After a relatively quiet period, Paris is re-energizing its maritime empire, particularly in the Pacific. In the past year alone, there have been huge military sales, paradigm-shifting diplomatic initiatives, and unusual visits by French political leaders to far-flung islands. The first question is why? The second question is: what does that mean in the context of China’s growing role as a Pacific maritime power?

France has impressive global reach. Under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, every qualifying island can claim up to a 200 nautical mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ). France has islands all over the world that qualify, including the Pacific territories of New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and Wallis and Futuna.

The full tally of islands means France has the second largest EEZ in the world, around 11 million square kilometres, second only to the slightly larger EEZ of the United States. There are dots of France all over the globe, many in critical locations convenient for effective monitoring and strategic positioning.

Paris’s attitude towards her extremities tends to change over time, and is a by-product of core concerns. Take the evolving view of French intelligence used explosives to sink the Rainbow Warrior, a Greenpeace ship that had been protesting against France’s nuclear tests, resulting in the death of a photographer. France became diplomatically isolated in the region, and the testing went on.

Then, the Cold War ended. As much of the rest of the West, there was an ‘End of History’ haze. The West had won, and it was time to shed some of the strategic burden and focus on economics. France conducted its last nuclear tests in the Pacific in 1996, and some in Paris were starting to ask questions about the costs of maintaining these far-flung territories. In 1998, the Nourma Accord was agreed, promising New Caledonia a referendum on independence by 2018.

Others were also ‘unburdening’. Britain and the US shifted more of the regional strategic oversight to Five Eyes partners Australia and New Zealand.

In 2006, the UK closed high commissions in Vanuatu, the Kingdom of Tonga, and Kiribati (which has an EEZ the size of India). Nick Squires, covering the event for The Daily Telegraph, reported that Prime Minister Tony Blair told his New Zealand counterpart Helen Clark that Wellington would now be London’s eyes and ears in the region.

‘The Union flag was lowered yesterday for the last time in Tonga, one of Britain’s oldest friends and allies, as China prepared to extend its foothold in the South Pacific,’ Squires wrote. ‘Blair will be disappointed if he thinks New Zealand can act as a regional gendarme’.

In the past ten years, policies coming out of Canberra and Wellington have indeed alienated formerly strong western allies among the 14 Pacific island countries. Meanwhile, China has extended its reach deep into the region.

China helped Fiji set up a counter organization to the Canberra and Wellington-dominated Pacific Island Forum grouping. It is providing scholarships to study in China for thousands of influential Pacific Islanders. It is handing out soft loans and funding major infrastructure projects across the region.

Much of this activity is paired, overtly or

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South Pacific

Kanak dancers welcome French Prime Minister Manuel Valls on a trip to New Caledonia last May

France dives back into the Pacific

Paris is refocusing attention on its island territories, the new strategic front line between Asia and the Americas, writes Cleo Paskal

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not, with recipient countries accepting increased Chinese immigration. In many Pacific island countries, these newly arrived Chinese communities are highly controversial. In Tonga, in the past decade alone, newly arrived ethnic Chinese have taken control of more than 80 per cent of the retail sector. A newly arrived ethnic Chinese woman was also the first, and only, person in Tonga found guilty of human trafficking.

The tensions have been growing for at least a decade. In 2006, Chinese shops were attacked in unprecedented (though unrelated) riots in both Tonga and the Solomon Islands. In 2004, Fijian police arrested a network of Hong Kong citizens and shut down the largest methamphetamine lab found in the region. Since then, this dual track of major Chinese investment, coupled with increased migration and uncertain domestic consequences, has played out across the region, including in Australia and New Zealand.

Meanwhile, in the French Pacific territories, there is also major, and growing, Chinese engagement. Again, Paris’s policy towards French Polynesia seems to be following two tracks.

On one hand, France’s economy needs all the investments it can get. On the other, as China’s interest in the South Pacific has increased, it has become clear to all in Paris that, far from being ‘at the edge of the map’, France’s Pacific territories are on the new strategic frontline between Asia and the Americas, and are becoming increasingly valuable.

China has been very open about wanting to use French Polynesia as a trans-shipment and refuelling point between China and South America. France has responded by loosening visa requirements for Chinese tourists, signing agreements allowing for direct flights, encouraging investment in hotels, and more, including multiple Tahiti port visits by the Chinese Navy’s Yuan Wang class of tracking and surveillance ships.

Which brings us to the flurry of French activity in the past year or so. Institution-
ally, France’s Pacific territories were historically kept apart from English-speaking Oceania, especially during the nuclear tests period. However this past year, with support from Australia and New Zealand, New Caledonia and French Polynesia joined the Pacific Island Forum, giving Paris backdoor entry into one of the most important regional groupings.

In the past year, several French political leaders have visited the region, some promising a resolution to long-standing nuclear fallout compensation grievances.

At the same time, Paris is burnishing its bilateral relations with Pacific island countries. At the COP21 climate change meeting in Paris in 2015, French officials met with Pacific Island leaders without the presence of either Canberra or Wellington. Note these are all French initiatives, nothing to do with the European Union.

The marquee event in Paris’s Pacific year was the announcement by Australia that it would be buying a dozen French submarines at a cost of 50 billion Australian dollars. Jean-Yves Le Drian, the French defence minister, excitedly said: ‘We are married to Australia for 50 years.’

The submarine deal was a surprise to many, not least the Japanese. There had long been rumours that Canberra would opt to buy from a Japanese government-backed consortium led by Mitsubishi. The decision to buy from France may have been purely technical but, if that was the case, Canberra should have dropped some hints to Tokyo. As it was, the surprise made the decision look like a slap in the face from China by proxy.

The move compounded years of mixed messages from Canberra. For more than a decade Australian leaders have been touring Washington, Tokyo and Delhi touting the role of Canberra in a strengthened Indo-Pacific security architecture. In 2007 this developed into the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with members Australia, the US, Japan and India. A year later, Australia pulled out of the ‘Quad’ apparently over concerns that it would affect Australia-China relations. Since then, Australia has continued sending conflicting signals about its relationship with China and its strategic priorities. While
some former Australian prime ministers talk about how the United States should ‘share’ the Pacific with China, others, and members of the strategic and defence communities, raise deep concerns about China’s role in the region.

The submarine deal encapsulates the contradictions. Submarines are an offensive weapon. Why would Australia procure them if it were not concerned about China? North Korea doesn’t warrant a dozen subs. But if Canberra is serious about standing up to Beijing, why alienate Japan? And why drop out of the Quad? And why, after the Australian government dragged its feet before reluctantly allowing the US to rotate Marines through the city of Darwin, did it then allow the lease of the port of Darwin itself to a Chinese company?

The Five Eyes have been counting on Australia and, to a lesser extent, New Zealand, for strategic oversight in English-speaking Oceania. For a range of reasons, that hasn’t stopped the rapid spread of Chinese influence across the region, including in Australia and New Zealand.

At the same time, Paris is getting more active in French Oceania and is, itself, engaging more with China in the region.

Meanwhile France and Australia are moving closer through growing strategic linkages created by the submarine deal. They were always close physically. Via New Caledonia, France and Australia share a maritime border. It may be a coincidence, but there is now hardly any coverage of the growing unrest in French Caledonia in the Australian press, and little support in Canberra for an independent New Caledonia.

If France’s past relationship with its Pacific territories is anything to go by, the current imperative of metropolitan France will only lead to more involvement in the region. France needs investment, global leverage, and a back-up plan in case the EU fails. Flirting with China in French Polynesia is likely to continue as long as the money flows, even if only to mainland France.

At the same time Paris will get more involved in regional organizations, such as the Pacific Island Forum, with the aim of trying to direct – along with Canberra and Wellington – key policy directions. It will use these various levers to try to handle tricky issues, such as the outcome of the New Caledonia vote – if it happens.

There is very little chance France will give up the strategic positioning and defence and security installations in New Caledonia, whatever the outcome. While all this old-school power-playing might seem clever to planners in Paris, it may not be smart over the long term as it is not likely to endear France to the people of the Pacific. The Kanak people of New Caledonia have a lot more friends across the region that a Parisian administrator will ever have, not only with other Pacific islanders but with foreign countries that would be happy to trip up France. Updated colonial approaches won’t work.

So what does France’s renewed interest mean for China? Imagine the Australian subs are built, and deployed, perhaps even running through exercises with French naval assets in the region. Australian and French businesspeople, scientists and strategists are working together more often, and more deeply.

In the meantime, Chinese investors have bought more infrastructure in Australia and Chinese shipping and tourism are pouring vast sums into the economy of French Polynesia, while Chinese investors are partnering with French firms in Paris. What has to happen for those subs to actually get used?

Since the time of John Foster Dulles in the 1950s, the key concept of the defence architecture of the Pacific has been the ‘Island Chain’. The idea is there are three roughly north-south island ‘chains’ that must be controlled to contain threats from China – and Russia. Or, conversely, seen from Beijing, there are chains China needs to control, or at least influence, to be free of maritime constraints. The first island chain contains current East and South China Sea island hotspots. The second island chain comes down east of the Philippines and includes the American Mariana Islands. The third chain runs down from Hawaii through Oceania.

The big question is, are Australia and France contemplating drawing a fourth line in the water, one that runs not north-south, but west-east across the top of their southern Pacific position? A line, studded with bases and military assets, behind which they could retreat, and regroup, in case of conflict in the central and north Pacific. If so, our strategic map has fundamentally changed.

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‘France needs investment, global leverage and a back-up plan in case the EU fails’