategic order that's kept the peace in the Pacific since 1945. In 2022, Samoan Prime Minister Fiamē Naomi Mata'afa said that she and other Pacific leaders wouldn't like to encourage 'in any way' scenarios in which military forces from other countries would be coming into the Pacific.⁶³

Resources

China is also very interested in New Caledonia because of its rich mineral resources. China is expanding productive capacity abroad to secure sufficient supplies for military and civilian use at home. The PLA's ongoing expansion in equipment and capabilities (the world's largest military expansion ever⁶⁴) makes accessing nickel of utmost importance for China. Further, China is cornering the global market in energy storage devices and consumer electric vehicles and needs a guaranteed supply of nickel for that. New Caledonia has 25% of the world's nickel resources, the third-largest supply in the world, and was once, and could be again, the largest producer of ferronickel.⁶⁵ New Caledonia is rich in cobalt, a very rare mineral that's used in strategic military applications such as missile guidance and radar, as well as commercial and industrial applications. South Province's Goro mine produces 3% of the global cobalt supply.⁶⁶ New Caledonia also has potential deposits of gold, silver, copper, lead and zinc in North Province, and unexplored hydrocarbon resources in its EEZ.

A 1954 US Department of Defense report called nickel 'the closest to being a true "war metal" [that] deserves first priority among materials receiving conservation

attention'.⁶⁷ Nickel is used in a wide range of military hardware, from missiles and tanks to satellites. A 2019 report for the non-ferrous industries in China highlights nickel as a metal that's crucial for the country's defence and aerospace industries.⁶⁸ As stated, nickel is also essential for China's electric car production. Electric vehicles have both military and civilian uses. Military vehicles that use electric or hybrid power systems have a lower thermal image, which makes detecting them more difficult.

China is seeking long-term agreements with overseas and domestic producers. China's mineral analysts look to New Caledonia to secure stable access to nickel and cobalt. There's detailed information about New Caledonian society, politics, economics and resources in Chinese sources written specifically as guides for Chinese companies' future investments:⁶⁹

- A 2016 report assessing New Caledonian nickel in a Chinese finance journal emphasised that 'the developed laterite nickel ore resources [in New Caledonia] are less than half of its recoverable reserves, and the potential for future production increases is huge'.⁷⁰
- A 2016 'Analysis on a New Caledonia nickel resources investment strategy' for China's national non-ferrous metals project introduced 'the natural and social conditions of New Caledonia, taxation and corporate management policies and regulations, the characteristics of nickel resources and the status quo of mining enterprises' to 'provide information for Chinese enterprises to invest in nickel resources in New Caledonia'.⁷¹
- A 2018 report on China's nickel resources security and internationalisation strategy stated that 'future nickel investment areas mainly have the following options: Indonesia, the Philippines, and New Caledonia—where there are abundant laterite resources, low mining costs, relatively complete mining laws and regulations, and relatively convenient shipping; nickel sulfide mines are very rich, and the geographical position is superior'.⁷²
- A 2020 assessment of New Caledonia's mineral resources by the Nanjing Geological Survey stated that 'the rational development and utilisation of New Caledonia's nickel resources is of great significance to guarantee the safety of China's nickel supplies'.⁷³

- In 2020, the China Geological Survey told potential investors in New Caledonia that ‘while the main political force in North Province of New Caledonia is pro-independence, the main political force in South Province is against independence from France.’ Hence, it advised that ‘When Chinese-funded enterprises go to invest, they should pay close attention to the area where the investment project is located’ and make their pitch accordingly.⁷⁴

New Caledonia is further of interest to China due to its rich marine resources, including bêche-de-mer, tuna and prawns. The Loyalty Islands Provincial Assembly company SODIL, which helps fund the FLNKS, exports bêche-de-mer and nacre (mother-of-pearl) to China, with high returns.⁷⁵ New Caledonia has a growing aquaculture sector, with potential to expand, and all three provinces are seeking investment for that sector. As detailed below, China has expressed an interest in investing in the sector in New Caledonia.

Diplomatic interests

New Caledonia’s appeal to China also comes from the votes it provides in international organisations. Although the territory isn’t yet fully independent, the Noumea Accord provides the New Caledonian Government with the right to overseas representation in the Pacific region and in Pacific agencies. It can also negotiate agreements with those entities within its designated areas of responsibility.⁷⁶

New Caledonia is a member of the International Telecommunication Union, the Universal Postal Union, UNESCO (associate member), the World Meteorological Organization, the International Olympic Committee, International Organisation of La Francophonie, the Pacific Community and the Pacific Islands Forum. China is also a member or partner of most of those organisations and seeks support for its policies and desired representatives in international organisations.

New Caledonia is somewhat set apart from other states. Only Australia, Indonesia, Japan, New Zealand and Vanuatu have consulate-generals there, while Germany, Belgium, Italy, Switzerland and Vietnam have honorary consuls. In 2019, China announced that it was also planning on setting up an honorary consulate in New Caledonia,⁷⁷ but that hasn’t yet happened. Formally, China’s only representation in New Caledonia is via the PRC

Embassy in Paris, while consular assistance is provided via the PRC Embassy in Vanuatu. The PRC Ambassador to France has visited New Caledonia twice, in 2007 and 2017.

The President of the Government of New Caledonia is the legal representative for New Caledonian external affairs. The independentist Louis Mapou, the leader of the FLNKS-affiliated *Union nationale pour l’indépendance*, was elected President in 2021. New Caledonia’s foreign policy is the responsibility of the tiny Regional Cooperation and External Relations Unit (SCRRE), set up in 2003. It’s housed in a small two-storey building in Noumea, behind a crumbling hospital built in the 1870s. It doesn’t appear to be well resourced. It isn’t a foreign ministry as such, since France retains diplomatic, justice and defence powers. New Caledonia has placed delegates within French embassies in five locations throughout the Pacific, from Canberra to Suva. The 1998 Noumea Accord permits New Caledonia to have representation in French embassies throughout the Pacific, and several of my interview sources told me that potentially includes China. The French Foreign Ministry helps to train those external relations personnel. The SCRRE’s activities have been affected by the tug of war between pro-independence and *status quo* parties within the New Caledonian Congress. The agency needs to obtain the cooperation of the Government of New Caledonia and the French Government, while trying to establish external relations with foreign governments. The former director of the SCRRE said that it’s ‘a very tricky role’.⁷⁸

Regional and global strategic interests

The PRC has paid close attention to New Caledonia’s decolonisation process. Independence in New Caledonia could have a domino effect on France’s overseas territories elsewhere in the world.⁷⁹ New Caledonia’s political status is a bellwether for France’s other Pacific territories of French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna, but also Corsica in the Mediterranean, and France’s overseas departments in the Indian Ocean and Caribbean. If China could have a military presence in an independent New Caledonia, it would be a direct threat to the existing regional order. An independent, China-leaning, New Caledonia could also be an influential political force in the Pacific.

Comments in a 1987 article by a PRC think tank now seem prescient, given the current unrest in New Caledonia.

They reflect China's long-term assessment of the strategic situation in the Pacific:

Once New Caledonia's national independence movement is taken advantage of by a superpower, changes that are unfavourable to the United States will take place in the strategic balance in the South Pacific. On the other hand, if the United States supports New Caledonia's national independence movement, it may spread to other islands and trust territories in the Pacific and encourage other peoples to start their own independence movement. This is what the United States would not like to see.⁸⁰

In 2014, Chinese scholars predicted that New Caledonia's independence was 'imminent'.⁸¹ The PRC is seeking diplomatic partners, in competition with the Republic of China (Taiwan). Beijing would press for an independent New Caledonia to establish diplomatic relations immediately.

New Caledonia is economically important in the Pacific, and if China were able to influence key sectors there, that could have a broader regional impact. For example, Pacific Energy Pty Ltd, a private New Caledonian and French Polynesian-owned enterprise, controls not only petrol stations in New Caledonia but also all the many petrol stations in the PICs and French Polynesia and supplies aviation fuel and lubricants to the region.⁸² In 2019, there were rumours that Pacific Energy had a purchase offer from a Chinese company. If it had been successful, it would have meant that a Chinese entity had control over the oil and petrol supplies in all the small-island developing states of the Pacific and the French territories of the Pacific.⁸³

Historical connections and CCP messaging

New Caledonia's archaeological and modern history is of interest to the CCP from an ideological point of view, and it plays a small part in wider narratives. The Kanak ethnic people of New Caledonia are descendants of Austronesian voyagers of the Pacific, who were famed for their pottery, which was first discovered in New Caledonia's Lapita in northern Grande Terre. The Austronesian expansion originally began from the island of Taiwan.⁸⁴ However, PRC researchers claim that Austronesian archaeological history goes back to southeast Hainan Island, which is

part of the PRC.⁸⁵ This relates to the CCP's growing official narrative, which promotes the line that modern-day China's interests in the Southwest Pacific go back beyond recorded history.⁸⁶

France's brutal colonial policies against the indigenous Kanak population feature prominently in Chinese academic and media discussions about New Caledonia. A 2021 article in a publication of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences under the leadership of the CCP Central Committee Propaganda Department, stated:

Especially after the local nickel mines were discovered, the French government introduced a large number of labourers from other parts of Asia and the Pacific to plunder the wealth and let them work in the mines, which severely squeezed the living space of the indigenous people. Ongoing conflict and alien disease have taken a deadly toll on the Kanak people, whose population has halved in about 70 years. Now, the Kanak people, who were originally the owners of this land, have become a minority.⁸⁷

New Caledonia is a highly stratified society and one of the least equally developed societies in the world.⁸⁸ Chinese-language commentary on New Caledonian society frequently emphasises its economic disparities and social and racial stratification. An assessment in Xinhua's *Global* magazine observed, 'New Caledonia receives 1.3 billion euros in subsidies from the French central government every year. At the same time, it also relies on France in defence and education. But the indigenous people live in poverty, with lower education and employment rates than whites.'⁸⁹

China's support for decolonisation in New Caledonia and highlighting of the racist, brutal policies of the past resonates with many political elites in the Pacific. In this sense, New Caledonia's story is also the Pacific's story. The CCP itself doesn't recognise the concept of indigeneity in its own society and brutally suppresses ethnic minorities such as Uyghurs and Tibetans in a colonialist project to create a unified nation-state.

CCP historiography also mentions New Caledonia in the context of the territory's tragic role as the penal colony for the Paris Commune and especially relating to the heroine of the commune, Louise Michel, who was exiled to the territory. This is meaningful from the point of

view of the Paris Commune's place in the international history of communism, but it's a narrative meant for domestic audiences.⁹⁰

2024 unrest

China has been very circumspect in public commentary about the massive social unrest in New Caledonia since early May 2024, which erupted after France passed legislation expanding voting eligibility in the territory.⁹¹ At the time of writing, the unrest has caused an estimated €2.2 billion worth of damage, and hundreds of cars, homes and private businesses have been looted and burned.⁹² There are no reports of any Chinese businesses being targeted, even though the capital, Noumea, has a large Chinatown. Elsewhere in the Pacific, whenever unrest erupts it tends to be Chinese businesses that suffer the greatest damage.⁹³

The PRC's traditional and non-traditional media are very strictly controlled by the CCP, so their limited commentary on the ongoing unrest and political stand-off in New Caledonia indicates official guidance on how to discuss the situation. The usual instruction in a time of crisis or matter of political sensitivity is for all the PRC media to follow the line taken by Xinhua (the PRC's official news service).⁹⁴ However, it's a very difficult situation for Xinhua to report on, as it doesn't have a journalist stationed in New Caledonia and is unable to send in reporters. Xinhua reports have thus mostly relayed French media coverage of the unrest, but even those reports have been scant. Xinhua also compiles an internal publication service for CCP leaders, so we can expect that more detailed coverage is appearing there. China's international television network, *CGTN English*, has had more coverage, but again only relaying foreign reporting.

On 27 May, the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) described the ongoing unrest as 'riots' (骚乱). MOFA has made no further comment about the political situation in New Caledonia.⁹⁵ The comment was made in the context of MOFA announcing that a group of Chinese tourists who were stuck in New Caledonia had been successfully repatriated. Ever since the 2011 Libya crisis, the PRC prefers to use the PLA to evacuate ethnic Chinese in a crisis.⁹⁶ Many other states also use their militaries to evacuate citizens in crisis situations. On 20 May 2024, New Zealand and Australia were given clearance by France to use their

defence force planes to evacuate their nationals from New Caledonia.⁹⁷ However, it appears that France may not have granted China permission to use a PLA plane for evacuating its nationals from New Caledonia. Instead, five days later than the Australians and New Zealanders, Chinese citizens who wished to leave New Caledonia were evacuated on a chartered Aircalin flight. They were flown first to Singapore, then connected to commercial flights into China.⁹⁸

In the first two weeks of the unrest, the French Government banned the Chinese social media app TikTok (抖音) in New Caledonia because it was being used to spread disinformation. French Prime Minister Attal said that TikTok was banned 'due to interference and manipulation of the platform, whose parent company is Chinese. The app is used as a medium for spreading disinformation on social networks, fed by foreign countries, and relayed by the rioters.'⁹⁹ The Chinese-language PRC media didn't report on the ban, or that it was later lifted.¹⁰⁰ However, *CGTN English* did relay a brief Reuters report when the ban was lifted.¹⁰¹

New Caledonia is China's second-largest supplier of nickel. The Chinese-language specialist minerals media has been tracking the impact of the unrest on New Caledonia's nickel industry and global nickel prices.¹⁰² A Chinese analyst noted that the nickel crisis in New Caledonia also negatively affects Russia, which is a primary consumer of China's nickel production.¹⁰³

In June 2024, the CCP English-language paper *Global Times* posted a scathing attack about Western coverage of the crisis in New Caledonia, saying that Western media were scaremongering about China as a 'shadow' behind the unrest.¹⁰⁴ There's no evidence of the PRC Government's direct involvement in the unrest and violence, but, as I detail in the pages below, the CCP has been engaging in covert activities in New Caledonia over decades. The influence and impact of those activities are certainly significant factors in New Caledonian politics in the present day.

Assessing CCP foreign interference activities in New Caledonia

Although the emphases of CCP foreign interference may be different in each country and territory, the basic tactics remain the same. New Caledonia's decentralised governance structure (see appendix on page 31), which has political power divided between the French Government, the New Caledonian authorities, three provincial assemblies and local councils, provides many potential channels for PRC agencies and actors to exploit. On the other hand, the effect of multiple centres of power eyeing each other may have complicated some CCP interference efforts in New Caledonia. In the sections below, this report uses the template set out in my 2017 paper, *Magic weapons: China's political influence activities under Xi Jinping*, to assess CCP foreign interference in New Caledonia.¹⁰⁵ The report also outlines some of the measures that France, the New Caledonian authorities and civil-society groups have employed to manage potentially harmful aspects of the China relationship, and discusses what more needs to be done.

In New Caledonia, the main vectors of CCP foreign interference activities appear to be China's efforts to utilise ethnic Chinese links and activity in the territory, the targeting of New Caledonian economic and political elites, and attempts to bring New Caledonia into the Belt and Road Initiative,

Using the Chinese diaspora as a vector for foreign interference

In 2017, CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping stated that he wanted to utilise the 60-million-plus Chinese diaspora to serve the CCP's political and economic agenda.¹⁰⁶ Currently, New Caledonia has a population of around 1,500 residents who identify as Han Chinese, and around 400 of them are from the PRC.¹⁰⁷ Even though the population is small, like other diaspora communities they have had to deal with the CCP's efforts to control the ethnic Chinese community, especially since Xi Jinping's rise to power. The CCP leadership views the overseas Chinese diaspora as both a resource and a threat. The party seeks to use overseas Chinese along with Chinese companies—both PRC-based and ethnic-Chinese international businesses—to advance its strategic agenda.

Some of the key agencies involved in this vector are the CCP Central Committee's United Front Work Department (UFWD); the UFWD's Overseas Chinese Affairs Office; MOFA; the Ministry of State Security; PLA military intelligence; the Chinese People's Consultative Conference; overseas Chinese associations, and the UFWD's 'peaceful reunification associations'.

Targeting New Caledonia's overseas Chinese community

The CCP aims to exert control over the Chinese diaspora and 'turn them into propaganda bases for China'¹⁰⁸ by actively involving the community in united front work. The CCP has affiliated existing Chinese community organisations with the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, and it has also set up new groups that are solely vehicles to promote the CCP agenda.¹⁰⁹

The oldest CCP united front group organisation in New Caledonia is *L'amicale chinoise de Nouvelle-Calédonie* (新喀里多尼亚华人协会, the Chinese Association of New Caledonia, CANC). CANC is affiliated with the UFWD's Overseas Chinese Affairs Office. It's listed in Chinese-language materials as New Caledonia's official overseas Chinese group.¹¹⁰ CANC was formed in 1973 by the merger of the New Caledonia Overseas Chinese Association (新喀里多尼亚华侨协会) and the New Caledonia Chinese Association (新喀里多尼亚中华总会), both of which had links to the Republic of China and before that to Qing Dynasty China.

According to contemporary Chinese sources, the purpose of CANC is to 'strengthen the unity, cooperation and exchanges of overseas Chinese, to promote the development of overseas Chinese industry, and to strengthen friendly relations with the indigenous Kanak people'.¹¹¹ In recent years, CANC activities have tended to focus on Chinese cultural events. Promoting Chinese culture within strictly defined boundaries is a core united front work strategy.¹¹² This is a means to exclude banned groups such as Falun Gong and Tibetan, Hong Kong, Taiwan or Uyghur activists. For example, since 2012, the CCP has tried to promote the Lunar New Year

festival globally as ‘Chinese New Year’ and used activities associated with the festival for international united front work.¹¹³ CANC celebrations use the term ‘Chinese New Year’, and that was initially adopted by local media.¹¹⁴ However, since 2018, it’s noticeable that reports of the Lunar New Year celebrations in New Caledonia have emphasised that it’s celebrated by the many Asian communities in the territory, including Vietnamese and Chinese people. New Caledonia’s local newspaper even referred to it as the ‘Asian New Year’.¹¹⁵

The current president of CANC is Michel Fongue (房春平), who’s also one of the 12 deputies to the Mayor of Noumea and is in charge of digital development for the city.¹¹⁶ Fongue’s willingness to lead what the CCP defines as a united front organisation reflects the difficult balancing act faced by local leaders, who may simply want to be able to represent their community while maintaining some cultural links with China. The CCP has a well-established policy of pressuring foreign-based diaspora politicians in sensitive roles to be involved in united front work and getting them to promote CCP policies and provide information on the policies of the governments they represent.¹¹⁷

Michel Fongue has previously made a point of emphasising the difference between local New Caledonian Chinese, the people in China, and the CCP-led PRC Government. He told a New Caledonian television program examining the Chinese diaspora in New Caledonia that the ‘Chinese view us as foreigners.’¹¹⁸ In a profile for the international service club Kiwanis, where he was seeking an international leadership role, Fongue referenced the group he leads as a ‘Chinese Community Association’.¹¹⁹ However, a Chinese version of his profile used the actual name for the organisation—the name used in CCP united front work.¹²⁰

In 2006, a wealthy ethnic Chinese businessman, Liu Jiyou (刘继有), who had been one of the founding figures of the Chinese Association of New Caledonia, established a second New Caledonian Chinese united front group, the *Réunification pacifique de la Chine en Nouvelle Calédonie* (New Caledonia – China Peaceful Reunification Association, 新喀里多尼亚中国和平统一促进会, NCCPRA). The membership of Liu’s group appears to be very small. Liu claims that most of the PRC-origin Chinese in New Caledonia participate in his organisation, although it hasn’t held many public activities. Liu says

that ‘peaceful reunification’ representatives in Vanuatu encouraged him to set up the NCCPRA. Liu Jiyou usually visits China annually to attend united front work events and obtain instructions on the latest CCP policies. In 2019, he participated in the annual conference of the UFWD’s Overseas Chinese Office, at which he says overseas Chinese attendees were told to prepare for the PRC going to war with the US.¹²¹

Liu Jiyou first came to New Caledonia from Tahiti in 1960.¹²² He initially traded with the Republic of China (Taiwan), then pivoted to trading with the PRC and visiting the Canton Fair in 1973. In the same year, he helped found the Chinese Association of New Caledonia. The PRC was just beginning to reach out to patriotic Chinese again after the disastrous Cultural Revolution years, when many overseas Chinese living in China were treated as spies.¹²³ Liu is the main landlord of Noumea’s Asia Town. UFWD agencies have a longstanding pattern of working with the Chinese business elite.¹²⁴

Michel Fongue and Liu Jiyou’s groups don’t coordinate their activities. In 2013, a Vanuatu PRC Embassy diplomat in charge of overseas Chinese management and united front work visited New Caledonia. In an unsubtle prod to the poor relations between the two New Caledonian leaders, the official stated:

It is hoped that the Overseas Chinese in New Caledonia will be more united, that they will promote the construction of a harmonious Overseas Chinese community, that they will gather strength, care for their ancestral (or in some cases home) country, that they will become a bridge and link between China and the local economic and culture, and that they will become the inheritors and disseminators of China’s culture.¹²⁵

The NCCPRA is a member of the Oceania Peaceful Reunification Association (大洋洲中国和平统一促进会).¹²⁶ The peaceful reunification associations around the world are essentially CCP external party cells, although not every prominent figure involved in them will be a CCP member.¹²⁷ Liu, for example, disclosed to the author that he isn’t a CCP member. He calls himself a ‘patriotic overseas Chinese’ (爱国华侨). His father, Liu Hanhua, worked with Sun Yat-sen, the first President of the Republic of China, and fled political unrest to settle in Tahiti. Liu Jiyou identifies strongly with his father’s revolutionary heritage.¹²⁸

Because the PRC doesn't have a consulate in New Caledonia, the NCCPRA acts as an agent for the PRC Embassy in Vanuatu, helping to process passports and handling other consular matters.¹²⁹ The CCP often uses diplomatic cover for united front work.¹³⁰ Each PRC consulate and embassy has several staff members designated to engage in united front work activities. The PRC Ambassador or Consul-General always plays a very prominent role in that work.¹³¹

Liu Jiyou hosted the PRC Ambassador to France when he visited New Caledonia in 2007 and 2017.¹³² In 2013, Liu hosted Vanuatu PRC consular officials in charge of overseas Chinese affairs and CCP united front work.¹³³ In 2016, Li Zhongmin, deputy inspector of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of Guangdong Province, visited New Caledonia and met with Liu Jiyou. Li Zhongmin brought with him a team of traditional Chinese medicine doctors who set up a free clinic for overseas Chinese and other locals in New Caledonia.¹³⁴ The CCP commonly uses free traditional Chinese medicine clinics to bring Chinese people together in countries where the overseas Chinese community is diverse and difficult to connect with.¹³⁵

After each visit from CCP officials and PRC Embassy personnel, staff of the New Caledonian branch of *La Direction générale de la sécurité intérieure* (General Directorate for Internal Security) interviewed Liu Jiyou. He says they asked him what the officials were doing there in his offices, why they were coming to New Caledonia, and whether they were coming to support the independence movement.¹³⁶

Michel Fongue told a reporter that there are only about 50 'real Chinese' in New Caledonia.¹³⁷ By that, he presumably means residents of New Caledonia who come from the PRC. The actual number is closer to 400. Some 110 of the small community of PRC-origin Chinese residents of New Caledonia arrived in 1997 as undocumented refugees on two fishing vessels that sailed from China.¹³⁸ A few others have family connections to New Caledonia or French Polynesia that have enabled them to emigrate from the PRC.

Most of the 1997 asylum-seekers were economic migrants,¹³⁹ but they hid that from the French and New Caledonian authorities. Their arrival was politically sensitive because it fed into a longstanding debate about immigration policy just before the Noumea Accord

was concluded in 1998. The FLNKS didn't want them to settle, and the French authorities were going to expel them, but, after a sustained popular political protest, the group was allowed to remain.¹⁴⁰ The NCCPRA took on the role of helping the migrants settle into their new lives in New Caledonia.¹⁴¹

Foreigners granted residency in New Caledonia have rights to travel and settle in the EU. That puts the territory at risk of being a backdoor path for CCP operatives to migrate to the EU. Yet, it's quite difficult for PRC citizens to immigrate to New Caledonia, unlike other territories in the Pacific. The French state retains responsibility for immigration policies, while the New Caledonian Government has the right to issue work visas for foreigners to work in the territory. Issuing work visas to foreigners is so rare that decisions are made by the cabinet.¹⁴² There isn't yet a significant problem of illegal migration from the PRC. PRC citizens must apply to French embassies to visit New Caledonia.¹⁴³ However, holders of Vanuatu passports issued before 25 May 2015 can enter New Caledonia without a visa.¹⁴⁴ Up to one-third of Vanuatu's income comes from the sale of passports, and large numbers of passports have been sold to PRC citizens, even though dual citizenship is illegal in China.¹⁴⁵

Promoting Chinese mass tourism to create economic dependency

The New Caledonian Government has long been looking for ways to diversify the territory's economy. In the years from 2016 to 2018, the China tourism market was touted as a great opportunity for New Caledonia. The PRC Government made New Caledonia a preferred destination for Chinese tourism in 2017.¹⁴⁶ All the big tourism markets in the Pacific have come to rely on the Chinese market in the past 15 years. However, the potential to expand that market in New Caledonia has been slowed by the difficulty of access to visas for PRC citizens. In 2016, a boatload of 2,000 PRC tourists visited New Caledonia on a one-off cruise visit. Special tourist visas were issued for all the PRC passengers under the dispensation of the President of New Caledonia. However, contrary to expectations, tourist operators and shops didn't benefit significantly from that visit, which led to considerable discussion about the value of such mass tourism from China.¹⁴⁷ There are no direct commercial flights between China and New Caledonia, but in 2017 and 2018 two

chartered flights were organised to carry tourists between the two countries. A new direct flight connection was also proposed for Aircalin (*Air Calédonie Internationale*) between Noumea and Shanghai. Aircalin is 99% owned by the New Caledonian Government.¹⁴⁸ Some 260 PRC tourists arrived in New Caledonia via chartered plane in February 2018, and 231 arrived in November 2018.

The public plan was that 1,000 Chinese tourists would arrive in 2019, and 6,000 by 2025.¹⁴⁹ But, according to former New Caledonian President and leader of the anti-independence political party *Calédonie ensemble*, Philippe Gomès, the real plan was to send many more Chinese tourists than that. He says that, in a 2017 meeting with local politicians, the PRC Ambassador to France ‘asked us what we needed in terms of infrastructure and offered his help. He said that his country could send 100,000 to 300,000 tourists a year, on condition that it could build hotels for them, preferably constructed by Chinese companies and staffed by Chinese.’¹⁵⁰

The UFWD-directed Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC) pressed the New Caledonian Government to allow PRC tourists to enter New Caledonia visa free and to set up continued direct flights.¹⁵¹ Initially, French diplomats were sympathetic to this idea,¹⁵² but ultimately France didn’t approve it.

New Caledonia’s short-lived experiment with mass tourism from China hasn’t yet been repeated. Some Kanak leaders weren’t receptive to the mass tourism plan. There were fears about the impact on traditional Kanak society of large numbers of Chinese tourists.¹⁵³ The central government’s plan to diversify New Caledonia’s tourism market hasn’t gone away, but it’s now targeting less politically sensitive markets. In October 2022, Aircalin announced that it was setting up new code-sharing arrangements to the US and a direct flight to Singapore.¹⁵⁴ In March 2023, the New Caledonian Government stated that its priority tourism markets were now Australia, New Zealand, France and Singapore.¹⁵⁵

Separately from those developments, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, increasing numbers of PRC nationals had in fact been visiting New Caledonia, arriving via the regular Pacific-based cruise ships that make one-day stops in Noumea on Grande Terre and Easo on the island of Lifou in the Loyalty Islands. Cruise-ship passengers on short stays don’t need to apply for visas to enter New Caledonia,

and there are only random customs and immigration inspections when they disembark.¹⁵⁶ This is a security risk, as it’s possible the travellers could be used as mules for illegal money transfers, drugs, or weapons for criminals or political groups. The border restrictions imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic were, in this sense, a bonus for New Caledonian security, although they devastated the tourism economy. Possibly relatedly, in 2022, New Caledonia quietly tightened up rules on transfers of money via the post office’s finance division (*l’Office des Postes et Télécommunications de Nouvelle-Calédonie*, OPT), which was identified as a channel for money laundering.¹⁵⁷ Reports indicate that criminals with links to China are heavily involved in illicit finance in the Pacific.¹⁵⁸

Using PRC commercial links with New Caledonia

The PRC’s Ministry of State Security and PLA military intelligence agencies often use business links as a channel for foreign interference.¹⁵⁹ Chinese citizens and companies are obligated to assist China’s intelligence work under the National Intelligence Law (2017).¹⁶⁰ There are several known examples of this occurring in New Caledonia. For example, during the 2018 referendum, agents of China’s Ministry of State Security reportedly used the cover of a Chinese media delegation to clandestinely visit New Caledonia and observe the election process firsthand.¹⁶¹

The former director of New Caledonia’s SCRRE said that the New Caledonian Government is very prudent about risks in the China relationship, and the unit doesn’t accept offers of investment from Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and ‘will never accept’ such investment.¹⁶² He said that New Caledonia doesn’t need investment from Chinese SOEs in infrastructure. However, investments from Chinese private companies aren’t subject to the same scrutiny. PRC Government funding to New Caledonian provincial assemblies or their commercial subsidiaries is also beyond the control of either the French Government or the New Caledonian Government.

PRC Government agencies have supplied a small number of critical infrastructure technologies to New Caledonia, which may pose a strategic vulnerability:

- In 2010, China National Machinery Industry Corporation, a major SOE directly managed by the PRC central government, provided the nickel-processing equipment for the North Province Government’s

Koniambo pyrometallurgical plant.¹⁶³ The plant was built by 1,200 Chinese workers, as well as 1,800 Korean, Thai and Filipino workers.¹⁶⁴

- In 2019, a PRC company took on a two-year salvage project to recover a container ship off the New Caledonia reef—its first ever outside China.¹⁶⁵ The project provided ample opportunity for the vessel to survey New Caledonian waters. New Caledonia has more than 500 mines in its lagoon—a legacy of the US Navy’s efforts to defend New Caledonia against Imperial Japanese submarines during World War II. The mines still present a threat to any foreign military vessel or submarine that wishes to anchor in or transit through New Caledonia. Knowledge of the seabed is crucial to avoid those hazards.
- In 2019, the PRC telecommunications firm Huawei supplied 300 solar inverters—which integrate cloud, artificial intelligence and 5G technologies—for French company Total-Quadrant’s photovoltaic park at the Noumea – La Tontouta Airport.¹⁶⁶ Huawei has close links to the PLA and the PRC Ministry of State Security. Huawei’s ownership structure also links it to the UFD.¹⁶⁷ The New Caledonian Government has decision-making power over telecommunications within the territory. France has unofficially banned Huawei from French communications. French Government regulation efforts managed to initially keep Huawei out of the core networks for 3G and 4G, and, by 2021, restricted it from most of France’s 5G network.¹⁶⁸ Unlike in many other states in the Pacific, Huawei isn’t present in any level of the telecommunications set-up in New Caledonia, which could reflect the strategic importance of signals communication from the territory for France, as well as the fact that the local telecommunications provider, OPT, is a state-owned monopoly.
- Several Chinese companies have repeatedly tried to invest in New Caledonian mines. The New Caledonian Government and provincial assemblies are looking for investment to help break the territory’s dependence on France. In 2019, Brazilian miner Vale decided to sell the Goro nickel mine in South Province, one of the largest in New Caledonia. An unnamed Chinese investor made a bid to buy it, but the French state, which has control over mining licences and sales, vetoed the offer. After intense negotiations, the mine was sold to a consortium involving a 51% stake to South Province authorities and

other local interests, plus 19% to Swiss commodity trader Trafigura, and the remainder to an investment company.¹⁶⁹ Tesla is the new main market for the plant, and part of the purchase deal required that all the supply was to go to Tesla’s ‘battery supply chain in Asia’, with production to double in 2024. The bulk of Tesla’s electric battery production is moving to China.¹⁷⁰

In addition to trying to invest directly in New Caledonia, PRC minerals companies can partner with New Caledonian nickel interests outside the territory. They can then gain access to their information, technology and contacts. PRC organisations frequently use mergers, acquisitions and partnerships with foreign companies, universities and research centres to acquire local identities, who provide access to military technology, commercial secrets and other strategic information.¹⁷¹ In 2019, Eramet, the main shareholder of South Province’s *Société Le Nickel*, partnered with Tsingshan Holdings (青山集团) in a massive nickel-processing plant at Weda Bay in Indonesia.¹⁷² Eramet and Tsingshan also work together in Argentina.

Thus, despite France’s efforts to restrict PRC investment in New Caledonian nickel mining, China has achieved its goal of increased access to New Caledonian nickel through other means. In a relatively short time, China greatly expanded its involvement in the New Caledonian nickel economy, with the Tesla deal, via the partnership with French company Eramet, which controls part of South Province’s rich nickel supplies, and through a joint venture with North Province-based nickel company Société Minière du Sud Pacifique (SMSP).

Until 2016, to protect the domestic smelting and refining industry, the New Caledonian Government didn’t permit exports of raw nickel to China. The policy was overturned by a majority vote in the New Caledonian Congress in the wake of the decision by Australian mining magnate Clive Palmer to mothball his nickel refinery in Townsville, which had previously processed low-grade New Caledonian nickel ore.¹⁷³ In 2017, Yangzhou Yichuan Nickel Industry Co. Ltd signed a memorandum of cooperation with the North Province and Loyalty Island government-owned SMSP¹⁷⁴ to begin negotiations on a 25-year agreement to purchase 600,000 million tonnes of laterite nickel ore per annum.¹⁷⁵ Three years later, that amount was increased to 700,000 million tonnes per annum.¹⁷⁶ Following the memorandum,

preliminary agreements were set up to allow the first exports to China.

As a result, New Caledonia's exports to China soared. In 2011, New Caledonia's trade to China was a mere 6.9% of total exports.¹⁷⁷ However, by 2022, 62.3% of all New Caledonia's exports, the bulk of which were minerals exports, went to China.¹⁷⁸ Exports to France were 1.2%. China was New Caledonia's fourth-largest source of imports in 2022, at 6.06%.¹⁷⁹

The shareholders of SMSP never wanted to just export raw nickel to Yichuan. The plan was that SMSP would join with Yangzhou Yichuan Nickel as partners in a pyrometallurgical plant to process the nickel in the city of Yangzhou in China.¹⁸⁰ SMSP was to have been 51% owner of the plant. The PRC Government offered the financial guarantee for the joint venture.¹⁸¹ The deal was symbolically important to SMSP and its backers, but, from the point of view of the CCP's wider interests and agenda, it was a small concession to gain long-term access to the nickel. However, in 2023, the negotiations were brought to a sudden end, without explanation. SMSP said that it was in discussion with other partners to find a market for its low-grade ore.¹⁸²

By the end of 2023, New Caledonia's exports to China dropped to 46.3%, while imports from China were 5.5%. Taiwan became New Caledonia's second-largest market, at 15%, taking over from South Korea.¹⁸³ Exports to France grew to a modest 2.7%.

Since the political unrest began in May 2024, New Caledonia's mines have come to a standstill, and exports have dropped to a historical low.¹⁸⁴ No tourists are coming to New Caledonia. The economy won't be able to recover until the society reunites.

Yet, even if peace is achieved, the thorny question of trade dependency needs to be addressed. Economists define trade dependency as an economy that's overdependent on one source. In the short space of a few years, New Caledonia had become overexposed to the Chinese market for its main export, nickel. In addition, Chinese demand is a key determinant of global nickel prices because China is the world's largest nickel importer, consuming 50.4% of global production.¹⁸⁵ China is also the world's largest cobalt importer, taking 32% of global production.¹⁸⁶ A sudden change in nickel orders from China, such as a drop in commercial demand or state-directed economic coercion,

would have an immediate and significant impact on the New Caledonian economy.

So far, China's emergence as the principal market for New Caledonia's nickel hasn't been matched by direct equity investment, as has been the case in Indonesia. With the three principal nickel producers in New Caledonia each confronting severe financial challenges both before and after the political unrest of 2024,¹⁸⁷ it wouldn't be surprising to see Chinese firms offering to 'save' those operations. Preserving New Caledonian nickel for France and for Europe, as President Macron desires, would require public financial support.

Targeting political and economic elites as a vector for foreign interference

The CCP has a comprehensive strategy to target foreign economic and political elites. The goal is to coopt elites so that they promote China's foreign policy agenda within their own political system, relay information on foreign government intentions, strategies and the attitude of key actors towards China, and provide access to cutting-edge technology.¹⁸⁸ CCP elite-capture efforts frequently target subnational entities. Mao Zedong called this approach 'using the countryside to surround the cities' and 'using the local to surround the central' (农村包围城市; 地方包围中央). This is particularly relevant for New Caledonia, as it's an autonomous territory within France's larger sovereignty, with three provincial governments that have autonomy over key aspects of governance, as well as municipalities (see appendix on page 31).

Some of the key agencies involved in this vector are the CCP International Liaison Department; the Ministry of State Security; MOFA; the Ministry of Education; PRC state and city governments; SOEs; major PRC corporations and some foreign-based Chinese-owned corporations; the CPAFFC (*Youxie*, 友协); the PRC Ministry of Education's Hanban and the Confucius institutes; the Chinese People's Institute for Foreign Affairs; and the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, along with other such CCP front organisations.

Targeting political leaders

CCP united front work often uses former senior politicians and community leaders as bridges to current

administrations. Foreign economic and political elites are offered access to the CCP leadership and support for business opportunities and vanity projects in exchange for supporting China's policies, providing information, or offering silence during critical public debates. The CCP builds up asset relationships with susceptible individuals via China-based political hospitality at all-expenses-paid conferences; paid talks; and paid and unpaid 'advisory' roles and consultancies. If necessary, prominent individuals may be compromised via hacking of devices used while in China, bribery, honey traps or even intimidation tactics such as denial of business opportunities or visas to China.¹⁸⁹

The former leader of the anti-independence movement in New Caledonia, Jacques Lafleur, who made his fortune from nickel mining,¹⁹⁰ may have been a CCP target. In the late 1990s, he employed one of the PRC migrants who had come on the two people-smuggling boats as his family chef.¹⁹¹ She in turn invited her relative, who formerly worked for the CCP's important Central Documents and Translation Department and still maintains contact with that organisation, to join her in New Caledonia.¹⁹² Both women helped Lafleur, and subsequently other New Caledonian political leaders, to establish political connections in China, facilitating several non-publicised visits of elites to discuss business opportunities.¹⁹³ The Lafleur family originally owned the mining company SMSP, which was purchased in 1990 by subsidiaries of the pro-independence North Province and Loyalty Islands provincial governments.

Lafleur's name appears in the Zhenhua Overseas Key Information Database (OKIDB) dataset. In 2020, Zhenhua Data Information Technology made global headlines when independent researchers revealed that it had been collecting information on prominent individuals around the world—2.4 million of them. Only 10% of the dataset was recovered.¹⁹⁴ The OKIDB dataset contains the names and personal information of elites in the US, Oceania and Europe.

A total of 31 New Caledonians were listed in the recovered OKIDB dataset under the category of 'politically exposed people' (PEP), along with their relatives. 'PEP' is a term used in financial regulation to describe someone with a prominent public role. CCP intelligence agencies have historically used blackmail and other forms of coercion,

as well as bribery and the exploitation of psychological weaknesses, to develop asset relationships with prominent individuals.

Among the New Caledonian PEPs and their family members who appeared in the OKIDB dataset were Jean-Pierre Taïb-Aïfa, former Mayor of Bourail; Pascal Vittori, Mayor of Boulouparis; Philippe Blaise, Vice-President of South Province; Raphaël Mapou, former FLNKS spokesperson; relatives of the Mayor of Kouaoua, Alcide Ponga; anti-independence activist MP Gaël Yanno; the former Secretary-General of France's representative office in New Caledonia; and one of the negotiators of the Noumea Accord. The list of names and associations would have required detailed, granular, knowledge of the New Caledonian political landscape. Not all the information could have been gleaned from data-scraping. France also appears in the OKIDB dataset, with 7,259 names. This was the greatest number of entries for any EU nation. The New Caledonian names in the dataset are mostly figures who are either anti-independence, centrists or moderates or work for the French authorities in senior positions. China is always interested as to whether foreign elites are politically 'friendly' (友好) or hostile to China's interests. The OKIDB dataset represents the 'before' stage of foreign interference. The first step is to identify targets and their associates. The next step is to gather data on them and determine whether they're friendly to China's policies and whether they have any secrets that can be exploited. The final step is to make an approach to cultivate a relationship. This could be the offer of a business opportunity, a directorship or other honour, an all-expenses paid conference trip in China, or a political donation offered via an intermediary.¹⁹⁵

An independent New Caledonia would certainly be in the CCP's interests. And the CCP has a longstanding policy of supporting national self-determination movements around the world, providing training and supplying funding and weapons.¹⁹⁶ In the 1980s, according to Liu Jiyou, some of the leading figures in the Chinese Association of New Caledonia and New Caledonia's wealthy ethnic Chinese businessmen Athon Chang (房子成) and himself helped funnel cash from the CCP to the Kanak independence group, the FLNKS.¹⁹⁷ Liu says that they liaised with the current President of the New Caledonian Congress, Roch Wamytan, to disburse the funds. Roch Wamytan confirmed that history and highlighted the role of Kanak separatist

leaders Jean-Marie Tjibaou and Yann Célééné Uregeï in links with China in the 1980s. He said that Tjibaou also sought support from Taiwan.¹⁹⁸ According to Liu, the CCP sent funds to the FLNKS from Malaysia to Vanuatu, then on to New Caledonia.¹⁹⁹ Liu Jiyou says that then Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad also helped to support the connections.²⁰⁰ Liu Jiyou said that, in 1987, FLNKS personnel were sent to China for training.²⁰¹ Famously, some members of the FLNKS received funding and training from Libya in those years,²⁰² but the support that some of them received from the CCP has never previously been made public. The CCP continues to maintain strong connections with key FLNKS political leaders at the central as well as local level—essentially the core of opposition to France’s continued control of New Caledonia.

Roch Wamytan, who’s a senior leader of core FLNKS political party *Union calédonienne* (Caledonian Union), visited the PRC in 2017 as an opposition member of the New Caledonian Congress to discuss the possibility of using China’s renminbi as the currency for an independent New Caledonia. Wamytan became President of the New Caledonian Congress (the equivalent of Parliamentary Speaker of the House) in 2019, and he also held that role from 2011 to 2012 and from 2013 to 2014; he was President of FLNKS from 1995 to 2001, and President of *Union calédonienne* from 1999 to 2001. Wamytan helped negotiate the Noumea Agreement, he was president of the Melanesian Spearhead Group from 2001 to 2003, and was formerly the lead international spokesperson for the FLNKS. He is also the customary chief of the St Louis tribe. After Wamytan’s visit to China, the then member of the New Caledonian Government in charge of finance held follow-up discussions with PRC representatives. The proposed plan is that New Caledonia would swap nickel for renminbi cash.²⁰³

Wamytan told French journalist Sébastien Schneegans in 2020, ‘We are not afraid of China. It was France, not China that colonised us.’ That’s a fairly typical statement from Mr Wamytan, but his following comments are less in character and read like classic CCP talking points. According to Schneegans, Wamytan added, ‘China stands by itself, poses as a reliable ally of these countries.’ In the eyes of the Pacific island countries, Beijing represents an unwavering ally, concerned about their economic development, because it systematically adopts a ‘win–win’ approach.²⁰⁴

Paul Néaoutyine, the leader of the Kanak Liberation Party (Palika), a party within the FLNKS, and President of the Provincial Assembly of North Province, made official visits to China in 2010 and 2018.²⁰⁵ Néaoutyine’s 2018 visit marked the establishment of the joint nickel-processing plant between North Province nickel company SMSP and a PRC SOE. He has made only bland public statements about China. The North Province Assembly aims to follow a pragmatic and strategic approach in dealing with China and other foreign economic partners, balancing each and not allowing one to become more dominant.²⁰⁶

There’s long been a plan to set up an FLNKS office in China. Under Xi Jinping, the CCP is increasingly focusing on party-to-party political links as a tool of united front work.²⁰⁷ FLNKS representatives maintain regular links with the PRC Government via the PRC Consulate in Tahiti and the PRC Embassy in Vanuatu.²⁰⁸ FLNKS leaders meet with the PRC Ambassador whenever they’re visiting Vanuatu, which is often. They also meet with Chinese officials on the sidelines of international meetings, such as at the UN Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee) or Non-Aligned Movement meetings. FLNKS has strong associations with the Non-Aligned Movement. In June 2023, an FLNKS delegation led by Roch Wamytan gave a presentation on the decolonisation process in New Caledonia at the Non-Aligned Movement annual meeting in Azerbaijan. At the meeting, Wamytan accused France of having a ‘dictatorial government’.²⁰⁹

Roch Wamytan says that the New Caledonian Congress and PRC People’s Congress have an exchange agreement—although there’s no public information of that link.²¹⁰ Wamytan says that the agreement was set up by the PRC Consulate in Tahiti.²¹¹ The New Caledonian Congress is a mixed-member proportional representation system. Since 2019, a coalition of pro-independence parties has formed the majority and held the key positions of authority. The anti-independence opposition parties keep a close watch on the China connections of the current FLNKS-majority government, which may have slowed some developments. Yet, when foreign interference activities experience opposition at the central government level, the CCP has a pattern of targeting subnational entities and elites.²¹² And the CCP approach appears to suit some within the independence movement in New Caledonia, which has its own tradition of clandestine activities. As a result of the heightened public interest about perceptions that China

was targeting New Caledonia for political interference, from 2018 links with New Caledonia's pro-independence parties and other elites appear to have increasingly moved to the local level and to more junior personnel, as outlined in the section below.

The Belt and Road Initiative as a vector for foreign interference

In 2014, Xi Jinping launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—a global political, economic and strategic policy. PLA spokesperson Peng Guangqian has said that the BRI aims to reshape the global order.²¹³ The BRI is a China-centric order, connecting China to its partner states via a network of roads, railways and ports, as well as a 'Digital Silk Road' that will connect China's BRI partners to China's own information communication systems, such as Huawei and Beidou GNSS.

Initially, the BRI focused on central Asia and Europe, but, in 2015, China announced that Oceania would also be part of the initiative and that the Pacific had an important role to play in China's broader BRI strategy. An article published in the CCP newspaper *Global Times* in 2015 proudly stated that the reason for including the South Pacific in the BRI was to break the US's island-chains China containment strategy, which has been in place since the Cold War era. The CCP leadership plans to use economic means to bind South Pacific states—including Australia and New Zealand—to China, thereby undermining the US containment policy. The *Global Times* article concluded that 'the new southern section of the Maritime Silk Road, which is quietly changing the world's strategic landscape, achieves the goal of killing two birds with one stone: realising the great Chinese dream and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.'²¹⁴

Some of the key agencies involved in this vector are the National Development and Reform Commission (the lead agency), the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council, MOFA and other relevant state agencies, PRC SOEs, major private PRC corporations, and the CPAFFC (aka the Friendship Association, *Youxie*, 友协).

The Friendship Association is the CCP's main united front organisation for targeting foreign economic and political elites, especially at the subnational level or in countries that don't have diplomatic relations with

China. 'Friendship' (友谊), 'friendly relations' (友好关系) and 'old friends of China' (中国人民的老朋友) are all political terms in China. The Friendship Association has three 'mothers-in-law' (to use the parlance of the CCP system): MOFA, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (which is under the CCP Central Committee's UFWD) and the CCP Central Committee International Liaison Department. In the Xi era, the Friendship Association has been given the task of expanding the BRI worldwide.

The Pacific-China Friendship Association—a united front organisation that coordinates 16 united front friendship associations in Pacific nations and territories—is China's main point of contact for rolling out the BRI in the South Pacific.²¹⁵ All the PRC's 10 small island state diplomatic partners in the Pacific have signed BRI agreements.

Due to New Caledonia's unique governance situation, setting up a 'friendship association' that could manage subnational relations with China was the first step in getting New Caledonia to join the BRI. In 2016, the President of the Pacific-China Friendship Association, Hiri Ottino, reached out to Michel Fongue of the Chinese Association of New Caledonia for help on setting up such an organisation in New Caledonia. Fongue recommended Karine Shan to be the founding President of the new group.²¹⁶ Karine Shan was then Secretary-General of the Loyalty Island Provincial Government company SODIL. After 2018, she became chief of staff in the office of Roch Wamytan.

The *Association d'Amitié Sino-Calédonienne* was set up in 2016 with a total of 13 members.²¹⁷ The organisation was given authority by the New Caledonian Congress and France's then High Commissioner to represent New Caledonia in expanding relations with China. Mickaël Forrest, Permanent Secretary for External Affairs of the FLNKS, Vice President of the independentist party *l'Union calédonienne* and a member of the New Caledonian Government, took the role of Secretary of the new group.²¹⁸ The organisation's name in English and Chinese is the New Caledonia – China Friendship Association (NCCFA) (新喀里多尼亚中国友好协会).²¹⁹

The NCCFA is a member of the Pacific-China Friendship Association, and its parent body is the CPAFFC. Roch Wamytan said that establishing the NCCFA to work with the CPAFFC was the 'easiest route' to expand New

Caledonia – China relations, as New Caledonia doesn't yet have diplomatic relations with the PRC.²²⁰

In December 2016, a CPAFFC delegation spent a week visiting New Caledonia. They discussed potential cooperation projects, including setting up a Confucius Institute, tourism development, investment in nickel and aquaculture, a China – New Caledonia Hainan Airlines air route, and technology transfer. Hainan Airlines is part of what was once HNA Group, which has been closely associated with CCP united front work activities.²²¹ The delegation visited Noumea and the Loyalty Islands, but notably not North Province. In 2017, the PRC Ambassador to France was invited by the NCCFA to visit New Caledonia.²²² The Ambassador visited Noumea, Lifou in the Loyalty Islands, the Isle of Pines and Bourail, but again, not North Province. During the visit, the Ambassador told a gathering of the local Chinese community that New Caledonia was going to be joining the BRI.²²³

In 2019, France agreed to participate in the BRI on a case-by-case basis,²²⁴ so it should have been straightforward for New Caledonia to join in, too. The New Caledonian Government has the right to form international agreements relating to fisheries, maritime matters and trade. Yet New Caledonia has still not signed up to the BRI. Despite this, the island territory is listed as a BRI destination in a 2021 Xinhua News Service handbook.²²⁵

The BRI was a key topic of discussion during the NCCFA's visit to China in May 2017.²²⁶ An NCCFA delegation consisting of President Karine Shan, Vice-President Johanito Wamytan (a nephew of Roch Wamytan) and two other delegates visited China as guests of the CPAFFC. Their trip received very detailed and positive coverage in the New Caledonian newspaper *Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes*.

The NCCFA delegation visited Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Shanghai and Beijing. Like many foreign delegations hosted by CCP united front organisations, they were taken on a tour of Huawei headquarters in Guangzhou. They then met with PRC Ministry of Education representatives to discuss educational exchanges and scholarships for New Caledonian students; with the Guangzhou Foreign Affairs Office to discuss visa-free entry for Chinese citizens to New Caledonia; and with a maritime research centre to discuss potential marine investments in New Caledonia.²²⁷ They next flew to Shanghai for a one-day 'BRI South Pacific

Economic Cooperation Seminar' hosted by the Shanghai Institute of International Affairs, sponsored by Tianrui Investment Company and held at Shanghai Maritime University.²²⁸ Tianrui and the CPAFFC were behind the plan to set up a controversial fish-processing plant on Hao Island, which is a former French military base in French Polynesia.²²⁹

Despite the name of the seminar, the small New Caledonian delegation and the President of the Pacific–China Friendship Association, Hiri Ottino, and two other representatives from French Polynesia were the only foreign participants.²³⁰ Xie Yuan, Vice Chairman of the CPAFFC, delivered a speech. New Caledonia was the main focus of the event. Around 50 academics and officials also attended and gave presentations. Karine Shan said that she heard several presentations emphasising New Caledonia as a key source of strategic minerals for China. Other talks stated that New Caledonia had untapped aquaculture opportunities, which could be a future source of income for the territory.²³¹ Aquaculture isn't a strategic industry in New Caledonia, unlike nickel, so there are less sensitivities about China's investment in that sector.²³²

During their visit, the delegation signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the CPAFFC, which confirmed that the NCCFA would be the PRC's 'point of contact in New Caledonia'. The aim of the MoU was 'to deepen friendly relations between the two countries in the cultural, educational, tourist and economic fields'.²³³ More specifically, the delegation was tasked with following up on a tourism development proposal, a BRI aquaculture investment plan and the air link with Hainan Airlines. The expansion of mining was highlighted as a point of contact between the two countries, along with increased tourism numbers.²³⁴

Soon after the visit, the *Mouvement des Entreprises de France de Nouvelle-Calédonie* (Medef-NC), New Caledonia's business association, asked the NCCFA to facilitate a visit to China to discuss economic opportunities. There was also discussion of New Caledonia setting up a free trade zone with China.

By early 2018, the New Caledonian Government, which was then led by an anti-independence coalition, had a plan to establish a mission of the President of New Caledonia (the formal head of government) in China. The former head of the External Office of the New Caledonian

Government, Francois Bockel, told me that the aim was to better control China – New Caledonia relations, rather than having CCP united front efforts leading interactions.²³⁵ The pro-independence FLNKS-majority government that followed hasn't put this plan into place.

In April 2018, Karine Shan and Johanito Wamytan, along with Hiria Ottino, the President of the Pacific–China Friendship Association, met with China Pictorial Publishers in China to arrange the publication of a book of poems and drawings by Karine Shan in a bilingual French–Chinese edition.²³⁶ *China Pictorial* is one of the CCP's most longstanding foreign-propaganda magazines.

Then, in September 2018, Thierry Miloud, a restaurateur, was named as the new President of the NCCFA, and Jean Patrick Lerandy, of *Association Maintenance Durable*, a business cluster that works closely with Vanuatu, was named Vice President on the association's social-media page. Yet, in November 2018, it was Karine Shan and Johanito Wamytan who represented New Caledonia at the CPAFFC's 2018 Friendship Forum for American and Oceanian Regions in Hainan Island.²³⁷

France's policy on China – New Caledonia links began to change in 2018. The NCCFA attracted increasing pushback, both in New Caledonia and in France.²³⁸ There appear to have been no public NCCFA events in New Caledonia since 2018.

The pro-independence Loyalty Islands provincial government now appears to be continuing the agenda established by the NCCFA. In 2019, the Provincial Assembly of the Loyalty Islands announced plans to establish an international airport and a regional airline backed by China, as part of a consortium working with partners in Vanuatu.²³⁹ The Loyalty Islands Provincial Assembly also proposed setting up a free trade zone.

In July 2019, Siamelie Latu, Secretary General of the Tonga China Friendship Association, announced that the Pacific–China Friendship Association was working on a feasibility study for a regional airline to connect all the PICs with China.²⁴⁰ In November 2019, the Solomon Islands Government signed an agreement with a Chinese defence and aerospace company to develop three airfields into a regional Pacific air hub, connected back to China.²⁴¹

In September 2019, the President of the Assembly of the Loyalty Islands Province, Jacques Lalié, met with the PRC

Ambassador to Vanuatu to discuss subnational-level cooperation between China and New Caledonia. Lalié told PRC Ambassador Zhou Haicheng that 'the local governments of New Caledonia are willing to strengthen exchanges with Chinese provinces and cities, to deepen practical cooperation and add new impetus to local development.'²⁴² In November 2019, the Loyalty Islands Provincial Assembly authorised its economic subsidiary SODIL to create a business plan to establish the Loyalty Islands' own airline, Air Oceania.²⁴³

In October 2022, Lifou's Wanaham Airport was refurbished to host international flights at a cost of over 1 billion CFP francs (US\$9.2 million). The project was heavily subsidised by France. The airport has so far dispatched a single international flight to Vanuatu. For now, the only international flights to the airport are likely to be charter flights.²⁴⁴ That might happen sooner than expected. In June 2023, Hainan Airlines suddenly dispatched five charter flights per week for five weeks from China to Samoa. The flights weren't approved by the Samoan Tourist Authority; they were hosted by a company associated with a leading Samoan politician set up only weeks before the flights began.²⁴⁵ China funded and built the expansion of Samoa's Faleolo International Airport in 2018.²⁴⁶ The stated purpose of the Loyalty Islands' new airport is to triple tourism numbers to the islands by 2030, to 300,000 per annum.²⁴⁷ Those are the same figures as were quoted by the PRC Ambassador in 2017, when promoting mass tourism from China as an income source for New Caledonia.²⁴⁸ In an interview in June 2023 to discuss the Loyalty Islands tourism plans, Jacques Lalié told a reporter, 'there are partners who want to get back on with us, and if they require us to, we will have to transform society.'²⁴⁹

Unlike the other two New Caledonian provinces, Loyalty Islands Province doesn't have mineral resources. However, it does have useful geography. Lifou sits alongside one of the main sea lines of communication and air routes of the Pacific. In World War II, Lifou hosted a small US military intelligence presence and coastwatcher observation stations run by Kanak locals. The observer stations kept track of shipping and plane movements. They were part of the Pacific-wide coastwatchers intelligence network run by Australia, New Zealand and the US From Kiribati,²⁵⁰ to Vanuatu,²⁵¹ to French Polynesia.²⁵² China has repeatedly tried to gain access to militarily significant

locations, all in the name of BRI infrastructure investment. There's a risk that the China–Pacific air hub in the Solomons, and satellite airports such as Wanaham and Samoa's Faleolo Airport, could be used for both civil and military-related purposes.

The years of the Covid-19 pandemic, from 2020 to 2022, briefly slowed the further expansion of New Caledonia's BRI links with China. In May 2020, in the first months of the global pandemic, the Chinese media recorded that the CPAFFC sent a planeload of personal protective equipment (PPE) to Pacific countries, including French Polynesia. The association said that it also had PPE ready to donate to New Caledonia and Wallis and Futuna.²⁵³ China offered Sinopharm vaccines to all its small-island diplomatic partners in the Pacific. Countries were required to share their vaccine data as a condition of receiving China's vaccines. The UK's MI6 has described this as a 'data trap'.²⁵⁴ New Caledonia didn't accept any Covid-19-related assistance from China. Instead, France launched a massive, military-scale, effort to assist the territory with the Covid-19 outbreak, providing PPE, vaccines and additional doctors and nurses from metropolitan France.

China reopened its border in January 2023. In May 2023, the CPAFFC hosted the China–Pacific People-to-People Friendship Forum in Fuzhou. There were representatives from all the 16 groups within the Pacific–China Friendship Association. The focus of the forum was on fostering local-level (province-to-province and municipality-to-municipality) relations.²⁵⁵ Three members of the NCCFA attended. The delegation consisted of Johanito Wamytan, once again listed as the Vice President of the NCCFA, who in 2019 became chief of staff of the New Caledonia Congress majority grouping of the *Union calédonienne*–FLNKS, *Union nationale pour l'indépendance* (National Union for Independence) and *L'Éveil Océanien* (Oceanian Awakening);²⁵⁶ the Mayor of Ponérihouen, Pierre-Chanel Tutugoro, who's Secretary-General of the FLNKS-affiliated *l'Union calédonienne* as well as since 2021 the President of the New Caledonia Congress majority grouping; along with the Deputy-Mayor of Ponérihouen, Jean-Pierre Poma.²⁵⁷ It's worth noting that, in 2022, Karine Shan moved from her role in central government to become the Secretary General of the Municipality of Ponérihouen.

The NCCFA has tended to keep a low public profile since public opinion began to turn against China – New Caledonia links. However, a few days after violent unrest erupted in New Caledonia in May 2024, NCCFA Vice President Johanito Wamytan posted on X, 'If Kanaky was "invaded" by China as the anti-independentists say, then it would all be done in 5 days and there would be nothing France could do about it. Just saying.'²⁵⁸

Media, culture and education as vectors of foreign interference

The CCP's go-global, multiplatform, international strategic communication strategy aims to control international perceptions about China and the policies of the CCP (让党的主张成为时代最强音). All forms of mass communication are utilised, from films and advertising to new media, academic and non-academic publications, education and cultural links.²⁵⁹ Promoting a positive view of the BRI is an important task of that information strategy.

Some of the key agencies involved in this vector are the State Council Information Office; the CCP Central Committee Propaganda Department; Xinhua News Service; *CGTN*; *China Radio International*; MOFA; the Ministry of Education; the Ministry of Culture, Hanban and the Confucius institutes; the Chinese People's Institute for Foreign Affairs; the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations; and the CPAFFC.

The expansion of cultural, educational and people-to-people links between China and New Caledonia is one of the key tasks of the NCCFA. The goal is to build up positive public opinion towards the PRC so as to improve the likelihood of developing further links in the future. During the 2017 NCCFA delegation's visit to China, the Shanghai Municipal Government proposed that youth from New Caledonia could participate in an international youth united front event. In 2018, five New Caledonian youths were granted scholarships to attend the International Youth Interactive Friendship Camp in Shanghai.²⁶⁰ Shanghai hosted a New Caledonian cultural group at the 2017 Shanghai International Arts Festival for one month.²⁶¹ The Shanghai Government also raised the possibility of broadcasting promotional clips about New Caledonia on a Shanghai television channel.

The CPAFFC further proposed that a Confucius Institute be set up at the University of New Caledonia, with

Ningbo University as the partner.²⁶² Confucius institutes play an important role in the CCP external propaganda system; their core task is to create a cadre of pro-China Chinese speakers globally. They've also been linked to espionage.²⁶³ Much pressure and effort were put into the University of New Caledonia – Confucius Institute initiative, over several years. However, the then Vice Chancellor of the university opposed the idea, and the plan hasn't yet been implemented. The New Caledonian education system already has its own small Chinese-language program. Tuband Middle School and Lapérouse High School both offer Chinese classes, as does the University of New Caledonia.²⁶⁴

The Friendship Association also discussed the possibility of scholarships for New Caledonian students to study in China. In 2018, New Caledonian students were invited to apply, via the NCCFA, for two scholarships at Shanghai Maritime University as part of China's Pacific Belt and Road program, and for a separate five-year scholarship to study for an undergraduate degree there.²⁶⁵

Conclusion

The CCP has engaged in a range of foreign interference activities in New Caledonia, targeting political and economic elites, and attempting to utilise the ethnic Chinese diaspora and PRC companies as tools of CCP interests. Local elites have at times actively courted China's assistance, willingly working with CCP front organisations. This report has provided detailed evidence of CCP foreign interference activities in New Caledonia, as well as counter-responses and impacts. Documenting these activities and relationships is a necessary step to determining appropriate boundaries and fostering healthy relations in future New Caledonia – China relations.

New Caledonia has a very divided society, an unstable political future and considerable economic disparities. Those weaknesses put the territory at great risk of being affected by CCP foreign interference efforts. The lack of understanding of CCP foreign policy agendas and methods by some within France and New Caledonia appears to have resulted in some naive and risky policy decisions in the past. New Caledonia is overexposed to the Chinese market for its exports and could well be for decades to come. The

The NCCFA's attempts to create positive public opinion for China in the territory appear to have been somewhat unsuccessful, at least among the wider population and in the media. There was much initial excitement and optimism in the then New Caledonian Government and across society about the expansion of links with China in 2016 and 2017.²⁶⁶ However, that moment may have passed. There's been a significant increase in awareness of and concern about China in the New Caledonian media, but not in the direction that the CCP would like. The main newspaper in New Caledonia, *Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes*, carried very optimistic coverage of China in 2016 and 2017, especially regarding opportunities for New Caledonia, but from 2020 to 2024 coverage was mostly gloomy and negative, reflecting international reporting on Covid-19, Xinjiang, Hong Kong and China's expansionist activities in the Pacific.

Loyalty Islands appears to be *de facto* participating in the BRI, carrying out what was started in 2017. The NCCFA is continuing its work, which is now focused on local-level relations. It appears to be operating as a closed group. It no longer seeks public attention or support for its efforts, while continuing to represent New Caledonia in meetings in China. The current government of the New Caledonian Congress appears to endorse those efforts by allowing a government official, Johanito Wamytan, to participate and represent New Caledonia at meetings in China.

Due to the devolution of powers, France is limited in the extent to which it can respond to some of those infringements of sovereignty. The Macron government is clearly very worried by China's foreign interference activities in New Caledonia and the talk of opening the territory to other militaries. In a speech to a large crowd in Noumea during his presidential visit in July 2023, Emmanuel Macron warned, 'If independence means choosing tomorrow to have a Chinese base here or to depend on other fleets, good luck to you, that's not independence!' And Macron emphasised that 'Nickel

is a resource for New Caledonia. It is also, and I say this strongly here, a major strategic resource for France and Europe, at a time when we have undertaken a massive reindustrialisation effort. As such, nickel must be able to be taken [to be] included in EU legislation on critical raw materials.²⁶⁷

Yet France's China policies, which both warn of dangers and then at times appear to promote and support China's agenda, have caused confusion as well as suspicion in some circles in New Caledonia that French vigilance of CCP interference is purely to justify its continued governance of the territory. France's strategic ambiguity may seem politically expedient in the short term, but it will be damaging in the long term because it serves to validate China's interests and agenda. It's also damaging to France's reputation among partners in Europe and the Pacific.

Initially, France and many both pro- and anti-independence New Caledonian politicians were enthusiastic about expanding relations with China. However, there was a shift in thinking on this from 2018 onwards, as documented in this paper. In response, the CCP's united front efforts targeted at New Caledonia have become more secretive, gone local, and gone offshore.

Australia, New Zealand, France, the US and many other states also began changing their policies towards China at that time, especially regarding concerns about CCP foreign interference. In September 2018, the Five Eyes partners established a counter-foreign-interference group along with France, Germany, Japan and other like-minded states.²⁶⁸ The foreign interference activities of China and Russia are the focus. In 2018, the Pacific Islands Forum's heads of government signed the Boe Declaration on Regional Security, which redefined the concept of security in the region, highlighting political interference as a concern.²⁶⁹

PRC official sources cynically observed that pushback, stating that 'France's strategy so far has been to rely on its alliance with Australia to curb the expansion of China's local influence.'²⁷⁰ However, as my research has shown, the French Government and some New Caledonian authorities used the levers of their own democratic laws and systems to manage risks in the China – New Caledonia relationship. Moreover, civil society, the New Caledonian media, pro-*status quo* politicians as well as some pro-independence ones, and Kanak traditional leadership

and society have all had a role in restraining the extent of the CCP's foreign interference activities in New Caledonia. Few Pacific island peoples would welcome a relationship of dependency with China or having the Pacific become part of a China-centred order.

Many of the New Caledonian politicians and societal leaders whom I interviewed highlighted what they perceived as Vanuatu's client-state relationship with China as a negative example of engagement that New Caledonia was keen to avoid. Anti-independence politician Didier Leroux told me, 'Vanuatu is seen as an example of what could come here should we become independent.'²⁷¹ Emmanuel Tjibaou, who was elected in 2024 as a member of the French National Assembly for New Caledonia's second constituency and was formally the Director of the Tjibaou Cultural Centre, said that, while New Caledonia is a relatively disunited society, a New Caledonian identity and patriotism is beginning to take shape based on what the people do *not* want. A growing view among many is that New Caledonia doesn't have the ability to stand up to China, whereas France is easier to deal with.²⁷² Andre Dang Van Nha, a long-term adviser to the North Province Assembly and manager of nickel company SMSP, said that many in New Caledonia want to know more about who the China partner is, and what political and economic risks they bring.²⁷³ Dang described the PRC as 'invaders', saying that China is very dangerous for New Caledonia, as it's too populous and too strong. Dang appears to have had a change of heart on the China risk, for in 2012 he was instrumental in linking SMSP to Yangzhou Yichuan Nickel.²⁷⁴

The President of the Congress of New Caledonia, Roch Wamytan, said that the FLNKS won't let any great power control New Caledonia—neither France, nor China. He said that New Caledonia will learn from the mistakes of other Pacific countries. He noted that Vanuatu and Tonga (known for its 42% of GDP debt to China) don't have any natural resources, but New Caledonia has nickel. He said that the FLNKS wants to create a relationship of equilibrium between France and China. Wamytan said that he understands the advantages of New Caledonia for Australia, New Zealand, France, China and the US, and he also understands the dangers of China. Wamytan added that France wants influence in the Pacific, but that it can't have *carte blanche* (complete freedom).²⁷⁵

In the eyes of FLNKS leaders, France—and Western governments interested in maintaining the *status quo*—must do more to win their support. In 2022, after giving a virtual presentation as a representative of the New Caledonian Government during US Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s visit to the Pacific, Mickaël Forrest, the Permanent Secretary for External Affairs of the FLNKS, Vice President of the independentist party *l’Union calédonienne*, member of the New Caledonian Government and founding Secretary of the NCCFA, described the geopolitical situation in the Pacific as a ‘war of influence’. In response to a question on the need for France and the US to have strong Indo-Pacific strategies in the face of China’s aggressive actions, Forrest said that:

China is [New Caledonia’s] number one buyer in terms of our trade. From there, we must find a balance ... [I]t is necessary to launch appeals to the great powers to ensure that each territory and each island can continue to prosper while taking care to guard against negative situations at the geopolitical level ... Today we see a ‘double’ Indo-Pacific axis: one driven more by France, the other by the United States. And China is quite present in the region. We have no interest in taking sides, except to continue to build our political destiny on the basis of our common heritage, that is to say the Matignon and Noumea agreements.²⁷⁶

New Caledonian political leaders across the political spectrum have made it clear that they want to be treated as equals by international partners. In the past two years, New Caledonia and French Polynesia have been increasingly included in US-led Pacific security conversations. In April 2022, as noted above, they were included in a meeting between US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Pacific leaders in Suva, Fiji.²⁷⁷ They were included in the ground-breaking US – Pacific Island Country Summit held in Washington in September 2022,²⁷⁸ and the follow-up summit in 2023. The President of the Government of New Caledonia, Louis Mapou, said in a speech at the 2022 summit that the integration of New Caledonia in the Pacific is a priority for his government, and he discussed potential partnerships with the US.²⁷⁹ New Caledonia was also part of the Partners in the Blue Pacific ministerial meeting in September 2022.²⁸⁰ In October 2023, the US Ambassador to France visited New Caledonia and French Polynesia for the first time ever to discuss cooperation possibilities and the US’s Indo-Pacific

strategy.²⁸¹ Including New Caledonia in all current regional security discussions is a visible demonstration that France, as well as regional partners such as Australia, New Zealand and the US, support New Caledonian autonomy and resilience.²⁸²

Yet, for some in New Caledonia’s pro-independence forces, being included in regional security discussions with traditional partners isn’t enough. A 2021 FLNKS report emphasised that the political group would want to ramp up relations with China if New Caledonia were to achieve independence.²⁸³ That could create significant instability in the region. For example, any move to make New Caledonia the ‘Djibouti of the Pacific’ and invite in a Chinese military presence would attract strong pushback from other PICs.²⁸⁴ The same report highlights that the FLNKS is aiming for a balance between China and France, and that it doesn’t want New Caledonia to be caught up in France’s Indo-Pacific strategy against China. The report notes that Australia has already paid a price for confronting China.²⁸⁵ Yet Australia only changed its policies towards China after overwhelming evidence of the CCP’s foreign interference activities against it.²⁸⁶

Despite President Macron’s strong words about China’s ‘hegemony’ in the Pacific in 2018, or his remarks in 2023 about a potential Chinese military base in New Caledonia, he still seems to be avoiding directly confronting China. In September 2022, Macron told a gathering of French ambassadors that France should maintain ‘geopolitical independence’ from China’s behaviour, as well as from the response of the US and other allies.²⁸⁷ Yet the evidence in this report of the extent of China’s covert activities in New Caledonia and long-term agenda to usurp France’s interests belies the claim that France can separate itself from current geopolitics, or that the problem primarily lies with the US.

China is engaging in foreign interference activities not only in New Caledonia: it also conducts similar foreign interference activities in French Polynesia²⁸⁸ and the other external territories of France, as well as France itself.²⁸⁹ Public discussion about this issue has only just begun in France.²⁹⁰ To prepare for the future, action must be taken now. An informed public is a resilient public. And a robust public conversation is needed within New Caledonia itself on the role of China and other potential partners in the territory’s political and economic future, as well as

discussions of legislative and policy change to deal with the loopholes that CCP foreign interference is exploiting.

New Caledonia's exports are skewed towards China. As a result of the riots and unrest since May 2024, the economy is in crisis.²⁹¹ New Caledonia is at a crossroads. France, the EU, Australia, Japan, Singapore, Korea, New Zealand, the US and other partners should consider what role they can play in helping to diversify and rebalance the New Caledonian economy as a means of supporting greater resilience and autonomy. The Pacific Islands Forum could help to negotiate a peaceful end to the social and political crisis.

New Caledonia's agreed transition to greater autonomy must include discussions of how a sovereign independent or semi-autonomous New Caledonia / Kanaky would defend itself against external threats, as well as other

security risks. For now, all negotiations for New Caledonia's future are 'within the framework of the Republic' (of France),²⁹² but FLNKS leaders are pitching for full independence.²⁹³ Might evidence in this report lead the FLNKS to reassess its sanguine view of expanding relations with the PRC and the set-up for New Caledonia's future?

France and the people of New Caledonia could negotiate to adjust their security relationship to follow the model of other Pacific territories, such as the Cook Islands or Niue, which are both sovereign but supported by New Zealand on foreign affairs and defence; or establish a compact arrangement such as that between the US and the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands and Palau. Whatever the outcome, France and New Caledonia must find a way to manage the risks, as well as the opportunities, of engaging with China.

Recommendations

1. New Caledonia must be included in all regional security discussions as an equal partner; for example, it would be a natural partner for Pacific counter-foreign-interference discussions.
2. The French Government must talk frankly about CCP foreign interference activities in metropolitan France and its external territories, as well as the risk in the Pacific, and adopt an all-of-government, total-defence, approach to the China challenge.
3. New Caledonia needs to rebalance its economy. Supportive partner states can do more to help with this.

Appendix: New Caledonia politics and governance

New Caledonia is an increasingly autonomous, strategically important archipelago in the Southwest Pacific. It comprises the main island of Grande Terre, the Loyalty Islands and the Belep Archipelago, as well as other remote islands. New Caledonia is rich in mineral resources, notably nickel and cobalt. It has a total landmass of 18,576 square kilometres and an EEZ of 1.4 million square kilometres.

Settlement patterns

The earliest human presence in New Caledonia dates from around 3000 BCE. The first European contact with the indigenous Kanak people was in 1774, during the visit of Great Britain's Captain James Cook, who bestowed on the islands the Roman name for Scotland. Some 19 years later, in 1793, the French navigator Antoine de Bruny d'Entrecasteaux visited New Caledonian territory. France annexed New Caledonia in 1853 based on that visit, to prevent Britain claiming the islands. Today, thanks in no small part to its Pacific territories of New Caledonia, French Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna, and Clipperton Island, France has the second-largest maritime territory in the world, after the US.

From 1864 to 1924, France administered New Caledonia as both a penal colony and a colonial settlement. More than 25,000 prisoners were sent to the territory, most famously the prisoners taken during the fall of the Paris Commune and insurgents from uprisings in Algeria. By 1913, the Kanak population was forced into reserves totalling a mere 7%–to 8% of the main island, while the small European population controlled the rest. France has a long way to go in owning up to its brutal legacy of colonialism, appropriation and exploitation of resources in New Caledonia.²⁹⁴

In 1946, France reclassified New Caledonia as an overseas territory of France. Most Kanaks didn't have the right to vote until 1956.²⁹⁵ During the 1980s, following increasingly violent protests and unrest, France initiated the Matignon and Noumea accords, which began the decolonisation process. After the Noumea Accord was signed in 1998, New Caledonia was divided into three autonomous provinces (North, South, and the Loyalty Islands), with a provincial assembly in each, as well as a territorial

parliament. From 1999, New Caledonia was classified as a *sui generis* collectivity.

According to its 2019 census, New Caledonia has a population of about 271,000.²⁹⁶ Nearly two-thirds of the population live in the capital, Noumea.²⁹⁷ The Kanak people make up 41% of the total population, 24% of New Caledonians are of European descent (local-born and metropolitan French), around 10% are Polynesians (mostly Wallisians), 1% are of North African descent, 1.4% are of Indonesian descent, 1% are of Ni-Vanuatu descent, 0.9% are of Vietnamese descent, and 0.4% (about 1,500 people) are of Chinese descent.²⁹⁸

The ethnic Chinese residents of New Caledonia form three main groups: those whose families came from China to the francophone Pacific generations ago (老桥); Vietnamese people of Chinese descent (Vietnam Hoa kiều, Người Hoa, 越南华人); and those from the PRC (新桥) who arrived more recently. Some came via Tahiti, where there was an established overseas Chinese population; others came from Vietnam to work in the nickel mines in the 1890s.²⁹⁹ Many have married into local families.³⁰⁰

New Caledonia is a relatively divided society, with weak social capital. Strikes, protests and social unrest have become common over the past five years, and over several months in 2024 the society verged on a state of near civil war. There's no one group that represents all the indigenous Kanak people, any more than there's one group that represents those of European descent or other ethnic groups. Kanak society is divided between nationalists and independentists, but, even then, they don't form two united groups. There's a huge gap in views between those who promote independence and those who want to maintain the *status quo*. Over 40% of Kanaks live in urban areas, and there's little formal employment for those who remain behind in traditional areas.

Societal challenges

New Caledonia has one of the largest economies in the South Pacific. In 2019, its GDP was US\$9.44 billion.³⁰¹ Over the past two decades, its GDP per capita has been higher than that of New Zealand. More than 75% of the territory's exports are mineral products and alloys, mainly nickel ore

and ferronickel. Yet despite those high-value exports, the benefits aren't distributed equally within New Caledonian society. Noumea has many squatter camps (*les squats*) scattered through the city, inhabited by Kanak families. Kanak unemployment is high (even considering that a large part of the Kanak population relies on the informal economy). Around 17% of the New Caledonian population live below the poverty line. Income inequality in New Caledonia is 2.4 times greater than in France. In 2020, the rate of unemployment in New Caledonia was 11% in South Province, 24% in North Province and 34% in the Loyalty Islands. The Kanak population are the majority population in the North Province and in the Loyalty Islands.³⁰²

New Caledonia depends on French subsidies to maintain an extensive social-welfare system. Education is free for all, from kindergarten to university. Hence, many have questioned the economic cost of independence. France directly supplements the New Caledonian budget by €1.5 billion every year, which equates to more than 15% of New Caledonia's GDP, as well as indirectly via other subsidies,³⁰³ but the territory still has a budget shortfall. In an extensive report in 2021, New Caledonia's leading pro-independence group, the FLNKS, detailed how New Caledonia could partner more with China as an essential part of the solution to the shortfall in the territory's budget, as well as the projected significant shortfall if New Caledonia were to become independent.³⁰⁴ Diversifying the New Caledonian economy has long been on the political agenda, but the challenge is how to do so without creating new dependencies.

The path to greater autonomy

On 12 December 2021, New Caledonia held its third referendum on the question of independence from France, which was the final vote on independence provided for under the Noumea Accord. The territory again voted to remain with France—this time by 96%, the widest margin of the three votes. The result was challenged by the FLNKS, as large numbers of the indigenous Kanak population boycotted the vote due to a customary mourning period for Covid-19 deaths. The overall turnout was 44%. The vote on the 1988 Matignon Accord, which led to the Noumea Accord, was also boycotted by many Kanak voters, and that vote set in place the decolonisation process on which the referendums were based. At the first referendum on independence, in 2018, with 81% turnout, 56% voted to

remain a territory of France. In the second referendum, in 2020, 53.6% voted to remain, with 86% voter turnout.

Negotiations have been underway since the referendum on the future economic, social and political set-up of New Caledonia.³⁰⁵ In May 2024, France passed legislation expanding voter eligibility in the territory, which resulted in mass protests and severe civil unrest.³⁰⁶ The FLNKS is continuing to call for independence and has succeeded in internationalising the New Caledonian situation. At the time of writing, the society is in a state of flux and severe unrest.

Governance

The 1998 Noumea Accord set up a transition process for decolonisation. Under a concept of shared sovereignty, France has steadily transferred all but central, sovereign, competencies to local authorities.

Under the current system, France retains some powers of government, while the New Caledonian authorities and the provincial assemblies have others. All New Caledonians have French nationality and can vote for the President of France. They also have the right to vote in elections for the European Parliament. New Caledonian voters are represented in the French Parliament by two deputies and two senators.

France's designated representative in New Caledonia is the High Commissioner of the Republic in New Caledonia (*Haut-commissaire de la République en Nouvelle-Calédonie*). The High Commissioner chairs the Mining Council, signs legislation to be brought into force, and is responsible for New Caledonia's security and justice systems. The French state retains sovereign powers (defence, foreign affairs, law and order, immigration, currency, justice, tertiary education, public media, and, crucially, control over nickel, cobalt, lithium, potash and potential hydrocarbon mining licences and sales).³⁰⁷ The French Government also has control over developments at New Caledonia's international airports,³⁰⁸ although not over domestic airports in the territory.

New Caledonia is governed by the 54-member Territorial Congress, a legislative body consisting of members of the assemblies in the North, South and Loyalty Islands provinces. Meanwhile, the Customary Senate

brings together the various traditional councils of the Kanak people.

The Customary Senate has an advisory role in respect of legislative proposals concerning Kanaks. In particular, it gives advice on laws that may affect Kanak identity, the civil customary statutes, and the land system.³⁰⁹

The Customary Senate has asserted that all foreign delegations to New Caledonia must present themselves to representatives of the indigenous people (that is, the New Caledonia Senate) in accordance with customary protocol.³¹⁰ This is now being followed.

The New Caledonian Government leads negotiations over the territory's taxes and finances; the transference of sovereign powers and the timetable for the transfers; labour and social-security laws; maritime affairs; domestic air transport and domestic air security; the telecommunications sector; primary and secondary education; the health sector; land laws; managing natural resources in the EEZ; and the right to issue visas for foreigners to work in New Caledonia.³¹¹ Under current arrangements, all New Caledonia's local legislation is subject to conformity with the French Constitution.

The New Caledonian Government owns the sole local phone company, OPT.³¹² OPT was set up by France in 1958, and ownership was transferred to the New Caledonian authorities in 2003. The government also issues licences for oil and gas supply to New Caledonia, and the company that currently holds this contract supplies all the small island nations and French territories of the Southwest Pacific.

Currency control is one of the competencies that was meant to be transferred to the New Caledonian Government. However New Caledonia, as well as France's other territories in the Pacific, still use the CFP franc. France has proposed that they adopt the euro, but independence groups have so far rejected that, and consensus is needed for the process to begin.³¹³

New Caledonia's shared political powers, political instability and economic inequality provide many potential openings for CCP foreign interference activities.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CANC	Chinese Association of New Caledonia
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CPAFFC	Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries
EEZ	exclusive economic zone
EU	European Union
FANC	<i>Forces armées en Nouvelle-Calédonie</i> (Armed Forces in New Caledonia)
FLNKS	<i>Front de libération nationale kanak et socialiste</i> (Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front)
GDP	gross domestic product
Medef-NC	<i>Mouvement des Entreprises de France de Nouvelle-Calédonie</i> (French Business Movement of New Caledonia)
MOFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (China)
MoU	memorandum of understanding
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCCFA	New Caledonia – China Friendship Association
NCCPRA	New Caledonia – China Peaceful Reunification Association
OKIDB	Overseas Key Information Database
OPT	<i>l'Office des Postes et Télécommunications de Nouvelle-Calédonie</i> (New Caledonia Post and Telecommunications Office)
PICs	Pacific island countries
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLA-N	People's Liberation Army – Navy
PPE	personal protective equipment
PRC	People's Republic of China
PSB	Public Security Bureau (China)
SCRRE	Regional Cooperation and External Relations Unit
SMSP	<i>Société Minière du Sud Pacifique</i> (South Pacific Mining Company)
SOE	state-owned enterprise
UFWD	United Front Work Department
UN	United Nations

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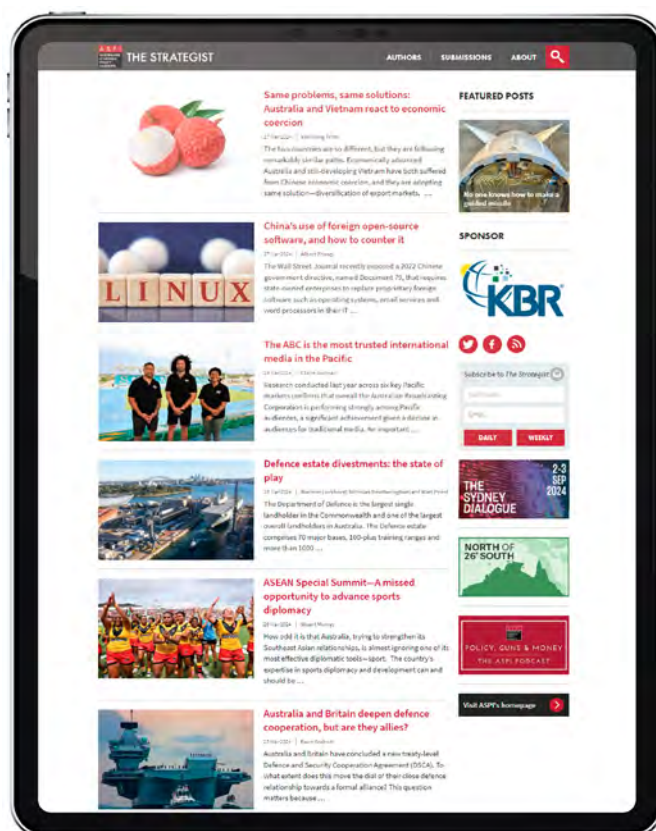


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