



France: That other power in the Pacific

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In March this year it was [reported](#) that France would be sending a Mistral Class amphibious assault vessel to the Pacific to carry out exercises with their Japanese counterparts.

The UK has two Royal Navy Merlin Mk3 helicopters embarked on the French Ship representing the nation. Along with Japan, France and the UK, the US has also been participating in drills as exercises continue around the islands of Guam and Tinian.

This French deployment known as the “Jeanne d’Arc 2017” also features the multi-mission stealth frigate *Courbet*. The annual Mission Jeanne d’Arc is simply a training deployment for the French navy in order for Officers to complete their training. Its significance this year comes from the heightened tensions in the region as China contests its sovereignty over the Spratly Islands and their territorial waters. The US and its allies in the region dispute China’s claims and are keen to show no diplomatic recognition towards them.

So where does France really fit into all this? The major players in the Pacific are generally regarded as the Americans, Chinese, Japan, South Korea and to some extent Australia, a country that is currently attempting to bolster its armed forces in an effort to have a greater presence in the region and slow down Chinese expansion.

France has been in the Pacific region since the 19th century when it was vying for domination against Britain. Since these times France still has two territories in the Pacific: French Polynesia, New Caledonia and the territory of Wallis and Futuna. These territories are hugely significant as they represent a large Economic Exclusive Zone which gives France special rights and claims stretching from the baseline out to 200 nautical miles.

As such the two overseas territories have helped to give France the largest Economic Exclusive Zone in the world, reaching a total of 11, 691,000 km². This is a huge potential area for exploration and exploitation. It is easy to see why China is asserting its claim to the Spratly Islands as this would give China exclusive rights in the surrounding seas.

French Polynesia is perhaps the more well-known of the two territories. Comprising of 118 islands and atolls, it was the test area for French nuclear testing from 1962-1996. France still takes it very seriously in the area, recently in January this year, the French frigate *Prairial* seized over 400kg of Cocaine nearby French Polynesia’s Marquesas islands. In 2016 New Caledonia received a new naval support vessel, FS D’Entrecasteaux.

The FS D’Entrecasteaux *Bâtiment* multi-mission class ship specialises in sovereignty patrols as well as law enforcement and logistics missions. She performs a similar role to that of HMS *Clyde* in the Falkland Islands, albeit in a less armed manner and with no helo-deck operational support. As the *Bâtiment* are not classed as warfare vessels they have been designed to civilian standards and built outside of France, in the same way that the new *Tide*-class tankers have been built outside the UK for the RFA. FS D’Entrecasteaux is a high endurance vessel that maintains French jurisdiction over the Economic Exclusive Zone. According to the French Procurement Agency (DGA) the *Bâtiment* class can carry 20 personnel (military or police) along with two 4x4 vehicles, an 8 metre boat, several semi rigid inflatables, diving support, underwater drones and the option to accommodate a medical team for humanitarian missions.

In total, the French naval presence in the Pacific equates to two surveillance frigates, four patrol vessels, two multi-mission ships, five maritime surveillance aircraft, four tactical transport aircraft, and several helicopters. French military personnel number 2,800. This number could also surge if France continues to promote its presence in the region. France still has a Blue water navy with a world-wide reach. The recent *Jeanne d’Arc* not only shows a French global presence but also a willingness to engage and strengthen regional partnerships. Most recently this can be seen to a greater extent with Australia’s purchase of 12 new submarines from French shipbuilder DCNS in 2016.

This contract was worth \$50 billion with DCNS beating rivals from Germany and Japan. A recent Australian publication from The Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies (CDSS) identified greater potential for further co-operation, describing both nations as sharing, ‘a similar expeditionary mindset about the globalisation of security imperatives, and have similar political and military cultures with regards to risk’ (Hoskin 2016). The paper goes on to suggest that recent French military intervention offers much to be learned from:

‘Australia’s recent focus on defence diplomacy (as expressed in the 2016 Defence White Paper) also suggests a useful area of cooperation. France has a sophisticated approach to military engagement around the world, typified by its relationships with francophone Africa. The 2013 Mali intervention and ongoing trans-Saharan counter-extremism operations are proving highly effective, in a manner non-typical of other recent Western interventions. This was greatly facilitated by longstanding personal and institutional ties, as well as a sound French understanding of how to cooperate effectively with indigenous governments and military forces. This is a good study for Australia, so we could usefully incorporate French insights into our training and education, and into our evolving mechanisms for international engagement’ (Hoskin 2016).

As a growing power Australia can learn from its various strategic partners, the above suggests that France has alternative approaches to offer. Unlike the UK, France has been a constant presence despite Europe’s colonial withdrawal from the Pacific region. After the UK’s withdrawal east of Suez in the 1970s, its major participation in the area has been occasional and mainly through its membership of the Five Power Defence Arrangements (UK, Malaysia, Singapore, New Zealand and Australia). This alliance, more for the benefit of Singapore and Malaysia sees occasional exercises amongst the nations but this has not always been consistent. France by its sovereign commitments has a base in the Pacific and has to defend its commitments.

This could change to some extent, in 2018 New Caledonia has an independence referendum. It is unlikely that the population will vote for independence due to the island’s stable economy and French investment. However, as 2016 saw the election of Donald Trump and the unexpected Brexit result few can really say with certainty.

Reference

HOSKIN, Colonel Rupert. 2016. ‘France and Australia: Realising our potential as like-minded strategic partners’. *Indo-Pacific strategic papers*, page 4.