

Asia Pacific Bulletin

EastWestCenter.org/APB

Number 416 | March 26, 2018

The Role of the French Military on Key Issues for Oceania

BY HELENE GOIRAN

On February 14, 2018, in a statement before the House Armed Services Committee, Admiral Harry B. Harris Jr, Commander, U.S. Pacific Command — who had been to New Caledonia in October 2017 — reminded listeners that “France has significant equities in the Indo-Pacific” and declared that he “welcome[d] France’s growing involvement in the region.”

Eight thousand French defense personnel are permanently located throughout the Indo-Asia-Pacific: 4,500 in the Indian Ocean, 2,800 in the Pacific Ocean and 700 sailors on deployment. The French military in the Pacific operates two surveillance frigates, four patrol vessels, two multi-mission ships, five maritime surveillance aircraft, four tactical transport aircraft, and seven helicopters. These forces ensure the protection and safety of French territories, as well as the surveillance of exclusive economic zones (EEZ), contribute to the France’s action at sea, and are involved in a number of defense diplomacy and cooperation activities. They also play a role on issues that are key for the Pacific islands, especially environmental security, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR), and maritime security including counter-trafficking.

France is present in the Pacific through its territories New Caledonia, French Polynesia, Wallis-et-Futuna, and Clipperton Island. This makes it a power of the Pacific, with a concomitant responsibility to defend its sovereignty and guarantee the security of its citizens. Moreover, as a permanent member of the Security Council, France has a sense of duty to contribute to the general protection of populations and resources everywhere. France has the second largest EEZ in the world (11 million square kilometers) located mainly in the Pacific (about 60%), and is responsible for protecting the fragile maritime environment and its extensive fishing, mineral, and energy resources.

The French armed forces stationed in the Pacific, in both New Caledonia and French Polynesia, confer to France a presence which is unique among European countries, and enables France to contribute to the stability of the region alongside its partners, especially the United States, Australia, and New Zealand.

On climate change — an issue of fundamental importance to many Pacific island countries — France greatly contributed to achieving the first universal agreement on climate, in December 2015 in Paris, during the United Nations conference on climate change or the COP21. The threat multiplier effect of climate change directly concerns the Pacific, and France sustains and deepens its efforts through collaboration with its partners in the region. These efforts come as a follow-up to the conclusions of the first conference at the ministerial level dedicated to the issue of Climate and Defence, organized in Paris in October 2015. France then proposed, at the 2017 South Pacific Defence Ministers’ Meeting (SPDMM), to have the members of that forum (Australia, New Zealand, Chile, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and Tonga, plus the United States and United Kingdom as observers) work together on a common study of the security impact of climate change in the South Pacific.

The objective of the SPDMM is to better connect the militaries of the participating countries, focusing “on two key thematic areas, namely: coordination of approaches and perspectives through

Helene Goiran, member of the Maison de la Melanesie research group, explains that “France has the second largest EEZ in the world located mainly in the Pacific, and is responsible for protecting the fragile maritime environment and its extensive fishing, mineral, and energy resources.”

The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options.

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information sharing and dialogue, consistently with national and international confidentiality requirements; and advancing interoperability through combined exercises.” In this framework, the capstone HA/DR exercise between the militaries in the region is the French-led joint and combined exercise “Croix du Sud” (Southern Cross), open to the Pacific and Southeast Asian partners, which aims particularly at enhancing interoperability as well as capacities in humanitarian aid and evacuation of French nationals.

For 25 years, the French armed forces in New Caledonia and French Polynesia have been assisting the Pacific Island countries in managing the consequences of natural disasters, contributing nearly every year to HA/DR operations conducted on the request of any affected state, usually under the framework of the 1992 FRANZ Arrangement (France – Australia – New Zealand).

Another key issue for the Pacific island countries is the safeguarding of maritime security. In this regard, Australia, France, New Zealand, and the United States created, in the 1990s, the Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group or QUAD (the South-West Pacific QUAD, not to be confused with the “diamond Quad” linking the United States, Japan, India, and Australia). This QUAD brings together defense and security agencies to develop multilateral approaches to enhance maritime security in the South West Pacific area and coordinate maritime surveillance and support to Pacific Island Countries to reduce illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, both in EEZs and adjacent High Sea Pockets.

In the framework of the QUAD, the French forces in the Pacific participate with personnel, vessels, and aircraft to the numerous multinational operations coordinated by FFA, the Fisheries Agency of the Pacific Islands Forum.

From 2016, when several states and territories in the Southwest Pacific were targeted by small fishing “blue boats” from Vietnam, coming to the region to illegally harvest sea cucumbers, the French forces not only acted in the EEZ of New Caledonia but actively participated in the coordination of the regional action, directly helping the Solomon Islands arrest three of these vessels operating in their EEZ.

The French military also has a role in other issues relevant to the Pacific islands, such as the treatment of explosive remnants of war. France’s experts — like those of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States — work with relevant services in Oceania in dealing with the many sites where mines and ammunition from the Second World War remain a hazard to people and the environment.

France is a member of many of US-initiated structures that link the defense and security agencies of the Indo-Asia-Pacific, including those of the smallest countries in Oceania, in order to improve interoperability and efficiency. These structures include the Chiefs of Defense Conference, Asia-Pacific Intelligence Chiefs Conference (APICC), Multinational Planning Augmentation Team (MPAT), Multinational Communications Interoperability Program (MCIP), Pacific Armies Chiefs Conference and Pacific Armies Management Seminar (PACC-PAMS), Military Law and Operations Strategic Engagement, etc.

France is rebalancing its strategic center of gravity toward the Indo-Asia-Pacific, where it is anchored in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Its armed forces stationed overseas and its permanent military basing work towards the reinforcement of defense relations between France and its partners. These relations are built on converging interests and shared democratic values, and are translated into strategic, operational, and industrial terms.

The *Asia Pacific Bulletin* (APB) series is produced by the East-West Center in Washington.

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