



How the China Card is Played in New Caledonia

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As China's international profile grows, debates over Chinese influence occupy a significant role in New Caledonian politics, as elsewhere. The idea that independence from France will inevitably result in New Caledonia being strategically dominated by China is a popular theme in the rhetoric of the non-independentist 'no' camp, which seeks to remain French. But the independentist 'yes' camp, which strives for New Caledonia to become a sovereign state, neutralises this claim by transferring fears of China back towards France and the 'no' camp. Both camps use the China card to try to influence Australia's position on New Caledonia in their favour. French government officials and academics also play up the threat of China to the French Pacific. However, hard evidence of Beijing's alleged designs on New Caledonia is circumstantial and, so far, less compelling than for almost everywhere else in the Pacific.

Relations with China

New Caledonia's relationship with China is insubstantial by regional standards. As a self-governing but non-independent French Pacific territory, New Caledonia has no official ties with Beijing. Their relationship is defined by New Caledonia's export of nickel to China. The independentist-run Northern Province has driven deepening trade ties with China. In 2018, a company it partners with signed a deal with Yangzhou Yichuan Nickel Industry Co. Ltd. The New Caledonian company also owns a processing plant in China. As New Caledonia's largest trading partner, China buys 57 per cent of the country's exports, up from four per cent in 2010. Australia buys one per cent (Maclellan 2021:207).

However, relations between New Caledonia and China lack breadth and substance. In 2017, then Chinese Ambassador to France Zhai Jun visited New Caledonia, promising support for agriculture, fishing, training, tourism and the building of Chinese-staffed hotels. Because it occurred on the eve of the first independence vote under the 1998 Nouméa Accord, journalists and non-independentist leaders alike read nefarious meaning into Zhai's quixotic visit. More

likely, it revealed China's strategic impotence in New Caledonia, where its influence is in fact miniscule, even if the commercial balance could in theory give it economic leverage over Nouméa in the future.

How France plays the China card

After a 2018 visit to Sydney, President Macron gave a landmark speech announcing his intent to build a 'new Indo-Pacific axis', thus recasting France's Pacific territories in strategic terms. This declaration made New Caledonia a geopolitical trophy in play, an attitude Paris had rarely publicly declared since the 1984–88 civil war (Les Événements, or the Troubles). On his next stop in Nouméa, Macron warned locals of the risk Chinese 'hegemony' posed to France and Australia.

In 2021, Macron repeated this specific claim in a speech in Papeete, French Polynesia. The small, he warned, needed a big power to protect them from the Chinese hegemon. Macron promulgated a domino theory with French characteristics, which was later pithily summarised by Xavier Bertrand, a would-be right-wing competitor in the 2022 elections: 'New Caledonia either stays French or it will become Chinese'. Although Macron's portfolio minister Sébastien Lecornu rejected this claim, he himself played the China card, framing it as 'the real question'.

In an extraordinary intervention, a French war college report published just weeks before the third referendum aired unsubstantiated claims of Chinese influence operations targeting New Caledonia's independence movement. It argued that 'an independent New Caledonia would de facto fall under Chinese influence' (Charon and Jeangène Vilmer 2021:401) and was reported prominently in the territory. China, it claimed, would use the island to contain Australia. This report played into the 2021 independence campaign by shoring up pro-France arguments.

How the 'no' camp plays the China card

There is a strong non-independentist tradition of presenting the spectre of foreign interference as the main reason to stay French. During the 1980s, pro-France activists even argued that Australian

domination would inevitably result from independence from France. A key variation on this theme was the threat of Soviet intervention, which became the ultimate argument against independence. In an earlier example of the same domino theory, French officials argued that the defence of France's great power status and French sovereignty over Corsica began in Nouméa, as the French interior minister declared in 1985 (Ward et al. 1988:27).

While French generals also claimed that Moscow's hand was behind the New Caledonian civil war (Chappell 2013:194), which the CIA was watching for as well, no evidence was ever furnished. In reality, Moscow's support for the Front de libération nationale kanak et socialiste (FLNKS) was merely diplomatic and shallower than Australia's. The worst Cold War incident involved pro-France locals lobbing rocks at the Soviet ambassador's cruise ship to prevent it docking (Godard 1993:280). By way of contrast, Libyan interference in the Pacific, which the [Australian government](#) took very seriously, saw Kaddafi sponsor a small cadre of Kanak trainees in a range of activities that some claim included 'firearms, explosives and protective security' training (Swan 2022:217, 219).

Drawing on this history, non-independentists see staying French as an insurance policy against coercion by foreign powers, especially China. Non-independentist leader Philippe Gomès argued that China would immediately [recolonise](#) New Caledonia if France left, and that only France could save it from 'the Chinese ogre' gobbling up Melanesia. Other politicians, journalists and academics framed the 2021 independence vote as a China choice. French analyst Bastien Vandendyck [warned](#) that China would turn New Caledonia into a vassal state if France withdrew, its string of pearls ending 'on Australia's doorstep'.

How the 'yes' camp plays the China card

The FLNKS is politically exposed to the China card because of its aforementioned Libyan misadventure, in which a radical faction visited and sought assistance from Libya in 1986. Despite FLNKS leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou's damage control of the affair, Canberra was 'scandalised' (Chappell 2013:192) and recalibrated its policy in response. Until then, Tjibaou had been flown to Australia on DFAT-funded visits, the FLNKS had opened a now-closed information office in Australia and Canberra had supported the addition of New Caledonia to the United Nations list of countries to decolonise in 1986. Two years later, Australian policy was downgraded to impartially supporting the political process. Canberra has cautiously and even-handedly engaged since 1989 in pursuit of its interest of strategic stability on its eastern flank.

Reacting to the 'no' camp's arguments over the Libyan affair, independentist activists have rejected the claim that independence would entail New Caledonia's subjugation to foreign powers as a colonial trope that

the Kanak are incapable of governing themselves. Inverting this claim, René Guiart (1991:131) argued that independence was the *solution* to stopping New Caledonian instability, which he noted Australia feared could become a pretext for Soviet intervention. In a similar vein, his father Jean Guiart predicted the failure of an Australian intervention to stop a second civil war in his novel *Adieu Calédonie*. In the story, a Kanak army equipped with Chinese tanks defeats the ADF, handing Beijing a Pacific base.

Contemporary independence leaders play the China card in two different ways. Their first tactic pushes back against claims that they will sell out New Caledonia to China. In 2020, senior FLNKS politician Roch Wamytan told *Le Monde*: 'We're not afraid of China. It's France ... that colonised us.' While the FLNKS were 'not naïve', he argued that China was being used 'to justify the French presence in New Caledonia'. A second tactic turns the fears of FLNKS adversaries against them, as Wamytan did in [portraying China](#) as a reason for France to keep its military bases after independence, which is his party's official policy. If France played its cards right, the FLNKS insinuated in one [statement](#), it might still supplant China's influence in New Caledonia.

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Author notes

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