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**THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE FRENCH PRESENCE IN THE
SOUTH PACIFIC FOR INTERSTATE RELATIONS IN THE REGION**

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in the Department of International Relations,
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The Australian National University.**

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DECLARATION

This sub-thesis is my own original work.
All sources used have been acknowledged.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Steve Bates', is centered on the page.

(Steve Bates)

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INTRODUCTION

This sub-thesis examines the implications of the French presence in the South Pacific for interstate relations in the region. As such it is concerned with the condition and evolution of France's relations with the South Pacific countries from the 1960s, when most were still not independent, until the present day and with the effects that the French presence in the South Pacific has had both on relations between Forum members and on regional stability and unity in general.¹

The South Pacific regional system is a relative newcomer to the world political scene. The South Pacific Forum, the organisation which groups together the independent states of the region, was not established until 1971 and even then it was rather limited in scope with only four of the twenty-three colonial territories in the South Pacific having achieved independence. Indeed, it was not until the end of the 1970s, by which time membership of the Forum included three of the four Melanesian entities and two other Micronesian states, that the Forum could be said to have achieved the dimensions of a regional system. Only on becoming independent were the South Pacific Island states free to determine their own foreign policy and the nature of their relations with other states from both within the region and outside it.² Yet at the same time these states, in order to guarantee their economic survival, were seeking additional sources and, in certain cases where traditional donors had been estranged, even alternative sources of economic aid.

This study then undertakes to examine the effect of the French presence not only on interstate relations in the region but on the stability of the regional system at a time when traditional economic and political ties were being questioned and new ones being forged.

¹ The members of the South Pacific Forum are Australia, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Marshall Islands, Nauru, New Zealand, Niue, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Vanuatu, Western Samoa.

² For the purposes of this study the South Pacific Island states are all the Forum states listed in footnote 1 except for Australia and New Zealand.

Ideally such a study should also consider the relations of France with the two giants of the region, Australia and New Zealand. It should also examine the effects of the French presence on relations between the Island states and these two countries and on relations between the Forum states and outside powers such as the United States and Japan. These effects have been far from insubstantial. The anti-nuclear sentiments that led to the banning of all US nuclear-armed and/or powered ships from entering New Zealand ports grew out of the campaign against French testing in the Pacific. The feeling of alienation that has developed among some South Pacific Islanders in relation to the Western powers is arguably a result of the priority that both the US and the UK give to their relations with their Western ally and European partner, France, over their less important and less official allies in the South Pacific. The hostile reaction of the Islanders to the French presence also poses a dilemma for Australia who must choose between its allegiance to the Western Alliance and the necessity to preserve stability in the region.

Because of the constraints of length that a sub-thesis by necessity imposes, relations between France and the non-Island states have had to be excluded from the purview of this study. Nevertheless, it is my firm conviction that this necessary omission does not invalidate the findings of the present study. Indeed, it can be argued that in some respects this omission actually enables the study to focus more on the concerns of the independent Island countries which in other studies have too often been overshadowed by those of Australia, New Zealand and the so-called great powers. It makes it possible to view the French presence from a Pacific Island perspective rather than from the more usual East-West perspective. Nonetheless, the study makes reference to the opinions and actions of countries other than the South Pacific Island states when these are deemed necessary to a full understanding of the actions and opinions of the South Pacific Island states.

It has been alleged by different political commentators and Island politicians that France has had a destabilising and divisive effect on the South Pacific. This study investigates the validity of such allegations through an examination of the nature of the French presence and its impact on the region. In this respect it is unlike many previous

writings on the subject which have taken an East-West perspective and focussed on the role played by the Soviet Union and its surrogates in destabilising the region.

The present study is the first one of comparable length to focus on the implications-past and present- of the French presence in the South Pacific for international relations. There have been some papers of article length on the subject presented at conferences and seminars but these have only considered certain aspects of the problem.³ There have, of course, been longer studies of political developments within the French South Pacific territories themselves but these have devoted only a few pages to external relations with the Island countries and usually with the purpose of showing how these impacted on internal politics.⁴ Theses, books and articles have also been written on nuclear testing, nuclear free zones, regionalism and great power involvement in the South Pacific but none has the French presence as its main focus nor do these studies cover it in all its aspects.⁵

Chapter One analyses the nature of the presence and the strength of France's commitment to remaining in the region. A second chapter examines the early incidences of Island hostility towards France in relation to the desire of the Islanders for greater control over the South Pacific Commission and their opposition to French nuclear testing. Chapter Three looks at the effects that French decolonisation policy in New Caledonia has had on bilateral and multilateral relations within the Forum. The fourth and final chapter considers the recent changes in the French attitude to the region and the reaction of the Island states to the dramatic reversals that took place in French policy on New Caledonia in 1986 and again in 1988.

³ Jean Chesnaux, "France in the South Pacific: Global Approach or Respect for Regional Agendas"; John Dalton, "France and Conflict in the South Pacific"; Stephen Henningham: "France and the South Pacific";.

⁴ John Connell, *New Caledonia or Kanaky*; Bengt and Marie-Thérèse Danielsson, *Poisoned Reign*; Myriam Domoy, *Politics in New Caledonia*; Helen Fraser, "New Caledonia: Anti-Colonialism in a Pacific Territory"; Claude Gabriel and Vincent Kermel, *Nouvelle-Calédonie: la révolte Kanak*.

⁵ Ron Crocombe and A Ali (eds), *Foreign Forces in Pacific Politics*; Stewart Firth, *Nuclear Playground*; Greg Fry, *South Pacific Regionalism*; Richard Herr, *Regionalism in the South Seas*; John Ravenhill, *No Longer an American Lake*.