

ANALYSIS

FOREIGN INTERFERENCE IN DISTANT TERRITORIES

FRENCH OVERSEAS TERRITORIES ON
AZERBAIJAN'S, RUSSIA'S, AND CHINA'S RADARS

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CONTENTS

Introduction	1
1. Historic Background and Modern Context	2
1.1. Human Geography and Political Landscape	3
1.2. The 2024 Unrest	4
1.3. Pro-Independence Movements	6
2. The Case of Azerbaijan	6
2.1. Fostering Links	7
2.2. Tarnishing France’s Image	8
2.3. Manoeuvres in the French Digital Ecosystem	8
3. Russian Interference	9
3.1. Tactics	9
3.2. The Global South Playbook	10
4. New Caledonia on China’s Radar	11
4.1. A Strategic Island for Military Expansion	11
4.2. Chinese Methods	12
4.3. Where Does the FLNKS Stand?	13
5. Different Actors – Different Objectives	13
Conclusion And the Way Forward	14

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BIG	Baku Initiative Group
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates
CCAT	<i>Cellule de coordination des actions de terrain</i>
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
DGSI	Directorate General of Internal Security
EEAS	European External Action Service
FID	Decolonisation International Front (<i>Front international de décolonisation</i>)
FIMI	foreign information manipulation and interference
GONGO	government-affiliated organisation
IO	Influence Operations
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
PLA	People’s Liberation Army
PRC	People’s Republic of China
UC-FLNKS	<i>Union-Calédonienne – Front de libération nationale kanak et socialiste et Nationalistes</i>
UNI	Union Nationale pour l’Indépendance
VIGINUM	<i>Le service de vigilance et de protection contre les ingérences numériques étrangères</i>

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INTRODUCTION

In today's context, hardened geopolitical competition translates into the erosion of the post-WW2 rule-based international. The European order is arguably being replaced by a multi-order world.¹ Revisionist states, meanwhile, resort to a wide range of hostile activities, targeting the vulnerabilities of their adversaries to attain their foreign policy goals.

French overseas territories cover the whole area of the globe, thus enabling France (and thereby the EU²) to have a global presence that no other nation can match. However, these territories – the heritage of France's colonial past – have their own distinct institutional, socio-economic, and historical issues. In other words, their own vulnerabilities. New Caledonia (also known as Kanaky) presents particular vulnerabilities that are being exploited in different ways and for different reasons by various revisionist and authoritarian actors – namely, Azerbaijan, Russia, and China.³

These destabilisation operations are usually referred to as FIMI (foreign information manipulation and interference). FIMI are defined by the European External Action Service (EEAS) as “a pattern of behaviour that

threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures and political processes.”⁴ Such activities are “manipulative in character” and often “conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner” by state or non-state actors, as well as “their proxies inside and outside of their own territory.” Furthermore, “FIMI often seeks to stoke polarisation and divisions inside and outside the EU while also aiming to undermine the EU's global standing and ability to pursue its policy objectives and interests.”

Ultimately, the strategic reasoning behind subversion is to alter the target's foreign policy. Kastner and Wohlforth define subversion as “the practice of trying to gain an advantage by directly influencing a foreign country's domestic politics against its wishes.”⁵ According to them, subversion is the idea of undermining accepted authority. Actions are hostile to the rulers and operate within the target state. FIMI falls under the “subversion” category, alongside other activities of various levels of severity, such as propaganda, disinformation, bribery, election meddling, sabotage, assassinations, etc. It is considered to be a “violation of sovereignty [...] against the sovereign prerogative of a state to determine what happens inside its borders” – a term that describes all the measures that are “short of war.”

One might think that FIMI and destabilisation operations by revisionist powers against the west tend to focus on the US or Europe (geographically speaking), as lately exemplified by the elections in Romania and Moldova or the mobilisation campaign in Ukraine.⁶ The aggressiveness and efforts directed at New

¹ Trine Flockhart and Elena A. Korosteleva, “[War in Ukraine: Putin and the multi-order world](#),” *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol 43, Issue 3 (June 2022): 466-81.

² The European Union makes a difference between regions and territories. Indeed, French overseas territories have different status (both nationally and at the EU level), and New Caledonia is neither a region nor a département but a *sui generis* collectivity. European Parliament, “[Outermost regions \(ORs\)](#),” Factsheet, April 2025; European Union External Action Service, “[Overseas Countries and Territories](#),” 16 September 2021.

³ Thierry Duchesne, “[Les nouveaux enjeux géopolitiques et maritimes de l'outre-mer français](#) [New geopolitical and maritime challenges for French overseas territories],” *Diplomatie*, 129, 70–74, September-October 2024.

⁴ Interestingly, the word “non-illegal” does not appear on the website anymore. European Union External Action, “[Information Integrity and Countering Foreign Information Manipulation & Interference \(FIMI\)](#),” 14 March 2025; Nicolas Hémin, “[FIMI : Towards a European Redefinition of Foreign Interference](#),” *EU Disinfo Lab*, April 2023.

⁵ Jill Kastner, William C Wohlforth, *[A Measure Short of War: A Brief History of Great Power Subversion](#)* (Oxford University Press, 2025); Jill Kastner, William C Wohlforth, “[A Measure Short of War](#),” Foreign Affairs, 22 June 2021. See also: “[Jill Kastner and William C. Wohlforth, “A Measure Short of War: A Brief History of Great Power Subversion,”](#) the New Books Network, 6 June 2025.

⁶ Maryna Vorotyntseva, “[Russia's War in Ukraine: Russia's Attempts to Undermine Mobilisation](#),” *International Centre for Defence and Security*, 6 September 2024.

Caledonia by foreign malign actors over the last years, especially following the Spring 2024 riots, deserve our attention.

The issue of New Caledonia, its domestic and regional developments are relevant to Estonia. While France is engaged in the defence of NATO's eastern flank with its military presence in the country, it may be forced to pull limited resources in response to a potential crisis unfolding at the same time in the Baltic region and in the Indo-Pacific.⁷ At the very least, France might be distracted and face dilemmas that would impact its actions in the Baltic.

This analysis examines the French overseas territories' vulnerabilities to FIMI and destabilisation operations, similar to those in Europe and the US. It describes the tactics deployed by revisionist actors in New Caledonia to target France's sovereignty and attempts to explain their underpinning strategy. By shedding light on the issue, this paper aims to spark wider discussions in expert and policymaking circles on how to resist and respond to such actions in such a peculiar strategic context and what it means for the security of NATO frontline states. To this end, it concludes with baseline recommendations on how to defend from FIMI and destabilisation operations, while proposing effective ways to tackle them.

1. HISTORIC BACKGROUND AND MODERN CONTEXT

New Caledonia has historically been a central component of France's global influence and an element of strategic balance in the South Pacific. It is recognised as such by other key actors: the US, New Zealand, and Australia.⁸ During the Second World War, New Caledonia served as a military base for the US and New Zealand, enabling the defence of the wider Pacific. Today, the island is a crucial hub for

marine, air, and digital transit with undersea cables, making it critical for French intelligence and spatial capabilities. If a hostile power were to control New Caledonia or the Solomon Islands (or to exercise sufficient control over its foreign policy), Australia and New Zealand could be cut off from their partners,

New Caledonia is a crucial hub for marine, air, and digital transit, making it critical for French intelligence and spatial capabilities

such as the US and Japan. The Torres Strait chokepoint, located right between Australia and Papua New Guinea, where French and Australian navies regularly navigate, could also become a critical waterway for global trade should Indonesian straits be blockaded in the event of a conflict. The island has 25% of the world's nickel reserves, with plenty of military applications, and thus attracts the attention of pernicious actors.⁹

Whereas one might think that China is the revisionist power with the strongest interest in New Caledonia and that FIMI operations are mainly deployed by Russia and China, it is Azerbaijan that has arguably been the most active actor recently. As shown by the Secretariat-General for National Defence and Security, Azerbaijan aimed to advance its foreign policy goals by targeting New Caledonia and France's sovereignty through its main tool

Baku used a rather comprehensive strategy, starting by fostering links with domestic figures

– the Baku Initiative Group (BIG), a government-affiliated organisation (GONGO) created back in 2023.¹⁰ Baku used a rather comprehensive strategy, starting by fostering links with domestic figures through conferences. It is, however, impossible to grasp the extent to which Azerbaijan's actions were successful without understanding local realities that this analysis attempts to highlight.

⁷ Taras Safronov, "[France Deploys Reconnaissance Ship to Monitor Russian Activity in Baltic Sea](#)," *Military*, 21 May 2025.

⁸ The White House, "[United States – Aotearoa New Zealand Joint Statement](#)," 31 May 2022.

⁹ Anne-Marie Brady, "[When China knocks at the door of New Caledonia](#)," *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, 23 August 2024. A French version also exists and was published by the Institut de Recherche Stratégique de l'Ecole Militaire (IRSEM).

¹⁰ VIGINUM, "[Technical report. Un-notorious BIG, a digital information manipulation campaign targeting French overseas departments, regions, territories and Corsica](#)," December 2024.

1.1. HUMAN GEOGRAPHY AND POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

New Caledonia finds itself in a peculiar situation, inherited from colonial times, where enforcing a full-fledged democracy contradicts, to a certain degree, the decolonisation ideal in a context of obvious socio-economic inequalities. This state of play was at the core of the 2024 unrest.

This *sui generis* collectivity is composed of three provinces: Southern, Northern, and Loyalty Islands Provinces. According to the 2019 census, the indigenous Kanak people make up 41,2% of the total population (111 000 out of 271 000 total population). They represent 95%, 72%, and 29% of the population in the Loyalty Islands, Northern and Southern provinces, respectively. The capital city of Nouméa has a disproportionate non-native population: around 9 out of 10 of its residents are non-native.¹¹

New Caledonians vote in nationwide elections.¹² Regional and departmental elections do not apply to New Caledonia's status and are replaced by "provincial" elections, which triggered the 2024 unrest. The Congress of New Caledonia is composed of 54 members who serve five-year terms: 7 are from the Loyalty Islands' Assembly; 15 are from the Northern Province's Assembly; and 32 are from the Southern Province's Assembly. They are elected based on a party-list proportional representation system with a 5% threshold.¹³ However, the electoral process is not the same for provincial and national elections. Members of Congress subsequently elect members of the government of New Caledonia.

The political landscape is centred around the division between 'loyalists' and 'pro-independence' forces.¹⁴

- Loyalists: *Calédonie Ensemble* (centre right, affiliated to Horizons) and *Rassemblement* (centre-right to right, affiliated to *Les Républicains*) with 6 representatives each, and *Intergroupe Loyalistes* (centre to right, affiliated to *Renaissance*) with 11 Members of Congress.¹⁵
- Pro-independence forces: *Union-Calédonienne – Front de libération nationale kanak et socialiste et Nationalistes* (UC-FLNKS, left to far-left) and *Union Nationale pour l'Indépendance* (UNI, left to far-left) with 13 and 12 representatives, respectively.¹⁶

The islands' governance structure is complex and divided between the French government, the New Caledonian government, and the Congress, as well as three provincial assemblies and local councils, which offers many channels to be exploited by pernicious actors, such as China.¹⁷

¹¹ Institut de la statistique et des études économiques Nouvelle-Calédonie (ISEE), "[Recensement de la population 2019](#)," Synthèse n°45.

¹² Les services de l'Etat en Nouvelle-Calédonie, "[Les élections en NC](#)."

¹³ The Congress of New Caledonia, "[Composition](#)," accessed on 5 June 2025.

¹⁴ We chose to present the various factions in New Caledonia's congress. The degree of detail is intentionally low as the groups' composition is volatile due to changes in the government. It is widely considered that 25 members are loyalists, in addition to 3 members from the "*L'éveil océanien*" party who defend the interests of the Wallisian minority (from *Wallis et Futuna*) and are opposed to separatism, yet are not members of any group (they are considered as king makers to an extent).

¹⁵ The Intergroupe "*Loyalistes*" (that used to be in the same group as *Rassemblement*) is mainly led by *Les Républicains Calédoniens* and Sonia Backès, the president of the Assembly of the Southern Province.

¹⁶ It can be very difficult to distinguish between the two groups. First and foremost, the UC is a party of its own. Since 2021, it became more radical, embarking on an "empty chair" policy in trilateral negotiations with the loyalists and the French government, taking part in creating the CCAT, and allegedly being at the origins of the unrest. The FLNKS is a coalition of parties that comprise: the UC, *Rassemblement Démocratique Océanien* (RDO), *Parti de libération kanak* (Palika), and *Union Progressiste en Mélanésie* (UPM). The UNI political group is currently dominated by Palika and includes the UPM. Palika is more moderate and tends to be more open to dialogue, although its name could imply the opposite.

¹⁷ Anne-Marie Brady, "When China knocks."

1.2. THE 2024 UNREST

On 13 May 2024, violence broke out following France's willingness to change the electoral code that currently prevents one-fifth of the population from voting in the provincial elections. As in any social unrest, many factors were at play: the crisis in the nickel industry, economic misery, and unemployment.¹⁸

In the first quarter of 2024, nickel production fell by 32% compared to the same period in 2023. Around 20% of Kanaks were unemployed, as opposed to 12% of the island average. Highest-paying jobs were largely out of reach: only 5% of them were in senior or managerial positions.¹⁹ Kanak's income is twice as low on average compared to the non-Kanak population. The island's yearly median income was 25% lower than that in metropolitan France (€17 208 vs €23 160), while the poverty rate reached 45% in the Northern and Loyalty provinces.²⁰ Given the existing divisions, the government's decision to impose a non-consensual reform was widely criticised and perceived as "inflammatory."²¹

Several months of unrest resulted in the death of fourteen people.²² Moreover, an abnormally high number of excess deaths due to natural

causes was registered.²³ Hundreds of people were injured. More than 1 700 people were arrested – including the leaders of the *Cellule de coordination des actions de terrain* (CCAT), considered as the violent faction of the *Union Calédonienne* and allegedly at the origins of the unrest – and around €2.2 bn in damages were recorded.²⁴ Other developments worth mentioning were the declaration of the state of emergency, the deployment of the army, and a short ban on TikTok.

The 1998 Nouméa Agreements restricted the voting rights at provincial elections to those who had already resided on the islands before 1998 and their descendants who maintained continuous residence on the territory for at least 10 years. That system, which excludes migrants from mainland and the Polynesian parts of France (and their adult children), was adjudicated as 'not discriminatory' and not 'disproportionate' in 2005 as part of a decolonisation process by the European Court of Human Rights.²⁵ In the 2018, 2020, and 2021 referendums, voters chose to remain part of France, which was in line with the Nouméa Agreements.

The 2021 referendum, however, turned out to be a thorn in the flesh for the government. Although primarily requested by the pro-independence advocates themselves (mainly, the FLNKS, the leading movement), they decided to boycott the vote, citing fears of the

¹⁸ Georgio Leali, Victor Goury-Laffont, "[Nickel, guns and foreign powers: How France's New Caledonia reached the brink of 'civil war'](#)," *Politico*, 16 May 2024; Jeanne Belanyi, Carine David, "[Le dégel du corps électoral en Nouvelle-Calédonie : autopsie d'une réforme incendiaire](#) [The thawing of the electorate in New Caledonia: autopsy of an incendiary reform]," *Institut Jean Jaurès*, 24 May 2024.

¹⁹ Leali, Goury-Laffont, "Nickel, guns and foreign powers"; France Info, "[Émeutes en Nouvelle-Calédonie : les inégalités entre les Kanaks et le reste de la population persistent](#) [Riots in New Caledonia: inequalities between the Kanaks and the rest of the population persist]," 17 May 2024.

²⁰ Savinien de Rivet, Alice Clair, Elisa Boyer, and Julien Guillot, "[En data Population, niveau de vie... Les chiffres clés de la Nouvelle-Calédonie](#) [In data Population, standard of living... Key figures for New Caledonia]," *Libération*, 28 May 2024.

²¹ Jeanne Belanyi, Carine David, "[Le dégel du corps électoral en Nouvelle-Calédonie : autopsie d'une réforme incendiaire](#) [The thawing of the electorate in New Caledonia: autopsy of an incendiary reform]," *Institut Jean Jaurès*, 24 May 2024.

²² FranceInfo, "[Violences en Nouvelle-Calédonie : sept mois après le début des émeutes, la liste des tués par balle s'est allongée](#) [Violence in New Caledonia: seven months after the riots began, the list of those killed by gunfire has grown longer]," 24 December 2024.

²³ An abnormally high number of excess deaths due to natural causes were registered in May 2024. La voix du Caillou, "[Depuis le début des émeutes, le nombre de morts naturelles a presque doublé](#) [Since the riots began, the number of natural deaths has almost doubled]," 29 May 2024.

²⁴ Les services de l'Etat en Nouvelle-Calédonie, "[Point de situation – Nouvelle-Calédonie](#) [Situation report – New Caledonia]," last updated on 8 July 2024. Some of them, for example Christian Tein, were sent to prison in France. In the meantime, he became FLNKS leader amid internal disagreements. Sud-Ouest, "[Nouvelle-Calédonie : sept militants indépendantistes incarcérés en métropole, les Calédoniens sous le choc](#) [New Caledonia: Seven independence activists imprisoned in mainland France, Caledonians in shock]," 23 June 2024; Mathieu Ruiz Barraud, Coralie Cochin, "[Leader de la CCAT, Christian Tein nommé président du FLNKS après le congrès extraordinaire de Koumac](#) [CCAT leader Christian Tein appointed president of FLNKS following extraordinary congress in Koumac]," *France Info*, 4 September 2024; Sud-Ouest, "[Nouvelle-Calédonie : le gouvernement local évalue le coût des émeutes à 2,2 milliards d'euros](#) [New Caledonia: Local government estimates cost of riots at €2.2 billion]," 5 July 2024.

²⁵ European Court of Human Rights, "[CASE OF PY v. FRANCE \(Application no. 66289/01\)](#)," 6 June 2005.

COVID-19 pandemic. It took the French government by surprise, as the then-minister for overseas territories had just returned from a trip to New Caledonia, where the issue was allegedly not raised.²⁶ At the time, the FLNKS labelled the decision to move forward with the referendum “a declaration of war.” The Loyalists suspected that the FLNKS was instrumentalising the pandemic in anticipation of an unfavourable electoral outcome.²⁷ In the end, the turnout was low (43.87%), and the results were incredibly lopsided in favour of the loyalists: 96.50% against independence.²⁸ (56% voted against in 2018 and 53,26% in 2020.²⁹) In the Kanak-majority Northern Province and the Loyalty Islands, the turnout was incredibly low: 16,62% and 4,54%, respectively.

The proposed constitutional reform would have diluted the Kanak people’s political clout

In practice, the proposed constitutional reform would have allowed individuals living in New Caledonia for at least 10 years to vote, therefore extending the voting rights to people with European, Polynesian, or Asian ethnic roots.³⁰ It would have diluted the Kanak people’s political clout but would, at the same time, have enforced a full-fledged

democracy, as stated by then-incumbent Minister of Internal Affairs Gérald Darmanin.³¹ Still, it was perceived by the FLNKS as a plan to “constitutionalise the colonisation.”³²

Following the suspension of the constitutional reform in October 2024, the government decided to go forward with comprehensive negotiations over the institutional future of New Caledonia.³³ After negotiations had failed in May 2025, loyalists and pro-independence forces reached a comprehensive agreement on the island’s future.³⁴

The 12 July 2025 Bougival Agreement is giving birth to a *sui generis* status for the “State of New Caledonia” within the “national ensemble” and “enshrined in the Constitution of the French Republic.” From that moment onward, it could be “recognised by the international community.”³⁵ The agreement has created a New Caledonian nationality and modified the electoral code, binding it to its obtaining. After the 2026 provincial elections, people with the Neo-Calédonian nationality will have the right to vote. It has also transferred the “competences” in international relations to New Caledonia, although its actions shall be conducted in respect to France’s “international commitments and fundamental interests.” Regarding defence, the “State” remains “competent,” while New Caledonia is “closely

²⁶ Marcelo Wesfreid, “[Nouvelle-Calédonie : un référendum d’autodétermination sous tension](#) [New Caledonia: a tense referendum on self-determination],” *Le Parisien*, 28 October 2021.

²⁷ Anthony Lattier, “[Nouvelle-Calédonie: les indépendantistes appellent à la non-participation au 3e référendum](#) [New Caledonia: independence supporters call for non-participation in third referendum],” *RFI*, 21 October 2021.

²⁸ Haut-Commissariat de la République en Nouvelle Calédonie, “[Résultats définitifs du 12 décembre 2021](#) [Final results of December 12, 2021],” 13 December 2021.

²⁹ James Griffiths, “[New Caledonia votes to remain part of France: What comes next](#),” 5 November 2018; Haut-Commissariat de la République en Nouvelle Calédonie, “[Résultats définitifs du 4 Octobre 2020](#) [Final results of October 4, 2020],” 5 October 2020.

³⁰ Vie Publique, “[Projet de loi constitutionnelle portant modification du corps électoral pour les élections au congrès et aux assemblées de province de la Nouvelle-Calédonie](#) [Constitutional bill amending the electoral roll for elections to Congress and the Provincial Assemblies of New Caledonia],” last modified on October 2024.

³¹ Thérèse Waïa et Françoise Tromeur, “[Avenir institutionnel : selon Gérald Darmanin, les indépendantistes acceptent de discuter d’un corps électoral glissant pour les provinciales](#) [Institutional future: according to Gérald Darmanin, separatists agree to discuss a rolling electoral roll for provincial elections],” 5 June 2023.

³² Benjamin König, “[Kanaky-Nouvelle-Calédonie : pourquoi le dégel du corps électoral met le feu aux poudres](#) [Kanaky-New Caledonia: why the thawing of the electorate is setting the powder keg alight],” *L’Humanité*, 13 Mai 2024.

³³ Vie Publique, “[Avenir institutionnel de la Nouvelle-Calédonie : quelles sont les orientations présentées ?](#) [The institutional future of New Caledonia: what are the proposed guidelines?],” 5 March 2025.

³⁴ Le Monde, “[Nouvelle-Calédonie : pas d’accord à l’issue de trois jours de négociations sur l’avenir institutionnel](#) [New Caledonia: no agreement reached after three days of negotiations on institutional future],” 8 May 2025.

³⁵ Le site officiel du Gouvernement, “[Un accord pour l’avenir de la Nouvelle-Calédonie](#) [An agreement for the future of New Caledonia],” 15 July 2025.

associated.” The voters of New Caledonia should approve (or reject) this agreement in a referendum in February 2026.³⁶

1.3. PRO-INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENTS

Even though the tensions have decreased, the situation remains fragile. Peace between communities has been jeopardised, and a new social contract needs to be fostered.³⁷

Although this analysis focuses on New Caledonia, it is important to remember that other French overseas territories – such as Martinique, Guadeloupe, La Réunion, Mayotte, and Guyana – face similar problems, especially in the socio-economic sphere. Despite being the highest among them, New Caledonia’s median wage remains 25% lower than that in metropolitan France. For instance, Martinique and Guadeloupe have already seen unrest due to socio-economic hardships.³⁸ In 2017, 77% of people in Mayotte were living under the national poverty threshold (5 times the national level).³⁹

All these overseas territories have other institutional, socio-economic, and geopolitical circumstances, as well as different attitudes towards independence. Therefore, their vulnerabilities and the degree of independence that they wish to attain can differ substantially. However, the developments in New Caledonia have marked a watershed moment in French overseas territories’ and international politics.

³⁶ The New-Calédonian nationality will be bound to the French one. It is important to distinguish between the electorate for the 2026 provincial elections and the future one (p5-6, II, 4. Corps Electoral).

³⁷ Marguerite Poigoune, Valentin Deleforterie, “[Le vivre-ensemble reste possible mais pas partout](#)” : quand de jeunes Calédoniens échangent avec Manuel Valls [“Living together is still possible, but not everywhere”: when young New Caledonians talk with Manuel Valls],” *France Info*, 27 February 2025 .

³⁸ Maia Davies, “[Violent protests force Martinique airport to close](#),” *BBC News*, 11 October 2024; David A. Vivian, “[The colonial legacy lurking beneath economic unrest in the French Caribbean](#),” *The Conversation*, 1 November 2024.

³⁹ Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques (INSEE), “[Mayotte – La France et ses territoires](#) [Mayotte – France and its territories],” 29 April 2021.

The external actors’ interference in the French overseas territories’ internal affairs gave a new impetus to pro-independence movements. The newly created *Front international de décolonisation* (FID, Decolonisation International Front) held its first meeting in

The external actors’ interference in the French overseas territories’ internal affairs gave a new impetus to pro-independence movements

January 2025. The movement aims to “bring together all the peoples fighting against colonialism,” including the “people of Dutch, American and British possessions around the world, particularly in the Caribbean.”⁴⁰

2. THE CASE OF AZERBAIJAN

Azerbaijan has arguably been the most active actor targeting New Caledonia in 2024, primarily through the Baku Initiative Group, created back in 2023. Azerbaijan’s activities could be seen as retaliatory measures against France’s military assistance to Armenia and in the context of long-time tensions between the countries.⁴¹ Researcher Sossi Tatikyan states that Azerbaijan selectively targets various actors, mainly France but also the Netherlands,

Azerbaijan’s activities could be seen as retaliatory measures against France’s military assistance to Armenia

the European Parliament, the Council of Europe, and the *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie*. It does not criticise Russia

⁴⁰ The FID is made up of organisations from: Corsica, Guadeloupe, French Guyana, New Caledonia, Martinique, French Polynesia, Bonaire, Saint Martin. See: Front International de Décolonisation (FID), “[Charte du Front International de Décolonisation](#) [Decolonisation International Front],” 26 Janvier 2025; Francis Carole, “[Déclaration Finale](#) [Final Declaration],” Facebook, 25 January 2025.

⁴¹ Ministère des Armées, “[La France renforce sa relation de défense avec l’Arménie](#) [France strengthens defence ties with Armenia],” 24 October 2023; Sossi Tatikyan, “[Azerbaijan’s Information Warfare Against France](#),” *Institut Montaigne*, 7 March 2025.

or China.⁴² Nor does it refer to other (western) overseas territories or regions in Europe.

2.1. FOSTERING LINKS

In order to target France's sovereignty, Azerbaijan has gone beyond classical FIMI operations, starting by fostering links with pro-independence movements. Such an endeavour materialised with two successive steps. First, Azerbaijan used international platforms, such as the UN or ministerial meetings of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), to organise events, cultivate ties with pro-independence movements, and lay the work for further cooperation.⁴³

Azerbaijan has gone beyond classical FIMI operations, starting by fostering links with pro-independence movements

The BIG then started to fund visits by delegations from local parliamentarians of French territories. For instance, weeks before the start of the unrest, the BIG invited Omayra Naisselline, a UC-FLNKS Congresswoman, to Baku to sign a memorandum of cooperation between the two assemblies.⁴⁴ At the same time, in New Calédonia, protesters were seen holding portraits of President Ilhan Aliiev and the Azerbaijani flag.⁴⁵ Sossi Tatikyan also shows that the BIG held various conferences with parliament members from Antilles, Guyana, French Polynesia, La Réunion, Mayotte, and Corsica, as well as on African affairs. According to *Le service de vigilance et de protection contre les ingérences numériques étrangères* (VIGINUM, France's technical and operational department responsible for vigilance and

protection against foreign digital interference), they also organised conferences in Comoros and invited pro-Russian pan-Africanist outlets to boost their audience and announced academic scholarships for students from the French overseas territories.

Azerbaijan has also been trying to support pro-independence leaders. In October 2024, Azerbaijan hosted a conference on "France's neocolonialism policy in Africa," claiming that Mayotte Island was under occupation. One of the speakers, Kémi Séba, is known in France for his antisemitic claims and being a mouthpiece of Russian influence; he was stripped of his French passport supposedly for "committing acts contrary to the interests of France."⁴⁶

Following suspicion of foreign interference and links to the Wagner Group (from which he allegedly received \$400 000) by the Directorate General of Internal Security (DGSJ), Kémi Séba was detained. The BIG promptly proclaimed him to be a political prisoner and a victim of neo-colonialism.⁴⁷

Without the BIG's logistical and ideological assistance, it is hard to imagine that the FID would have been established so quickly: it was unveiled in the summer of 2024 in Baku and established the following January. However, one should be careful not to deprive domestic actors of their agency. The head of the FLNKS'

⁴² At the time of writing, this analysis did not take into account the downturn in the Russia-Azerbaijani bilateral relations since the beginning of 2025.

⁴³ Tatikyan, "Azerbaijan's Information Warfare."

⁴⁴ Coralie Cochin, Sheïma Riahi, "[Déplacement d'Omayra Naisselline en Azerbaïdjan : l'affaire qui embarrasse le Congrès de la Nouvelle-Calédonie](#) [Omayra Naisselline's trip to Azerbaijan: the affair that is embarrassing the Congress of New Caledonia]," *France Info*, 23 April 2024.

⁴⁵ Amos Chapple, "[Why Azerbaijan's Flag Is Flying Amid New Caledonia Unrest](#)," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 21 May 2024; Elisabeth Pierson, "[Azerbaïdjan, Chine : le spectre des ingérences étrangères plane sur les émeutes en Nouvelle-Calédonie](#) [Azerbaijan, China: the shadow of foreign interference looms over the riots in New Caledonia]," *Le Figaro*, 16 May 2024.

⁴⁶ Journal Officiel de la République Française, "[Naturalisations et réintégrations - Décret du 8 juillet 2024 prononçant la perte de la nationalité française](#) [Naturalizations and reinstatements - Decree of 8 July 2024 declaring the loss of French nationality]," NOR : IOMN2415068D, Texte 229, 9 July 2024; Paul Sugy, "[Kémi Séba a perdu la nationalité française](#) [Kémi Séba stripped of French citizenship]," *Le Figaro*, 9 July 2024. (The procedure of stripping someone of French nationality can be triggered by the government against an individual who meets three conditions: someone who has the nationality of another state, who behaves like a citizen of that state, and who has committed acts contrary to the interests of France.)

⁴⁷ *Le Monde*, "[Le « panafricaniste » Kémi Séba soupçonné de liens avec le groupe paramilitaire russe Wagner](#) ['Pan-Africanist' Kémi Séba suspected of links to Russian paramilitary group Wagner]," 18 October 2024; AZERTAC - The Azerbaijan State News Agency, "[Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry: Persecution of Pavel Durov and Kémi Séba by France for their political views and convictions is unacceptable](#)," 16 October 2024. See also the original investigation undertaken by Jeune Afrique and other organisations: Benjamin Roger, "[« Projet Kémi » : quand Kémi Séba était financé par Evgueni Prigojine et Wagner](#) ['Project Kémi': when Kémi Séba was funded by Evgeny Prigozhin and Wagner]," *Jeune Afrique*, 18 October 2024.

external relations and a UC member, Mickaël Forrest, denies the allegations that Azerbaijan has been conducting interference and destabilisation operations. He claims that the initiative to launch the FID dates back to 1985 and was unsuccessfully revived in the 2000s, and that it currently receives support from other countries, such as Kenya and Cuba.⁴⁸

Beyond the strictly political sphere, links between Baku and the CCAT's founders are also visible, including meetings, militants displaying Azeri symbols, flags, and the portraits of President Aliyev.⁴⁹ The extent of these links is, however, an open and understudied question.

2.2. TARNISHING FRANCE'S IMAGE

Azerbaijan also tries to undermine France's reputation in the international arena. The 29th session of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP 29), held in Baku, gives an example of the instrumentalisation of the neo-colonialism question at international venues. President Aliyev gave a speech, accusing France of "brutally" repressing climate change concerns on its territory and Macron's government of "killing innocent people." He ended his remarks by stating that "all political prisoners of France must be liberated."⁵⁰ It could be interpreted as a response to France contesting the arbitrary detention of a French citizen through diplomatic channels.⁵¹ The Netherlands were also criticised by Azerbaijan along the same lines.⁵²

It is worth considering, however, whether Azerbaijan is positioning itself as a new actor in shaping narratives around an alternative international order. The country's BRICS

membership application has the potential not only to strengthen its global and economic standing, but it may also be part of this desire to titillate the established powers.

2.3. MANOEUVRES IN THE FRENCH DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM

VIGINUM, whose role is to monitor and protect the French digital ecosystem against foreign digital interference, detected informational manoeuvres targeting France and involving Azerbaijani actors. The service reported a coordinated dissemination of inaccurate and misleading content blaming France for its handling of the situation in New Caledonia on Facebook and X between 15 and 16 May 2024.

- On May 15, VIGINUM identified messaging that accused the police of murdering people and compared the developments to the French police's actions in Algeria.
- On May 16, VIGINUM encountered a montage showing pro-independence individuals allegedly killed by French police.

The social media content featured hashtags related to New Caledonia and 'French Colonialism' but also called for the boycott of the Paris Olympics (several accounts were linked to the Azerbaijani OLIMPIYA campaign).⁵³

Informational manoeuvres surrounding New Caledonia were part of a broader campaign dubbed "Un-notorious BIG," named after the organisation's failed attempt "to gain visibility." From July 2023 to February 2024, accounts affiliated with the BIG amplified the narratives harming France's image in French overseas departments and Corsica on the X platform; it did not succeed in reaching a wide audience, though. VIGINUM noticed that operations were linked to BIG's launch and its conferences: similar posts were shared by a cluster of accounts, with 423 presenting ties

⁴⁸ Deleforterie, "Le vivre-ensemble reste possible mais pas partout."

⁴⁹ Nathalie Guibert, "[Nouvelle-Calédonie : les indépendantistes invités par l'Azerbaïdjan suscitent de nouveau la réprobation](#) [New Caledonia: independence activists invited by Azerbaijan once again draw criticism]," *Le Monde*, 18 Juillet 2024.

⁵⁰ Le Monde, "[Azerbaijan President Aliyev blasts France for reaction to New Caledonia protests](#)," 13 November 2024.

⁵¹ France Diplomacy, "[Azerbaijan – Situation of Théo Clerc](#)," 12 September 2024.

⁵² Dutch News, "[Dutch hit back at "neo-colonial" claim by Azerbaijan at Cop29](#)," 14 November 2024.

⁵³ "[Nouvelle-Calédonie : manœuvres informationnelles impliquant des acteurs azerbaïdjanais](#) [New Caledonia: Informational manoeuvres involving Azerbaijani actors]," *Secrétariat général de la Défense et de la Sécurité nationale (SGDSN)/VIGINUM*, 17 May 2024; Le Monde, "[France links 2024 Olympic smear campaign to Azerbaijan](#)," 14 November 2023.

with Azerbaijan, in a short amount of time.⁵⁴ VIGINUM's text analysis revealed that although New Caledonia was the main target, Corsica, Martinique, and Drom-Com (*Départements et régions d'outre-mer et collectivités d'outre-mer* – Overseas departments and regions and overseas collectivities) were also mentioned, which might foreshadow Azerbaijan's actions in the future. For instance, they manipulated videos to allege police repression in Martinique and overseas territories, also without success so far.

The VIGINUM report revealed other interesting findings:

- First, the volume of interaction on the BIG's posts remains low, which is a sign that it struggles to take root in the francophone public debate online.
- Second, the operation confirms the malicious intent behind the BIG, whose objectives are dictated by the Baku authorities.
- Third, the campaign aimed at discrediting German, Irish, Austrian, and EU lawmakers, as well as former NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen.⁵⁵

With all that said, it remains difficult to assess whether the BIG intended to push for violence and whether its actions led to clashes in the streets (whether we talk about information manoeuvres or fostering pro-independence networks). Therefore, one would recommend that our European counterparts heighten their vigilance in their own overseas territories.

While “one of the greatest challenges in the study of disinformation and influence operations (IOs) is measuring their impact,”

⁵⁴ “Un-notorious BIG - A digital information manipulation campaign targeting French overseas departments, regions, territories and Corsica,” *Secrétariat général de la Défense et de la Sécurité nationale* (December 2024), 4-5. Number of accounts: from 882 to 1 118, with 423 presenting ties with Azerbaijan; Duration of Campaigns (5 hours to 3 days); Conferences: 1. Launch of BIG on 6 July 2023; 2. “Decolonisation Peace Revolution” on 22 September 2023; 3. “Neocolonialism: Violation of Human Rights and Injustice” on 20 October 2023; 4. “Decolonisation: Empowering and Development of Women” on 21 November 2023; 5. VIGINUM detected a fifth operation following the arrest of two activists of Corsica's new pro-independence party, “Nazione” on 2 February 2024.

⁵⁵ “Un-notorious BIG,” 20.

when it comes to the assessment of disinformation and influence operations' impact, Ben Nimmo's “Breakout Scale” can be a key tool for policymakers and analysts.⁵⁶ The breakout scale is a comparative and operational model based on “data that are observable, replicable, verifiable, and available from the moment they were posted.” It divides IOs in six categories based on the number of platforms across which they travel, whether they spread through many communities; break out from social media and are amplified by mainstream media or high-profile individuals; include calls for violence or trigger a policy response. By analysing the cross-platform and cross-medium development of an operation, one goes beyond the common approach, which focuses on “the raw metric of social engagement.” The breakout scale offers a standardised measurement tool which allows experts to compare different operations and categorise an IO in real-time.

3. RUSSIAN INTERFERENCE

3.1. TACTICS

Russians are known to use sticking points against western societies to sow distrust in populations, and elections or referenda are windows of opportunity for them to do so. Election interference has traditionally been used by Russia and the USSR. Henry Wallace, Commerce Secretary under President Truman, was the first candidate selected for support by Moscow in 1948. Stalin himself did not shy away from endorsing the wannabe agents of influence: he wrote a letter in a newspaper praising Wallace's programme, backed by the US Communist Party and its Soviet partners.⁵⁷

By the 2010s, Russia's desire to fragment Europe had crystallised as one of its primary strategic objectives.⁵⁸ The Kremlin meddled in Catalonia's and Scotland's referenda by deploying its propaganda machine to channel

⁵⁶ Ben Nimmo, “The Breakout Scale: Measuring the impact of influence operations,” *Brookings*, September 2020.

⁵⁷ Casey Michel, “Russia's Long and Mostly Unsuccessful History of Election Interference,” *Politico*, 26 October 2019.

⁵⁸ David Salvo and Etienne Soula, “Russian Government's Fission Know-How Hard at Work in Europe,” *GMF*, 31 October 2017.

the disinformation flows, by engaging state-funded news agencies, and by profiting from permissive local figures susceptible to its narratives.⁵⁹

As exposed by Dr Ivan U.K. Klyszcz, Russia has been attempting – in a pragmatic and messianic way – to cultivate its ties with the global south to challenge the international order.⁶⁰ Moscow promotes its version of multipolarity, while some countries try to strike a balance between the west and Russia. By exploiting anti-imperialism as its main propaganda theme, Russia draws a false equivalence between its actions in Ukraine and the west’s behaviour in other parts of the world.⁶¹ While French overseas territories can arguably be classified as belonging to both the west and the global south, there is a lack of quantitative data on how people from overseas territories view Ukraine. However, there is no lack of reverse accusations of France for being neo-imperialist by Russia.

3.2. THE GLOBAL SOUTH PLAYBOOK

Similar to its actions in Sub-Saharan Africa, Russia added fuel to the anti-French sentiments in French overseas territories, such as in New Caledonia, where banners reading “President Putin, free our colonies” were put up during the unrest.⁶² Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova commented on the riots, saying that it was “stemming from the lack of finality in the process of its decolonisation.”⁶³

Russia has not been as active on the ground in New Caledonia as Azerbaijan

However, Russia has not been as active on the ground in New Caledonia as Azerbaijan: the local pro-independence leaders do not seem to have apparent links with the Russian Federation.

Mayotte and its political elites have become another target of Russian narratives, taking advantage of a particular institutional situation inherited from colonial times. Mayotte has the status of both a French region and department; it is an “outmost region” of the European Union and is geographically part of the Comoro Islands but does not belong to the Union of the Comoros (also known as Comoros). While other islands voted to become independent, Mayotte chose to remain French in 1974 and 1976. It has not been a point of contention since, which might explain why no political organisation from Mayotte participates in the FID.

While trying to push the “double standards” narrative, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov claimed that Moscow was ready to get involved in discussions with Moroni, the capital city of Comoros, to resolve the issue with Mamoudzou (Mayotte). In addition, messaging favourable to Putin in the form of

⁵⁹ [“#ElectionWatch: Russia and Referendums in Catalonia? Assessing claims of Russian propaganda in Spain,” DFRLab – Atlantic Council, 28 September 2017;](#) [“Russian news agency Sputnik sets up Scottish studio,” BBC News, 10 August 2016;](#) Roy Greenslade, [“Pravda comes to Scotland ‘to extend Russian influence in UK,’” The Guardian, 12 October 2016;](#) Mure Dickie, [“Alex Salmond criticised over plans for Russia Today talk show,” The Financial Times, 10 November 2017;](#) [“Alex Salmond Show tweets misled audience, says watchdog Ofcom,” BBC, 16 July 2018;](#) [“Alex Salmond suspends RT show over Ukraine invasion, BBC, 24 February 2022;](#) María R. Sahuquillo, [“Un informe de la inteligencia europea documentó los intentos de injerencia del Kremlin en el ‘procés’ \[A European intelligence report documented the Kremlin’s attempts to interfere in the Catalan independence process\],” El País, 26 February 2024;](#) C. S. Macías, [“La Comisión Europea denuncia los contactos «estrechos y constantes de Putin con el secesionismo catalán, \[The European Commission denounces Putin’s “close and constant contacts with Catalan secessionists”\],” La Razón, 6 February 2024;](#) Iñaki Ellakuría, [“Cataluña, puerta de entrada de la injerencia rusa \[Catalonia, gateway for Russian interference\],” El Mundo, 5 June 2024.](#)

⁶⁰ Ivan U. K. Klyszcz, [“Messianic multipolarity: Russia’s resurrected Africa doctrine,” Riddle Russia, 6 April 2023.](#)

⁶¹ Klyszcz, “Messianic multipolarity”; Ivan U. K. Klyszcz, [“How Russia Brings its Aggression Against Ukraine to The Global South,” International Centre for Defence and Security, 14 April 2024;](#) Natalie Sabanadze, [“Russia is using the Soviet playbook in the Global South to challenge the West – and it is working,” Chatham House, 16 May 2024.](#)

⁶² Ulysse Legavre-Jérôme, [“Nouvelle-Calédonie : quand Chine, Russie et Azerbaïdjan manoeuvrent pour déstabiliser l’archipel \[New Caledonia: when China, Russia and Azerbaijan manoeuvre to destabilise the archipelago\],” Les Échos, 16 May 2024.](#)

⁶³ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, [“Comment by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova on riots in New Caledonia,” 18 May 2024.](#)

flags and graffiti has been visible in Mayotte.⁶⁴ Russian officials themselves spread anti-France narratives in Mayotte by criticising an alleged “unjustified militarisation” of the island.⁶⁵ This even led Marine le Pen, whose *Rassemblement National* enjoys a high level of support in Mayotte, to denounce the statement as Russia’s interference in France’s internal affairs.⁶⁶

The case of Mayotte shows again that there is a limit to which pro-independence movements can be engineered from outside

The case of Mayotte is interesting in comparison with New Caledonia. While Russia attempts to destabilise the island, there is no proof that it relies on domestic political agents, most likely because it can hardly do so. It shows once again that there is a limit to which pro-independence movements can be engineered from outside.

Looking at Mayotte’s vulnerabilities, one must wonder whether Russia could resort to harder measures to destabilise the island. Mayotte-based deputy Estelle Youssouffa claimed to have been attacked on Facebook by dozens of fake profiles and denounced regular IT system failures in the Mayotte hospital. Absent solid evidence, she believes, however, that such attacks resemble Russia’s hybrid war elsewhere, namely in francophone sub-Saharan Africa.⁶⁷ Mayotte has acute vulnerabilities that other overseas territories do not have. For instance, high immigration from the neighbouring Comoros – accused by a 2023 parliamentary report of treating it “as a weapon in favour of its territorial claim” – had fuelled bilateral tensions to the point when the constitutional birthright citizenship had

to be modified in May 2025.⁶⁸ The Mahoran people also blocked the Comorian people from accessing health centres amidst of a huge health sector crisis and violence against workers and infrastructure.⁶⁹ In December 2024, the Intense Tropical Cyclone Chido more than exacerbated these vulnerabilities: it partly destroyed the hospital and health surveillance systems in a place that was already significantly poorer than mainland France.⁷⁰

4. NEW CALEDONIA ON CHINA’S RADAR

4.1. A STRATEGIC ISLAND FOR MILITARY EXPANSION

Political scientist Anne-Marie Brady recalls the fact that New Caledonia has been on China’s radar since at least 1987. Back then, an article written by a People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) think tank mentioned the idea that “Once New Caledonia’s national independence movement is taken advantage of by a superpower, changes that are unfavourable to the United States will take place in the strategic balance in the South Pacific.”⁷¹

New Caledonia’s importance for the stability in the South-Pacific is widely recognised by other key actors, such as the US, New Zealand, and Australia, especially with regard

⁶⁴ Frédéric Métézeau, “Azerbaïdjan, Russie, Chine... Enquête sur les ingérences étrangères dans les Outre-mer français [Azerbaijan, Russia, China... Investigation into foreign interference in French overseas territories],” *FranceInfo*, 6 May 2024.

⁶⁵ France Info, “Moscou dénonce la “militarisation” de Mayotte et y remet en cause la souveraineté française [Moscow condemns the ‘militarisation’ of Mayotte and questions French sovereignty there],” 29 March 2025.

⁶⁶ France Info, “Militarisation de Mayotte : union de la classe politique mahoraise face aux accusations russes,” 29 March 2025.

⁶⁷ Frédéric Métézeau, “Azerbaïdjan, Russie, Chine...”

⁶⁸ Vie Publique, “Loi du 12 mai 2025 visant à renforcer les conditions d’accès à la nationalité française à Mayotte [Law of 12 May 2025 aimed at strengthening the conditions of access to French nationality in Mayotte],” 13 May 2025.

⁶⁹ Assemblée Nationale, “Rapport d’information, n°1295,” 31 May 2023 ; Vie Publique, “Loi du 12 mai 2025”; Christophe Ayad, “A Mayotte, les tensions se cristallisent autour des centres de santé [In Mayotte, tensions are mounting around health centres],” *Le Monde*, 27 May 2023.

⁷⁰ Marion Soler and al., “Immediate public health surveillance response to cyclone Chido, Mayotte, 14 December 2024,” *Eurosurveillance*, 13 February 2025, 30(6):2500060. doi: [10.2807/1560-7917.ES.2025.30.6.2500060](https://doi.org/10.2807/1560-7917.ES.2025.30.6.2500060); France Info, “«On n’a plus de toit, l’eau rentre dans les chambres» : l’hôpital de Mayotte en partie détruit par Chido [‘We no longer have a roof, water is coming into the rooms’: Mayotte hospital partially destroyed by Chido],” 16 December 2024; Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques (INSEE), “Mayotte – La France et ses territoires [Mayotte – France and its territories],” 29 April 2021.

⁷¹ Anne-Marie Brady, “When China knocks.”

to security and global trade. New Caledonia is also appealing to China when it comes to its mineral resources.

While the PRC is undertaking a large military expansion, the island's resources are of primary interest to Beijing. New Caledonia holds 25% of the world's nickel reserves (thereby making it the third largest supplier in the world) – nickel is used to produce missiles, tanks, and satellites; it is also crucial for Chinese electric car production and energy storage. It is worth mentioning that military systems which use electric or hybrid power systems have a lower thermal image, making their detection more difficult. New Caledonia's large cobalt reserves are also instrumental in missile guidance and radar technology.⁷² It constitutes another reason why the EU should be paying attention.

A bilateral security agreement between the Solomon Islands and China – the first in the region – has opened the door to the establishment of a permanent military base and intelligence listening posts, which makes the subject of New Caledonia's domestic and foreign policy even more topical.⁷³

4.2. CHINESE METHODS

New Caledonia is no stranger to the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) tactics, as exposed by Anne-Marie Brady. Beijing attempts to exercise control over the Chinese diaspora, projects influence through media, culture, and education, promotes mass tourism to create an economic dependency, and targets political and economic elites. Through them, China pushes its New Silk Road agenda – sometimes in collaboration with lenient local elites willing to work for the CCP's "United Front" organisations, which entails risks for local populations.

⁷² Anne-Marie Brady, "When China knocks"; Jack Bianchi at al., "[China's Choices: A New Tool for Assessing the PLA's Modernization](#)," *Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments*, 14 July 2022.

⁷³ Anne-Marie Brady, "When China knocks"; Joseph Hammond, "[China's Security Agreement with the Solomon Islands](#)," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, November-December 2023.

Powers in the region are not oblivious to China's activities. Australia has sounded the alarm about China's efforts to sway political elites and its targeted pursuit of transportation infrastructure in locations across Melanesia.⁷⁴

Powers in the region sounded alarm about China's efforts to sway political elites and its targeted pursuit of transportation infrastructure in locations across Melanesia

Other concerns raised are related to the transparency of projects involving state-owned enterprises and the prospect of debt-trap diplomacy that leads countries in need of infrastructure development – such as Indonesia – to weigh the risk-benefit ratio.⁷⁵ The Lowy Institute projects that in 2025, "the world's poorest and most vulnerable countries will make record high debt repayments totalling \$22 billion to China."⁷⁶

In New Caledonia, the Pacific Energy LTD, which operates gas stations on the islands, refused a Chinese takeover offer that would have resulted in China's control over oil supplies in French Pacific territories.⁷⁷ While New Caledonia can show some resilience, and such foreign investments are scrutinised, the island's exports to China accounted for 62.3% of its total in 2022 (up from 6.9% in 2011), the bulk of which were mineral exports.⁷⁸ France accounted for only 1.2%, which indicates a clear dependency on China.

Foreign actors are responding to existing domestic grievances, rather than inventing them from scratch

⁷⁴ Euam Graham, "[Mind the gap: views of security in the Pacific](#)," *The Interpreter - The Lowy Institute*, 14 September 2018.

⁷⁵ Jeffrey, Wilson, "[Infrastructure Choices and the Future of the Indo-Pacific](#)," *Security Challenges* 16, no. 3 (2020), 64–68; Gatra Priyandita, "[Belt and Road Investment under Fire in Indonesia's Presidential Elections](#)," *East Asia Forum*, 20 November 2018.

⁷⁶ Riley Duke, "[Peak repayment: China's global lending – Data Snapshot](#)," *Lowy Institute*, May 2025.

⁷⁷ Anne-Marie Brady, "When China knocks."

⁷⁸ Kate Hannan and Stewart Firth, "[Trading with the Dragon: Chinese Trade, Investment and Development Assistance in the Pacific Islands](#)," *Journal of Contemporary China*, 24 (95) (2015), 865–82.

As with the case of Azerbaijan, foreign actors are responding to existing domestic grievances, rather than inventing them from scratch. In this regard, it is interesting to look at the evolution of domestic actors' positions towards China over time. While Brady shows that both loyalists and pro-independence forces were initially enthusiastic about the idea of extending their contacts with China, the development of a client-state relationship between the CPR and Vanuatu prompted them to be more cautious.

4.3. WHERE DOES THE FLNKS STAND?

The case of the FLNKS is hard to decipher. Although Roch Wamytan, former President of the Congress of New Caledonia, claimed to be aware of dangers related to China and unwilling to favour either Paris or Beijing (as of 2018), as a vice-president of the FLNKS, he must know about the organisation's ties to the CCP.

In Brady's interviews, Roch Wamytan and Liu Jiyou (a businessman and the founder of the CCP United Front organisations in New Caledonia⁷⁹) themselves admit that Chinese links go deep to the core of the pro-independence movement (without characterising as such, however). For example, back in the 1980s, the FLNKS received money from the United Front, while its members were sent to China for training. The FLNKS considered opening an office in China. Roch Wamytan expressed willingness to introduce the Chinese renminbi (yuan) as the currency for future New Caledonia. He echoed Beijing's talking points, such as China's 'win-win' approach to the Pacific Islands, while comparing France to a dictatorship and saying that "France colonised us, not China."⁸⁰

Amidst contradictory signals from the FLNKS leaders, their – and other pro-independence forces' – position on the future defence model and future foreign policy orientations remains

⁷⁹ He is a founding figure of the Chinese Association of New Caledonia and established the *Réunification pacifique de la Chine en Nouvelle Calédonie* (New Caledonia – China Peaceful Reunification Association) – a second CCP united front group.

⁸⁰ Anne-Marie Brady, "When China knocks."

unclear. A 2021 document, published on a pro-independence website and attributed to the FLNKS by Anne-Marie Brady, casts doubts on the leader's understanding of China's threat.⁸¹ While Brady argues that the document advocates a Djibouti defence model, it also mentions Costa Rican and Panamanian models of "active neutrality."⁸² It is also said that engaging alongside France in an "Indo-Pacific axis hostile to China" is dangerous, but so is getting closer to China. Thus, "an equilibrium is to be kept," considering that the main cities are twinned with French and Chinese cities.

There is, likewise, a discrepancy between the politicians' speeches and actions regarding China as well as other revisionist foreign powers. Their (changing) rhetoric should not, however, serve as the sole indicator of policy orientations on the matter. Nor should the FLNKS be seen as completely dependent on just one leader or the UC, more broadly, or as a movement that is unanimous in its opinions. One shall not overlook the change in stances by nickel industry actors, who have become less open to collaboration with China, as shown by Brady.⁸³

5. DIFFERENT ACTORS – DIFFERENT OBJECTIVES

It bears repeating that the uprisings in New Caledonia in the spring of 2024 took root in domestic factors: attributing responsibility for these insurgencies to foreign actors would be both misleading and counter-productive. Doing so would lead to the imitation of certain narratives used by rival powers, as well as by autocrats and dictators.

Arguably, different foreign actors have different objectives and means to exploit vulnerabilities, although they mainly tend to capitalise on the historical colonial heritage and socio-economic grievances. By engaging

⁸¹ Lindependent, "[Document Etat Oui / Non : Nos Commentaires](#)," 11 October 2021. It was picked up by commentators, although it is not entirely clear who is at the origin of the document.

⁸² Interestingly, Brady recalls that "Djibouti is where the PLA (People's Liberation Army) has set up its first overseas base." Under this model, New Caledonia could "generate income by charging rent to foreign troops."

⁸³ Anne-Marie Brady, "When China knocks."

in what can be described as subversion (according to Kastner and Wohlforth's definition), they try to influence the French territories' foreign policy orientation.

- China may be interested in New Caledonia not so much because it is a French territory, but because of its value for achieving supremacy in the Pacific.
- Azerbaijan, on the contrary, uses New Caledonia to target France—to make Paris reconsider its support for Armenia, while also aspiring to greater influence within BRICS. It also targets other European states and institutions.
- Russia is pursuing its goal to divide the west and polarise western societies, which would subsequently facilitate the rearrangement of the European security order to Moscow's benefit. This tactic is well known in Estonia and relevant to its security interests. Russia's attempt to destabilise French overseas territories should be understood as part of the Russian strategy in Europe.

Russia's attempt to destabilise French overseas territories should be understood as part of the Russian strategy in Europe

To this date, only Azerbaijan and China have clear links with the pro-independence political establishment in New Caledonia, although to a varying degree. Nothing yet proves that Russia has significantly meddled in New Caledonia's affairs during the riots. Azerbaijan, however, employed and even enhanced Russia's playbook, going further than FIMI operations with the creation of the FID.

Domestic actors play a key role in foreign powers' attempts to deepen polarisation and propagate pro-independence ideas

The case of Mayotte and Russia's reliance on the Comoro Islands to stir up tensions there confirms that domestic actors play a key role in foreign powers' attempts to deepen polarisation and propagate pro-independence ideas. Therefore, one must not deprive domestic actors of their political agency.

Further research should be conducted on the local political elites' foreign policy orientation – and relations towards revisionist powers, in particular – especially should they successfully push for independence. Such research should dwell on more indicators than public communication.

Regarding New Caledonia, it will be interesting to monitor the dynamics between the pro-independence forces and foreign revisionist powers following the historic agreement of July 2025, as well as the impact it will have on the FID.

The UK, Spain, the Netherlands, or Denmark could witness similar destabilisation activities in their overseas territories

CONCLUSION AND THE WAY FORWARD

In an alliance, if it is about one of us, it is about all of us. The debates about France's (opposing) strategic priorities in its overseas territories and continental Europe are ongoing.⁸⁴ Meanwhile, revisionist powers – especially China and Russia – have a clear strategic interest in instrumentalising pro-independence movements and targeting other vulnerabilities in French overseas territories. It threatens to drive a wedge between France's foreign policy goals.

Against this backdrop, developments in France's overseas territories should be of interest to the Baltic states and the NATO Alliance. Other European countries – the UK, Spain, the Netherlands, or Denmark – could witness similar destabilisation activities in their overseas territories. Should their sovereignty be jeopardised, they could be forced to make painful choices and scale down their tangible contribution to NATO's eastern flank.

⁸⁴ Maxence Brischoux, "[Entre Varsovie et Tahiti, le caractère stratégique renouvelé des lignes de communication maritimes](#) [Between Warsaw and Tahiti, the renewed strategic importance of maritime communication lines]," *Revue Défense Nationale*, no. 868 (March 2024).

This analysis has illustrated the key vulnerabilities in French overseas territories, explained the overarching strategy of revisionist powers, and argued that domestic actors' positioning determines success in FIMI and destabilisation operations.

Moving forward, it is paramount for allies and partners to systematise the impact evaluation of FIMI operations. In this context, the United States' decision to scale down its efforts to counter Russian disinformation is a bad signal for the alliance.⁸⁵ Ben Nimmo's breakout scale appears to be a useful tool for analysts and policymakers. More emphasis could be put on pre-bunking instead of debunking.⁸⁶ In other words, we must inoculate people by teaching them to spot and refute a misleading claim, thereby undermining both narratives and techniques.

New Caledonia has been at the political crossroads since 2024, and it also needs to balance its economy. Like-minded democratic partners should consider the role they could play in strengthening the island's resilience. In this regard, the mining industry and critical minerals such as nickel are important, as they can be leveraged and abused by foreign powers – even more so today, as the sector struggles to be competitive.⁸⁷ Europe, in this watershed moment, cannot afford to lose this industry if it wants to ramp up its military production.

Amidst hardened geopolitical tensions, especially between the EU and Russia, the latter might resort to hybrid attacks outside of what is usually defined as European territory.⁸⁸ Henrik Praks's recommendations on countering Russia's hybrid warfare should therefore apply to the overseas territories of EU member states. For example, strengthening national and regional resilience could be carried out by introducing students to pre-bunking and detecting disinformation in high school and by using examples of influencers and social media figures that contribute to anti-western narratives in the francophone ecosystem. If it is not already the case, other EU countries could create VIGINUM-like agencies, and personnel could be tasked with combating FIMI (or subversion operations in line with Kastner and Wohlforth's definition) in overseas territories. This would improve attribution and identification capabilities within the EU. Lastly, it is important to continue intelligence-sharing and keep Allied countries informed about the situation of each other's overseas territories.⁸⁹

Russia and China are likely to continue to engage in this 'colonialism accusations' game. Europeans should recognise it and strive to minimise their own weaknesses while also looking for their opponents' vulnerabilities and responding both symmetrically and asymmetrically.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Benedict Smith, "[Trump official who shut down counter-Russia agency has links to Kremlin](#)," *The Telegraph*, 3 June 2025.

⁸⁶ Trisha Harjani et al., *A Practical Guide to Prebunking Misinformation* (2022).

⁸⁷ Frank Jüris, "[Security implications of China-owned critical infrastructure in the European Union](#)," European Parliament, Directorate-General for External Policies, June 2023; Emmanuel Hache, "[New Caledonia and the Geopolitics of Critical Metals: Towards a Disruption of the Nickel Market?](#)," *Institut de Relations Internationales et Stratégiques*, 21 May 2024.

⁸⁸ One might prefer to use the word 'subversion' according to Kastner and Wohlforth.

⁸⁹ Henrik Praks, "[Russia's Hybrid Attacks in Europe: From Deterrence to Attribution to Response](#)," *International Centre for Defence and Security*, 3 April 2025.

⁹⁰ Taras Kuzio, "[Commentary – Territorial Claims Can Work Two Ways: Russia and Ukraine](#)," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume: 6, Issue 18, 28 January 2009; Andrea Kendall-Taylor et al., "[Identifying Russian Vulnerabilities and How to Leverage Them](#)," *Center for a New American Security*, 14 December 2023; Ondrej Ditrych et al., "[Unpowering Russia How the EU can counter and undermine the Kremlin](#)," *European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS)*, May 2025.

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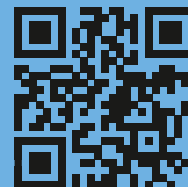
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