



## France's Contributions to Pacific Maritime Governance

By Ms. Céline Pajon

### France's Maritime Governance Objectives in the Pacific

France's Pacific territories, which include New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, French Polynesia, and Clipperton, form a vast Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) covering around 7 million km<sup>2</sup>. This area accounts for 67% of France's total global EEZ. France's primary focus in maritime governance in the Pacific is protecting this resource-rich maritime domain from Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing and drug trafficking.

Sovereignty forces are permanently stationed in New Caledonia (1,650 personnel) and French Polynesia (1,180 personnel), tasked with maritime surveillance and policing, crisis prevention, civil security, and, when needed, support and logistics for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR).

Additionally, these forces actively participate in regional cooperation initiatives, advancing France's second objective: contributing to the stability and security of the region in collaboration with partners, including strengthening the maritime capacity of Pacific Island countries.

### France's Key Policies and Activities

France articulates its maritime policy in the region within the framework of its Indo-Pacific strategy, published in 2019 and subsequently updated. This strategy aims to foster a region that is ['open and inclusive, free of all forms of coercion, and founded on multilateralism and respect for international law, particularly at sea.'](#)

In the Pacific, French forces assist the nations of the Pacific Island Countries in monitoring their vast maritime territories. For instance, France [collaborates with Australia, the United States, and New Zealand](#) within the Quadrilateral Defense Coordination Group (Pacific Quad) on maritime surveillance missions and combating IUU fishing, benefiting the Oceanian States and supporting the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA). France also participates in joint exercises organized by the FFA, such as the Tautai and [Kurukuru](#) operations, to enhance regional maritime surveillance.

Since 2021, France has organized an annual South Pacific Coast Guard seminar, rotating the venue between New Caledonia and French Polynesia each year. This [initiative aims to strengthen regional coordination](#) between France, the Pacific Islands, and Pacific Quad partners while supporting the sovereignty of Pacific Island nations.

### Unique Resources France Can Contribute to the Pacific

France stands out as the only European country capable of making a substantial security contribution to the South Pacific, [with a permanent presence](#) of 2,800 military personnel extensively skilled in regional cooperation.

In addition, France has an innovative maritime governance framework that could serve as a model for countries with limited capacities in the region. Instead of relying on a separate coast guard service, France employs a multi-agency approach known as the ["Coast Guard Function" \(fonction garde-côtes\) within its broader "State Action at Sea" \(Action de l'État en mer - AEM\) framework](#). This approach involves a coordinated effort among various government agencies, including the French Navy, customs, and maritime affairs, which collectively handle coast guard responsibilities such as maritime surveillance, search and rescue, environmental protection, and law enforcement at sea. The Secretary General for the Sea (Secrétaire général de la mer - SGMer) ultimately oversees and coordinates the activities of these agencies. While similar coordination systems exist in countries like Australia, the United Kingdom, or Germany,

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coordination in these cases does not imply command. The decisions of agencies such as the Coast Guard, Navy, and Customs follow their chains of command. In contrast, in France, the *préfet maritime* not only coordinates but also has the authority to order missions across all agencies.

France has also developed significant experience in Maritime Domain awareness (MDA). The [Maritime Information Cooperation and Awareness Center \(MICA\)](#) model [exemplifies this expertise](#). MICA relies on the voluntary cooperation of ship owners to collect information on maritime security and disseminate it to relevant authorities. Recently, MICA supervised the [Bellbuoy exercise from Brest](#), with the participation of 15 countries, 10 of which were from the Pacific region.

Additionally, MICA actively contributes to supporting the European [CRIMARIO](#) initiative, initially launched in the Western Indian Ocean and expanded to Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands. This initiative promotes the Indian Ocean Regional Information Sharing system (IORIS) as the leading platform for information sharing and incident reporting in these regions. Pacific states, such as [Fiji](#) and [Papua New Guinea](#), have been trained to utilize IORIS, enhancing their real-time communication, situational awareness, and coordinated response capabilities to address maritime threats and incidents.

"France's maritime governance approach leverages its overseas territories, advanced surveillance capabilities, and regional partnerships to maintain security and support Pacific Island nations."

IORIS now connects multiple nations across the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific, extending to Central and South America. This platform is widely used to support NCAGS (Naval Cooperation and Guidance for Shipping) objectives, facilitating the safe and secure movement of merchant vessels in regions with heightened security concerns. MICA also participates in the SHARE-IT project, aimed at enhancing connectivity among International Fusion Centers (IFCs) to create a global maritime security network for improved collaboration and response.

France possesses technological innovations that could aid the Pacific Island Countries (PICs) in enhancing their maritime surveillance capabilities. This includes light tactical unmanned aerial systems (UAS) [capable of performing a range of functions](#) such as tactical situational awareness, combating illegal activities at sea, traffic surveillance, pollution detection, monitoring suspicious behavior near vessels, and coastal surveillance.

### **Key Challenges and Barriers for France in the Pacific**

An important issue is the persistent tension between metropolitan France and its overseas territories, rooted in historical and decolonization challenges, as seen in the recent turmoil in [New Caledonia](#). Similarly, the success of pro-independence parties in the 2023 local elections in French Polynesia [has reignited discussions on greater autonomy](#). While these issues may not directly affect France's capacity to contribute to maritime governance, they could negatively impact France's image in the region, fostering ambivalent feelings about its colonial past and current intentions.

The implementation of France's Indo-Pacific strategy should also be implemented in closer coordination with local authorities in overseas territories. Indeed, in the Pacific, local governments hold significant authority over their EEZ, including responsibilities for environmental management and the establishment of marine protected areas, and are actively involved in exercising these powers.

Finally, France may need to address legal barriers hindering cooperation, such as shipriding with PICs. For example, French vessels' participation in fisheries control operations is restricted by France's non-participation in the Niue Treaty (1993), which requires coastal state agents to witness violations. France seeks to expand the legal framework to combat IUU fishing while respecting third-party states' rights, as discussed at the 2023 SPDMM Summit in Noumea.

Overall, it is essential to recognize that France has relatively [limited resources](#) compared to regional powers such as Australia or the United States. As a result, its engagement in the region heavily depends on effective coordination with partners.

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