



## **The situation in New Caledonia**

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The current developments in New Caledonia will be discussed by analyzing the conflict, troubles and new foreign influences on the islands along with their possible future evolutions. It shows that what some people wanted to seem to be a case of "decolonization" overseas, became a 21st century conflict where hybrid influence and warfare are involved.

New Caledonia is a *sui generis* community, a European Union overseas territory, but not part of it *per se*. Its geographical location is important, being 1300 km away from the Solomon Islands and 1500 km away from Australia.

New Caledonia was first discovered by English captain James Cook in 1774. It was annexed by France in 1853 during the age of colonialism, and was mainly used as a prison colony. New Caledonia is one of the only three settlement colonies in French history, besides Algeria and New France. This causes a large part of the island's population to be of European descent - the so-called "Caldoches", the natives being called "Kanaks.", who gained civil rights only after WWII. Around this time, a large Kanak population growth made the French government start pushing for more immigration to the island so that Kanaks lost their majority and the new immigrants were called "Zoreilles". In 1987, the first independence referendum failed due to a boycott by the Kanaks. One year later, a radical pro-independence group trained in Libya, assaulted a police station, killing four policemen and taking twenty-seven hostages, the first example of foreign interference in New Caledonia. In 1998, the Nouméa Accords were signed, "freezing" the right to vote for anyone who didn't live in New Caledonia for more than 10 years. This policy was made to preserve the voting power of the Kanaks, while preventing immigrants from voting, setting up the current conflict. Since then, three more failed independence referendums have been held, in 2018, 2020 and 2021.

A law removing these voting restrictions was recently adopted in 2024 in France. This sparked the current protests and riots which involved clashes between police and protestors that started on the 13th of May on the island. The chaos calmed down after a number of police officers were deployed from outside New Caledonia, and the state of emergency was called off only on the 27th of May.

These protests and riots, unfortunately, are not only backed by the Kanaks but also by a surprising foreign influence, which will be discussed later in the article. French Minister of Interior Gérald Darmanin, while on air on the 16th of May 2024 on radio *France 2*, said he regrets that pro-independence leaders have made a deal with Azerbaijan, and it's undeniable and that Azeri interference

is not a fantasy but a reality. Azerbaijan is also not the only foreign country involved in New Caledonia's internal affairs, but France's geopolitical adversaries Russia and China are also present. While all three of these countries have varying degrees of interference in Neo-Caledonian affairs and have the same final goal of Neo-Caledonian independence, their motivations differ.

Azerbaijan's interference in the archipelago's politics is the most overt. We see images of pro-independence protesters flying Azeri flags, in a place otherwise completely unrelated to the caucasian country. But why is that? The answer goes back to 2023. In July of that year, Azerbaijan, as the head of the non-aligned movement, invited pro-independence activists from French territories such as Guyana, Martinique, French Polynesia and New Caledonia. At that conference, with representatives from several pro-independence parties such as the People's Union for the Liberation of Guadeloupe, a far-left political party in the French overseas region, the main Azerbaijani actor involved in the protests was created: The Baku Initiative Group, or BIG, an non-governmental organization whose goal is to "support the fight against colonialism and neo-colonialism." The head of this organization is Abbas Abbasov, a long time worker for the Azerbaijani state fund. BIG has had meetings with pro-independence activists from Guyana, Martinique, Corsica, French Polynesia and New Caledonia. In April, the BIG signed an agreement with a representative of the FLNKS, the main Neo-Caledonian pro-independence party. There were uncovered images of protesters wearing t-shirts with anti-colonial slogans and the BIG logo on them. A few days later, a representative from the main Polynesian independence party signed a memorandum with Azerbaijan. On social media, BIG shows unconditional support to the Neo-Caledonian protesters. In that same month, a leading Azeri think-tank, AIR center, held a round table called "Towards the total elimination of colonialism." The head of AIR center, Farid Shafiyev, is the former ambassador of Azerbaijan to the Czech Republic. Azerbaijan hosted several conferences, including a support group for the Corsican people. Azerbaijan's long time authoritarian ruler, Ilham Aliyev made a speech antagonizing France at a decolonisation conference in November 2023. In his address, the Azeri president referred to France more than 20 times, accusing Paris of "inflicting conflict" in the Caucasus and committing "most of the bloody crimes in the colonial history of humanity". During the recent protests, Baku-based accounts on TikTok shared video montages accusing the French police of killing a young woman and montages showing marching French officers and dead kanak protesters.

Looking at all of these developments, the question of why Azerbaijan is involved arises. The answer lies within the deteriorating French-Azeri relations. During the most recent war in Nagorno-Karabakh, France supported Armenia, with whom Azerbaijan was at war, as France sent armored vehicles to Armenia via Georgia. In December 2023, one French national was arrested, accused of espionage and then two French diplomats were expelled. The undemocratic February presidential election in Azerbaijan was the first one in decades that did not have French election observers monitoring the vote, legislators no longer wanting to hear about it, with French senator Claude Kern explaining it as "When you have a president who systematically gets elected with over 80% of the vote, I wouldn't call that free and fair elections" and Azeri representatives turning away even interested observers. It is clear that Azerbaijan is doing this as a form of "payback" for French support of Armenia, viewing it as supporting internal separatists within France just as France supported internal separatists within Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan is using Russian methods in its interference, supporting separatists within an enemy country and using cyberattacks, however Baku doubtfully has the same resources as Moscow and its operations may lack the same scale or efficiency.

However, that is not to say that Russia is not involved. On the 22nd of May 2024, following the announcement of Macron's visit, Neo-Caledonian internet services were hit by a coordinated cyber-

attack. Millions of emails were sent to the same email address in order to saturate the servers, with 95 000 connection attempts being recorded. The emails seem to have originated from accounts whose IP addresses were located in Moscow. The spokesperson of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maria Zakharova, released a statement on the protests, in which she called the proposed law “colonial policy” and blaming the current situation in New Caledonia on “failed decolonisation” and called on France to “guarantee the rights and freedoms of the indigenous population of New Caledonia and other territories,” a covert way to say that the Kremlin, not known for its defense of human rights, thinks France should leave New Caledonia. Protesters at pro-independence rallies were seen flying banners with slogans such as “Putin, welcome to Kanaky” (the native name for New Caledonia) and “President Putin, liberate our colonies.” On TikTok, several accounts supporting African emancipation or Pan-African movements, both ideologies currently linked to Russia, have called for outright rebellion against the French authorities. Since the beginning of the illegal invasion of Ukraine, it has become obvious that Russia’s international policies are focused on creating a new cold war, and their actions in New Caledonia are not an exception. Moscow thinks that they can replicate the success they had in overthrowing pro-French governments in Central Africa by doing the same thing in the Pacific, New Caledonia being a prime target because of the general discontent about the law and the collapsing nickel industry. Russia’s playbook has always been, especially since Putin’s rise to power, to back separatists in “enemy” countries in order to destabilize and weaken them. We have seen this in Georgia with Abkhazkia and South Ossetia, in Ukraine with Donetsk and Luhansk and in Moldova with Transnistria, but also in Western countries, with their interference in the 2014 Scottish and in the 2017 Catalanian independence referendums, so there is no reason to assume Russia is not capable of doing the same thing in New Caledonia, especially as France announced that they will send instructors into Ukraine. However, Russia’s gambit in this region is likely to be less successful than what they did in Africa, as there is another, more powerful, anti-Western power that seeks to extend its influence in the Pacific, and that is geographically closer: the People’s Republic of China.

The involvement of China in this situation is seen largely through the Sino-Caledonian friendship association. Created as far back as 2016, it is presided over by the former cabinet director of FLNKS leader and President of the Congress of New Caledonia Roch Wamytan. This association has given several offers for “touristic and economic projects” to local collectives on the island. Roch Wamytan himself has declared that “We are not scared of China, it’s France that has colonized us.” It is also no coincidence that Azerbaijani and Russian accounts spread misinformation on TikTok, a social media application with a Chinese parent company. This fact was pointed out by the French prime minister Gabriel Attal when he announced that, due to “interference and manipulation” and because “The application is used as a medium for spreading misinformation on social networks, fed by foreign countries, and relayed by the rioters,” TikTok was getting banned in New Caledonia. China has multiple reasons for why it is very interested in the archipelago, seeing potential benefits for itself in the island gaining independence. The first reason is that the island contains one third of the global supply of nickel, which is a key component in the manufacturing of both electric vehicles and mobile phones, both sectors which China seeks to expand. The second reason for the Chinese interest is that it would give them a position just 1500 km from the coast of Australia. Over the past few years, China has been seeking to extend its influence through soft power, the Indo-Pacific region being one of its prime targets. China has already “bought” its way into many island nations in this corner of the world, Sri Lanka being a good example. China’s plan is to push their puppets all throughout the Pacific to spread their influence throughout the region, wanting to conquer in a diplomatic and commercial manner.

This all leaves one question: What will happen now? While the future is a constant uncertainty, we can make some speculations about what could happen. As of the moment of this paper’s writing, it

seems as if the current chaos is calming down, mainly due to the increased presence of law enforcement. However, the locals' unhappiness with the electoral reforms is not, and there are still difficulties on the island. From this point forward, there are two possible paths, and both are based on the fate of the electoral reform law. The first path includes the law being retired as the protests are too disruptive. In this case the pro-independence leaders win. If this happens, France would lose New Caledonia. The future elections on the archipelago would always include majorities for the FLNKS or other pro-independence parties. As the nickel supply on the island, on which the local economy is based, keeps on dropping and the international demand keeps going up, discontent with the status quo would grow. At some point in time, another independence referendum would be proposed and would likely pass. Even if Russia does currently interfere in Neo-Caledonian politics, the geographical distance between Nouméa and Moscow is likely too far for them to be able to successfully establish a pro-Russian government like the ones in Africa, with that role going to the Chinese. Following independence, the island would be ripe for the "Sino-Caledonian Friendship Association" and other Chinese investment companies to buy everything on the island, starting with the nickel mines. China would gain a strategically important base off the coast of Australia in the case of a conflict.

However, this is not the only way things could go. The situation in New Caledonia currently is similar to the French foreign-policy approach in establishment of Algeria: a failed settlement colony with a large European population going through civil trouble. The situation in Algeria was disastrous for France, and they do not wish to repeat it, so it is hard to believe France would let go of New Caledonia that easily. If the electoral reform law goes into effect, New Caledonia will not regain independence. As the nickel industry on the island continues to decline and the local economy keeps getting worse, more and more people from the French mainland will move to New Caledonia, attracted by the low prices on the island. This means that any future independence referendum will be voted down, and that anti-independence parties will triumph over parties like the FLNKS in future elections.

So it appears that the situation in New Caledonia is a hot point in the global hybrid conflict. As emerging nations like China, Russia and Azerbaijan back a proxy civil conflict inside western territories which also are a remnant of colonialism, New Caledonia stands as an example of how such a hybrid war can be held in the whole world world's eyes and from where lessons on how to fight these kinds of attacks in the future can be learned. These types of attacks will probably appear in other points of the globe under different forms, but there is a common element to them, which could also be the key to countering them. The next years will show if we have learned our lesson.

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