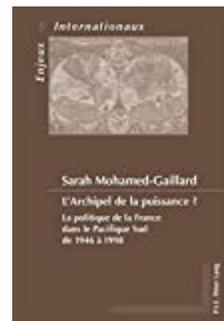




Sarah Mohamed-Gaillard. *L'Archipel de la puissance?: La politique de la France dans le Pacifique Sud de 1946 à 1998.* Brüssel: PIE - Peter Lang SA/Bruxelles, 2010. 425 S. ISBN 978-90-5201-589-7.



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S. Mohamed-Gaillard: L'Archipel de la puissance?

Encompassing a combined economic exclusion zone of more than 6,000 000 square kilometres, the French territories of New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, and French Polynesia span the South Pacific. During the 20th century, France's presence in the region at times appeared marginal (notably during the interwar era) if not precarious (especially at the close of WW2) and over the century's last half its reluctance to formally decolonise and its nuclear testing activities saw it endure a succession of crises as it was challenged by movements for independence and by regional anti-nuclear campaigns. By the early 21st century, however, France had shaken off much of its defensive stance and pariah status and its presence was arguably more secure than ever. In this study, Sarah Mohamed-Gaillard helps explain *how* France has remained in the South Pacific and how its diplomats and officials have responded to crises and challenges and managed France's relations with the region.

Working on territorial, regional and international scales Mohamed-Gaillard examines France's commitment to the South Pacific from the close of World War Two to the cessation of nuclear testing in 1996 and the

1998 signing of the Nouméa Accord. The study's three parts focus in turn on: the institutional relationships between France and its territories; the international and strategic stakes for France and its territories in the South Pacific; and France's foreign policy at the regional level. It is at its most rewarding when its three scales of analysis are brought into play together (though its organisational structure and absence of a full index at times makes this a challenge). Whereas analyses of France in the South Pacific often focus narrowly on the territories or the region (or the movements for independence and against nuclear testing), Mohamed-Gaillard provides the elements for a broader geo-political perspective as well as bringing an historical dimension.

One aspect of France's relations with the region that this study brings into focus more clearly than others is the importance of Asia. Mohamed-Gaillard sees France as having been somewhat torn between its Asian interests and Oceanian positions. Until 1954, while Indochina remained its foremost concern and a forward base for Pacific defense, France was absent from the accords that emerged from the Australasian search for

the reorganisation of South Pacific security, notably the 1951 ANZUS pact. It was France's perception, however, that ANZUS would reassure Australia and New Zealand and make them less likely to look for security solutions which might disturb France in the New Hebrides and New Caledonia. The Asian/Oceanian tension also made itself felt within France's territories. In the 1950s and 1960s concern about the spread of communism was rendered all the more acute by the Vietnamese presence in New Caledonia and the New Hebrides and the New Caledonian government's own attempts to resolve repatriation issues. Questions about the French naturalisation of French Polynesia's Chinese minority and concern to minimise Chinese propaganda became more acute with France's 1964 recognition of the Peoples Republic of China. The growth in China's influence in the Pacific over the last decade (and the way that this has helped French officials to alter Australasian perceptions of the French presence) lies beyond this study's time-frame, but there is useful analysis here for those seeking to understand the ramifications of the rise of China for international relations in a Pacific region where France remains present. The discussion of the mediating role played by French diplomats in sino-Australian relations in the 1970s is especially suggestive in this regard.

The examination of France's shifting institutional relations with its Pacific territories covers well-trodden ground, but here too a reading across the different scales provides a fresh perspective. This can be illustrated by looking at what Mohamed-Gaillard identifies as one of the key turning points in French policy in 1988. Until this time the question of political status or statute had been central to France's relations with the territories and its responses to their demands, but a rethinking of relations with New Caledonia (and in turn with the other territories) followed as officials realised that it was no longer possible to administer the territories without taking into account their 'particularisms'; that policy within the French territories and France's regional diplomacy had to go hand-in-hand; and that its territories could no longer be held in isolation from the region.

Mohamed-Gaillard ascribes much of this about-turn to the violence that occurred in New Caledonia in 1988, but a broader reading of her own work suggests that some of this change in outlook also built on earlier lessons. Since the mid-1940s, France had endeavoured to isolate its territories from the region fearing cultural and political contagion, but from the early 1970s (due to the regional anti-nuclear movement) French diplomats were aware of the need for more sophisticated and less defen-

sive responses in order to to make France a Pacific nation. The Kanak independence movement further forced the point by mobilising regional linkages to win the attention of the United Nations which in 1986 listed New Caledonia as a country awaiting decolonisation. As Mohamed-Gaillard shows, a drive for better regional coordination of French diplomacy had begun in the mid-1970s and from 1983 a change in diplomatic outlook led to the formation of a South Pacific Council in 1985-86 (and later a Pacific Cooperation Fund). The regional diplomacy of French Polynesian politician, Gaston Flosse, as Secretary of State for the South Pacific in 1986-88 and the development of bilateral relations with the independent island states, illustrated the gains that could be made when the jacobin strings were loosened.

Facilitated by the easing of political tensions in New Caledonia and the cessation of nuclear testing in French Polynesia, the last decade of the twentieth century thus saw an unprecedented autonomy for New Caledonia and French Polynesia as well as a drive to better integrate these territories with the region. A new type of relationship has emerged, Mohamed-Gaillard argues; there has been a shift from an assimilationist conception of 'Outre-mer' to a more plural idea of 'Outre-mers'. As she suggests, however, there are unanswered questions about the extent to which the Republic can be divided. France still considers the territories as parts of an ensemble (the single 'archipelago of power' of the title) in which its own sovereignty and strategic interests remain paramount.

This is an admirably detailed study, but some issues are only lightly covered. The study draws mainly on the French archives, to a lesser extent the Australian archives and a little from those in the United Kingdom meaning that other perspectives are less well canvassed; in some respects the 'region' is a shorthand for Australia. More importantly there is scant treatment of the economic dimension of the relationship between France and its territories; an understanding of the ways in which France itself has created assisted economies must be crucial to any future analysis. Being somewhat metropolitan-centred in outlook, there is also limited analysis of the territory-centred dynamics or initiatives that the author herself suggests may be increasingly important. If France's presence in, and relations with, the wider region really do depend on policies within its Pacific territories then those internal policies (e.g., in regard to mining and the environment, education or relations with the region) will warrant more attention; they may hold the key to understanding the road ahead.

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