

OVERSEAS TERRITORIES

Enhancing sovereignty and regional integration in the Indo-Pacific

France is an Indo-Pacific country, owing to its overseas territories and its over 1.6 million French nationals living there (see *Fact sheet No.2 - Demographics and political representation*). Seven of France's thirteen overseas departments, regions and collectivities stand in the Indian Ocean (Réunion, Mayotte and the French Southern and Antarctic Territories – TAAF) and the Pacific Ocean (New Caledonia, French Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna and Clipperton). These territories play a direct role in furthering France's influence in the Indo-Pacific, and are integrated into various regional cooperation mechanisms.

These territories, with their different political statuses, are strategically important, not least because of their geographical position and the associated maritime domain. Over 90 percent of France's exclusive economic zone (nearly 9 million km², the second largest in the world) is located in the Indo-Pacific. The defence of these territories and French sovereignty interests is ensured by three military presence forces in the southern Indian Ocean zone (FAZSOI), New Caledonia (FANC) and French Polynesia (FAPF) (see *Fact sheet No. 4 - Military presence and defence diplomacy*).

Geographical remoteness means different time zones to that of Paris: -12h for Papeete, +1h for Mamoudzou, +2h for Saint-Denis, +3h for Port-aux-Français, +9h for Nouméa and +10h for Mata-Utu.

VARIOUS ADMINISTRATIVE STATUSES

The overseas department and region (DROM) of Réunion and the overseas department (DOM) of Mayotte are governed by legislative identity, same as the mainland territories.

The overseas collectivities (COM) of French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna have adopted a system of legislative distinctiveness and autonomy. Despite its unique institutional organisation, the former does not enjoy political autonomy, but rather administrative autonomy. New Caledonia and the TAAF have a unique status and are *sui generis* collectivities.

Under the 1998 Nouméa Accord, referendums on New Caledonian independence were held in

November 2018, October 2020 and December 2021. The Caledonians voted against full sovereignty each time. However, the territory is beginning to enjoy a large degree of political autonomy.

In these territories, the State is represented by two *Préfets* in Réunion and Mayotte, two *Hauts Commissaires* responsible for sovereign matters in French Polynesia and New Caledonia, as well as the senior administration of the islands of Wallis and Futuna, and the administration of the French Southern and Antarctic Territories.

During his visits to New Caledonia (May 2018 and July 2023), Réunion and Mayotte (October 2019), and French Polynesia (July 2021), the French President emphasized the essential role played by the territories in France's Indo-Pacific strategy. The State is also present overseas through the work of the Ministry of the Interior and Overseas territories, and the Minister Delegate in charge of Overseas territories, who performs three missions relevant to sovereignty, intervention and coordination.

SHARP ECONOMIC INEQUALITIES

The Indo-Pacific's overseas economies account for less than 1.5 percent of France's GDP, and there are major inequalities with mainland France: lower per capita GDP and life expectancy, higher poverty and unemployment rates, etc. Mayotte is the poorest French territory.

Despite the distance, most commercial trade, which shows a heavy deficit, is with the mainland. While tourism plays a crucial role in the economies of Réunion and French Polynesia, New Caledonia's economy is partly based on nickel mining, which accounts for 25 percent of private sector salaried employment.

Numerous initiatives highlight the potential for the development of services, particularly in export markets, as illustrated by the success of the Choose La Réunion event in October 2019. In French Polynesia, the first edition of the Pacific Business Day in 2018 and the Tech4Islands Awards competition held since 2019 aim to increase the archipelago's



attractiveness for regional investment (*see Fact sheet No.8 - Economic cooperation and business*).

The French development agency (AFD) supports the French overseas territories through its presence in four DROM/COM and in the region (*see Fact sheet No.6 - Development aid and the environment*). This is the case with the assistance provided to Mayotte's local authorities in managing the construction and rehabilitation of elementary schools (*see Fact sheet No.10 - Education and human rights*).

Réunion and Mayotte are the EU's outermost regions in the Indo-Pacific. Community funds, including the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), are mobilised, as they were for the recent construction of the Martial Henry healthcare centre in Petite-Terre.

The Pacific Fund (PF), created in 1985, and the Indian Ocean Regional Cooperation Fund (FCR), created in 2000, aim to facilitate the regional integration of the territories through the co-financing of collaborative actions with states in the region.

A UNIQUE HERITAGE AND BIODIVERSITY

The Indo-Pacific overseas territories have a unique cultural and natural heritage, both material and immaterial. There are four UNESCO World Heritage sites: the lagoons of New Caledonia (2008), the pitons, cirques and remparts of Réunion Island (2010), Taputapuatea in French Polynesia (2017) and the French Southern Territories and Seas (2019). Réunion's Maloya has also been recognized as an intangible cultural heritage since 2009.

Protected areas are multiplying, and the network of marine protected areas in the Indo-Pacific could reach 3.5 million km² by 2030. At the One Ocean Summit in 2022 the creation of the French Southern Territories national nature reserve, covering almost 1.6 million km², was announced. To respond to the many natural disasters affecting the territories, France can rely on a range of actors, including the armed forces (*see Fact sheet No.7 - Humanitarian aid, crises and natural disasters*).

EXTENSIVE REGIONAL INTEGRATION

France seeks to promote these territories by hosting international events. In 2003, the first France-Oceania summit was held in French Polynesia. In 2021,

Réunion hosted the 7th Indian Ocean Naval Symposium. The 2023 South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting will be held in Nouméa. Notably, there have been no bilateral presidential summits in these territories, such as a Franco-Indian summit in Réunion or a Franco-Australian summit in New Caledonia.

The COMs participate autonomously in several regional organisations. New Caledonia and French Polynesia are members of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), the Pacific Regional Environment Program (SPREP) and the Pacific Community (PC), based in Nouméa. Wallis and Futuna is a member of the last two. The leaders of the Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front of New Caledonia have been part of the Melanesian Spearhead Group since 1989. Polynesia is a founding member of the Polynesian Leaders Group since 2011, and Wallis and Futuna joined in 2017.

Réunion is a member of the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), which is not the case for Mayotte. Réunion's Vêlayoudom Marimoutou is IOC's Secretary General.

New Caledonia and French Polynesia have direct interactions with their neighbours and conduct their own regional diplomacy. The former has appointed regional delegates to Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Fiji and Vanuatu to strengthen the archipelago's influence and capacity for regional cooperation. The New Caledonian and Polynesian leaders were invited to the US-Pacific Island Country Summit in Washington in September 2022 and 2023, as well as the Korea-Pacific Islands Summit in 2023.

There are several foreign consulates in the French overseas territories (*see Fact sheet No.3 - Diplomatic network and official visits*). China opened its first consulate outside mainland France in Papeete in 2007, before opening one in Saint-Denis on Réunion Island. To mark the 130th anniversary of Japanese immigration to New Caledonia, Tokyo opened a consular office in Nouméa in 2023, joining the Australian, New Zealand, Indonesian and Vanuatu consulates-general.

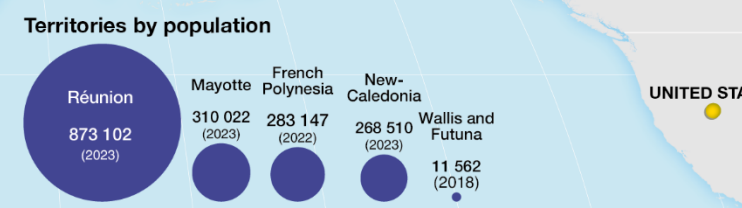
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No.1 - OVERSEAS TERRITORIES

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French scattered Islands in the Indian Ocean

1. Tromelin Island
2. Glorioso Islands
3. Juan de Nova
4. Bassas da India
5. Europa Island



French territories

- Exclusive economic zones
- UNESCO World Heritage sites and Intangible Heritage
- GDP per capita, in euros
- Presidential trips

Foreign consulates

- Consulates general and consular offices (Japan and United States)

Regional diplomacy

- New Caledonian delegate

Regional organisations

Participation by territory

- IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association)
- IOC (Indian Ocean Commission)
- PIF (Pacific Islands Forum)

- PC (Pacific Community)
- Melanesian Spearhead Group (FLNKS from New Caledonia is a member)
- Polynesian Leaders Group





ABOUT THE PROJECT

France in the Indo-Pacific - Proactive power and solutions provider is an unprecedented research project that consolidates, synthesises and maps France's actors and actions in a region of vital importance to national interests.

It consists in a dozen thematic fact sheets intended to provide greater visibility and to highlight what is being done in overseas territories for the benefit of the French people and local populations by ministries, other state actors but also French business and NGOs.

This project ties in with research by FRS, including two policy papers: "La France, une puissance d'initiatives en Indo-Pacifique" (November 2022)² and "Reconceptualizing French foreign and security policy in the Indo-Pacific" (July 2023)³.

List of Fact Sheets as of September 15th, 2023

- No.1 - Overseas territories
- No.2 - Demographics and political representation
- No.3 - Diplomatic network and official visits
- No.4 - Military presence and defence diplomacy
- No.5 - Security and police cooperation
- No.6 - Development aid and the environment
- No.7 - Humanitarian aid, crises and natural disasters
- No.8 - Economic cooperation and business
- No.9 - Cultural cooperation and Francophonie
- No.10 - Education and human rights
- No.11 - Scientific cooperation and innovation

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This project was initiated by **Antoine BONDAZ, Ph.D.**, director of the "Observatory for Multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific". He was assisted by **Marie DESBONNETS**, a Sciences Po student and a graduate of IEP Lyon. **Nathan BLUJSTAN**, a graduate from SOAS, translated.

The Foundation for strategic research (FRS), founded in 1992, is a foundation with public utility status (decree of February 26, 1993) that operates in complete independence. Its mission is to analyse strategy and international security issues, and to contribute to the strategic debate in France and the promotion of French thinking abroad.

FRS conducts research on and in the Indo-Pacific through regional and thematic approaches, publishes policy papers and reports, organises international conferences, conducts high-level strategic dialogues (bilateral and trilateral), pilots a European exchange platform on the Indo-Pacific and has signed cooperation agreements with the region's leading think tanks.

² <https://www.frstrategie.org/publications/notes/france-une-puissance-initiatives-indo-pacifique-2022>

³ <https://www.frstrategie.org/en/publications/notes/reconceptualizing-french-foreign-and-security-policy-indo-pacific-2023>