



The Indo-Pacific
Geopolitical
OBSERVATORY

FRANCE'S OVERSEAS TERRITORIES AND THEIR USE IN MARITIME STRATEGY

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AUTHOR'S PRESENTATION



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This observatory is directed by **Marianne Péron-Doise**, Senior Research Fellow at IRIS, and is part of the Asia-Pacific Programme.



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This Programme is directed by **Barthélémy Courmont**, Senior Research Fellow at IRIS, Senior lecturer at the Université catholique de Lille.

FOREWORD

The Geopolitical Observatory of the Indo-Pacific recently published a paper by Captain (R) Sarbjeet Parmar on the underlying strategic issues at the heart of the discussions between the British and Mauritian governments concerning the retrocession of the Chagos Islands in the Indian Ocean. Namely, the future of the Diego Garcia military base and the pre-positioning of American forces at the heart of this key geopolitical region. As we know, the question of maintaining the American military presence refers to the broader issue of power competition within the China-India-United States triangle, which weighs on all coastal and island states and shapes regional power relations.

But the Chagos Islands and the future of Diego Garcia - which seems to be a major concern for the new US administration - also raise the question of the role of islands and the specific nature of insularity in the Indo-Pacific region.

Has France paid sufficient attention to the uniqueness of its island territory in formulating its Indo-Pacific strategy? Probably not. Its overseas departments, regions and communities have enabled it to develop a narrative of maritime power and to promote a status of quasi-thalassocracy based on the world's second largest maritime area, covering approximately 11 million km², most of which is located overseas.

This dominant vision of the island as a strategic resource and marker of sovereignty has been received in different ways in Reunion, Nouméa and Papeete. This is because it refers to a colonial past that is still very much present in memories and identities. Time has passed and France's relationship with its overseas territories, these “strange peripheries” according to the deliberately provocative phrase of geographer Jean-Christophe Gay, has changed profoundly. As Georg Peppert's paper points out, the French communities from the Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific are largely integrated. For example, French Polynesia and New Caledonia have a degree of autonomy that is broad enough to enable them to conduct their foreign relations, whether with China or the United States, without necessarily involving the central government.

This means that these territories have developed their own regional integration strategies and their own geopolitical narrative. This can be very different from the concept of the Indo-Pacific, if we refer to that of “Indian Oceania” which links the islands of the southwestern Indian Ocean, or the reference to the “Blue Pacific” which marks belonging to the Pacific family in the Oceanian space. This means that the vision of France as an archipelago remains fragile and that the Indo-Pacific nomenclature, without being totally refuted, can be considered artificial and not corresponding to the local realities of overseas environments. In any case, it

demonstrates the difficulty the French have in accepting to move to a level of discourse that must project France from a continental power into an insular, fragmented and vulnerable France.

Marianne Péron-Doise, Senior Research Fellow, IRIS

INTRODUCTION

In October of this year, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland agreed to cede the Chagos Islands, an archipelago or, more precisely, a group of archipelagos that constituted the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) to the Republic of Mauritius. The result of endless political lobbying by Mauritius since the 1980s and years of negotiation by the two countries since 2022, this deal agreed to a change of sovereignty whilst retaining a strategically important naval base, jointly administered by the United Kingdom and the United States of America for the next ninety-nine years. This agreement marks a trend, not only as a tangible example of decolonisation - the returning or ceding of land that is or was considered stolen or occupied - but also demonstrates the value of geo-strategic locations and gives an insight into why entities retain certain territories, far from their original homeland in our current day and age. The example of the BIOT is particularly interesting because of the double nature of its importance. The territory, until recently British, is a strategic strongpoint not only for the United Kingdom, but also, and perhaps more so, for the United States who maintain, and will continue to maintain, a large and important naval base there.

This is not an exception, the United States, for example, is the world's greatest economic and military power, and one of the fundamentals that permits it to remain at the forefront of military might is the system of army, naval and air force bases the USA maintains around the globe. Whether they be vestiges of colonialism, the result of 20th century diplomatic agreements or as consequences of military interventions, great powers have often tried to fortify their military presence in various regions of the world, as palpable manifestations of hard power and in readiness for potential interventions around the globe.

The examples of the United Kingdom and the United States are practical when introducing this phenomenon as they tend to be regular subjects of media attention and therefore are relatively often brought to the attention of the international community. Guantanamo Bay, the Falkland Islands and Gibraltar are just some of the strategic overseas military bases that are regularly scrutinised by legal and diplomatic bodies as points of contention.

However, a country with significant overseas territories that is far less often the subject of debate in relation to this matter, is France. The French Republic has one of the most expansive networks of overseas territories in the world. As a result, France, which nominally possesses only two coastlines, neither of them remarkably long - along the Atlantic and the Mediterranean - is in fact the country with the largest Exclusive Economic Zone in the World. This is due, in large parts, to its “départements et régions d’outre-mer et collectivités d’outre-mer”, literally “overseas departments, regions and communities” and more often referred to as DROM-COM (or, formerly DOM-TOM). Consisting of 13 individual jurisdictions, scattered across four oceans, this tangible relic of France’s colonial empire is now a valuable resource in France’s foreign and defence policy.

In this paper we shall explore how France previously made use of its overseas territories to further its military and diplomatic policies, how it continues to make use of these locations and what recent challenges call these dispositions into question.

To explore these overseas territories and their importance we shall proceed in two parts, firstly by explaining the history and constitution of these territories and their current configuration. Secondly, we will delve into the issues that surround them nowadays and current or future complications.

THE EMERGENCE OF FRANCE’S OVERSEAS EMPIRE

France’s acquisition of overseas territories

France’s colonial empire was unquestionably one of the largest in modern history, on par with that of the United Kingdom, Spain or Portugal. Its colonial past is generally split into two periods, that before and that following 1814. Napoleon’s defeat and the years leading up to it had stripped France, either because of military defeat or concessions, of almost all of its colonies. Great swathes of what is today Canada, the United States, India and countless islands in different oceans were all lost through negotiations (Louisiana Purchase), military defeats (Canada) or as concessions following Napoleon I’s capitulation. However, France’s colonial enterprise starts long before this, in the 16th century, with the occupation of what is now a part of Newfoundland. It is here that the “1st” French colonial empire begins, occupying strategically placed islands in the Atlantic, Pacific and parts of the Indian subcontinent. Mauritius, Reunion and Martinique are some of the best-known vestiges of this first conquering spree. Occupied mainly for trade and exploitation of resources, these places would either become important sources of rare commodities or would act as outposts between metropolitan France and other resource-rich colonies, further from the mainland.

Here we perceive the first formation of a French network of bases that secure its global interests. Much like the United Kingdom (until 1800 the Kingdom of Great Britain) that made use of its naval force and the military capacities of the East India Company, France would form a chain of bases that could serve as protective fortifications and resupply stations for its merchant navy. Mauritius and Réunion, situated between India and the Cape, were ideal settlements to act as refuges for merchantmen and bases to resupply and refit naval vessels. Friendly ports, scattered throughout the Indian Ocean, the Western Pacific, parts of the Atlantic and on the African coast were vital to secure continuous safe passage for French East India Company ships and permit a global French naval presence. In time, however, and in part due to the Napoleonic wars, this web of outposts would be eroded, and finally destroyed (to a large extent) by the British Royal Navy and its allies. The Mauritius, Pondichéry (India), Réunion and many others would fall prey to the defeats of the French navy and, although Réunion and some others would be returned in time, it wouldn't be until the middle of the 19th century that the French Colonial Empire would rebuild and therefore constitute a new global network of colonies.

This second attempt of imposing its strength and defending its interests around the globe was a less (geographically) expansive endeavour, and focused mainly, in a time of relative peace between European powers, on the collection of resources in northern Africa and Indochina. Justified by the “mission civilisatrice” and the wider scramble for Africa, the expansion of this colonial empire was more a reflection of France's will to impose itself commercially rather than militarily, and a wish to compete with its European rivals economically and, more simply, in a show of symbolic strength.

In short, France's first colonial mission, marked by instability in Europe and abroad, was a targeted attempt to establish a network of military and commercial bases throughout the world as a web of safe havens for naval forces and merchant convoys. This, as witnessed by the geographic distribution of these bases, was their primary aim. On the other hand, the second, post-Napoleonic attempt at colonisation, marked by the occupation of territories closer to the mainland and a lesser fear of military aggression from other military powers, was less bellicose in its endeavour, and less strategic in its military planning¹.

Current standing and situation of these territories

As a result of the global trend to decolonisation that so marked the 20th century, France's former colonial empire finally dissolved following the Algerian war, its last forceful attempt to

¹ Harry Magdoff, Charles E. Nowell, “Western colonialism - French Empire, Imperialism, Colonization”, *Britannica*, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Western-colonialism/The-French>

prevent the break-up of the empire. Whilst it is incontestable that France no longer administers colonies, in the historic sense of the word, vestiges of its former empire remain to this day as integral parts of France's territorial make-up².

Currently, the DROM-COM consist of 13 overseas jurisdictions³, subject to at least two different forms of administration that reflect their legal status and their degree of autonomy. These territories are a peculiarity as concerns international norms, legally as well as geographically separated from the "mainland", yet not an independent state, they fall under a special status. Like Guam and Puerto Rico in relation to the United States, the DROM-COM are attached, though not necessarily fully integrated in the workings of the French Republic. However, one observes that, unlike the USA or the UK, French constitutionalists seem to have done their utmost to permit a more intensive legal integration. Almost all territories are represented in France's legislative assemblies, many have their own deliberative bodies (parliaments) and, although some have particular statuses in relation to nationality, few territories are legally disadvantaged. Some of these regions are even considered part of the European Union and therefore subject to its laws and norms just like the rest of France⁴. However there remain fundamental social inequalities and different hardships between the mainland and overseas settlements as well as between the jurisdictions themselves. From extreme poverty and hardships in Mayotte and New Caledonia, to the rising cost of living that most island states are confronted with, problems persist. We will address them in more detail later.

One may ask oneself why we insist on delving into these challenges in a paper relating to maritime security. The simple answer is that, as opposed to some of the examples stated above, purporting to other countries' overseas territories, France has made an effort not to consider its DROM-COM as simple strategic dots on a map, but to make them part of the country. President Macron himself said, when outlining France's Indo-Pacific strategy, that France considers itself "a fully fledged Indo-pacific country".⁵ When considering other countries and their (semi-)autonomous regions such as Guam, American Samoa, and islands like it, they are almost exclusively used as military bases. These territories are not fully

² Jean-Christophe Gay, "La France d'Outre-mer. Terres éparses, sociétés vivantes". Chapter 2 *De l'état de colonie aux statuts à la carte* : 29-62.

³ For a full list, consult appendix.

⁴ Isabelle Leblic, "Vous avez dit « rééquilibrage » et décolonisation ? Retour sur 40 ans de va-et-vient institutionnels sur souveraineté et colonialisme en Nouvelle-Calédonie (1980-2018)", *Journal de la société des océanistes*, n°2 (15 décembre 2018) : 329-350 <http://journals.openedition.org/jso/9649>

⁵ French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, *France's Indo-Pacific Strategy*, February 2022 [La stratégie de la France dans l'Indopacifique](#) (Consulted on the 12th of February, 2024)

represented in legislative processes, and are almost exclusively considered as strategic advantages, without respecting the will of the inhabitants. A sort of military colony.

We must be clear in stating that we are currently considering merely the legal statute of these regions, whilst keeping in mind that the perceived reality of their inhabitants may be entirely different. It goes without saying that we must continue to distinguish between the words of the law, the spirit in which politicians make speeches, and the reality of the current situation.

We can sum up, by insisting on the fact that DROM-COMs are, at least constitutionally, not just military bases spread around the globe but are also important civil and constitutional components of the French Republic.

OVERSEAS TERRITORIES AS A MILITARY AND POLITICAL ASSET

Current strategic deployment

We have explored the geographic disposition of French overseas territories as well as their place in the national territorial make-up. We pass now, to the disposition of troops, the current tangible importance of these spaces as hosts for military infrastructure. A 2022 report, published by the French Senate⁶, citing documents from the French ministry for the armed forces gives us a broad overview of defence personnel and technology in overseas locations. At that time approximately 8400 soldiers and civilians (linked to military activity) were stationed in five geostrategic regions⁷: Southern and Indian Oceans, with forces divided between Mayotte and La Réunion, the South Pacific divided between French Polynesia and New Caledonia and, finally the Antilles and Guiana Stations that are responsible for parts of the Atlantic Ocean and Caribbean. Most of these bases are mainly naval in nature. Among their missions is to secure French interests in their “Zones of Permanent Responsibility”, manifest a strong presence in international waters, and be able to respond to crisis situations around the world that affect French interests or policy.

These being their nominal missions, a closer analysis of these strategic placements permits a more detailed view of their function. Firstly, it is their locations that make them valuable strategic assets. Especially in our current political climate, many of these areas present several strategic advantages. Let us consider, firstly, La Reunion’s and Mayotte’s military bases’ shared mission off the Eastern coast of Africa and the Western Indian Ocean. . They lie, respectively, inside and outside of the Mozambique Channel that separates Madagascar from

⁶ French Senate, *La présence militaire dans les outre-mer : un enjeu de souveraineté et de protection des populations*, Palais du Luxembourg, 5 octobre 2022. [La présence militaire dans les outre-mer : un enjeu de souveraineté et de protection des populations - Sénat](#) (Consulted on the 12th of February, 2024)

⁷ Consult Map in appendix.

the African Continent. This alone can be considered of great importance, as a considerable part of shipping off the African coast passes through this strait. With an increase of piracy and other maritime security threats such as insurgency, terrorism, drugs and humans trafficking, IUU fishing in the area, La Reunion's placement close of the channel acts, in and of itself, as a deterrent for criminal activities and, if needed, allows for rapid response in cases of attempted terrorism, insurgency or natural disasters⁸. This is also the case for Mayotte, although the island's own garrison consists almost entirely of land troops, the Foreign Legion Detachment in Mayotte (DLEM), its proximity and logistical closeness to the naval, army and air bases on La Reunion allow it to respond quickly in cases of insurgency, piracy, natural disasters. This was demonstrated in 1995 by the detachment's rapid response in suppressing a coup d'état on the Comoros Islands during "Opération Azalée" in 1995. In addition, relative proximity to the Horn of Africa, by far one the most dangerous regions in the world when considering Somali piracy, or maritime terrorism could allow for rapid action in case of attacks/boarding of French/European vessels in the area.

Another, currently important, geo-strategic base is the detachment of troops located in the South Pacific. Military bases in New Caledonia and French Polynesia, in relative proximity to the Western Pacific, China's coastlines and the Taiwan Strait permit France to maintain a considerable strategic presence close to areas infamous for their maritime dangers - such as piracy off Indonesia, the Malacca Strait - and not all that far from a strong economic, and potentially dangerous, rival. Possessing military influence in these areas also has an indirect effect on France's foreign policy, allowing for them to maintain close ties to partners as Australia, the United States who, themselves, maintain a large military presence in those waters. The demonstrative sailing of military vessels through the Taiwan Strait, such as on the 28th of October 2024 reinforces France's presence in these waters, with their bases permitting frequent and lengthy operations in the all-Pacific⁹.

The last major hub for French military presence is the Atlantic, and more precisely the Caribbean, Central and South American waters and coastlines. With particularly strong naval stations in the French Antilles and an important military base in French Guyana, rapid response to potential crises and a strong military presence in an area marked by political instability is assured. Guyana is best known, in a military sense, as a training base for the French Army (the Foreign Legion especially), but also hosts air and naval troops.

⁸ Hugo Decis, *The Mozambique Channel – troubled waters*, Military Balance Blog, 7th May 2021 [The Mozambique Channel – troubled waters?](#)

⁹ Jonathan Chin "French Navy sails frigate through Taiwan Strait", *Taipei Times*, 30 October 2024 [PressReader.com - Digital Newspaper & Magazine Subscriptions](#)

As a result, France's influence is considerably heightened around the world. And not only that of France. As one of the leading naval forces in the EU, its bases could become potential military assets for the organisation or its members States, as locations for joint training expeditions, common defence stations and other such operations. This allows France and its European partners as Italy, Germany, Spain to expand their naval presence and exercise their influence in certain regions but also allows France to reaffirm its own position as, for example, the only Indo-Pacific member of the EU¹⁰.

As well as being able to emphasise its presence around the globe as a military and diplomatic power, France's network of overseas territories permits it to respond to challenges and potential crises in faraway areas. Along with being strategically placed along trade routes and in politically volatile areas it has an impact on global politics by extending EU presence in the Indo-Pacific area. Finally, when considering the future, the maintenance of these facilities throughout the globe permits an important anticipation of political and economic trends, permitting France to adapt to international developments and transformation.

Challenges

Although France's overseas settlements are undoubted assets when considering military and foreign policy, they pose their own set of challenges, both within the country and when considering other nations.

The first, and perhaps more obvious challenge, is a question of diplomacy. As is the case with many regions with a colonial past, French possessions in many regions are by no means uncontested when it comes to the question of sovereignty. Many of these islands cannot, in all conscience, be considered undisputed French territory. Madagascar, the Comoros, and other states have frequently questioned France's right to exercise its power over some of the islands that it considers its own and some claim French territory as theirs. An example is Mayotte, the island situated between Madagascar and the African mainland, near the Comoros Islands. This latter state claims Mayotte as part of its own territory and the island is in fact geographically a part of the Comoros archipelago. This, the consequence of a referendum held in 1974, following the Comoros' declaration of independence remains a matter of contention between the two states, all be it not a very harsh one. It is noteworthy, however, that the United Nations passed a resolution confirming the Comoros' right to

¹⁰ Catherine L. Grant, Alessio Patalano, Russell James Avery, and al. *The new age of naval power in the Indo-Pacific : strategy, order, and regional security* (Washington, D.C : Georgetown University Press, 2023).

sovereignty over the island in 1976, this resolution's passing was defeated by a French Veto¹¹. In 2009 the territory voted to become a full French overseas department by referendum.

A rather more poignant subject is an issue related to domestic policy. The DROM-COM are considered the most politically unstable regions in France and are frequently the scenes of protests and violence caused by several issues. In Guadeloupe and Martinique, the rising cost of living, an unfavourable consequence of residing on a small island, has recently given rise to violent outbursts and led to rioting¹².

In May 2024, New Caledonia experienced an episode of violence on an unprecedented scale (a state of emergency was declared), which caused immense damage and loss of life due to the imposition of an institutional reform modifying the electoral system. The aim was to enable French citizens residing in the archipelago for more than ten years to vote in provincial elections. Previously, this right had been reserved only for citizens resident on the island before 1998 and their descendants. The reform was rejected by the independantists, who feared it would dilute the Kanak vote. Since then, the situation has remained uncertain and political dialogue has struggled to resume¹³.

During the winter of 2024-2025, cyclone Chido wreaked havoc on Mayotte, one of the most powerful storms to touch the island in a century. Apart from the natural disaster's direct consequences, it also highlighted the lacking quality of the island's infrastructure and response from the government was perceived as a further proof of the island's second-class status in the eyes of the political elite. This too led to a political outcry.

As these and similar issues become ever more prevalent, the question of France's capacity to maintain its control, and, moreover, its legitimacy, as the sovereign power over these communities is regularly called into question. Whilst there is little doubt that there can be no question of open conflict, or rather that there can be no question of French defeat if it ever came to that, the fermentation of unrest in those areas leads to a continuous questioning of French legitimacy.

The strategic and political value attached to these areas, as well as a certain attachment to them as integral parts of the French Republic (although this is an issue of its own) make them assets to France. However, should certain territories seek independence or political affiliation

¹¹ United Nations General Assembly Resolution, *Question of the Comorian island of Mayotte* (New York City, USA : 21 October 1976) [Question of the Comorian Island of Mayotte](#) : (Consulted on the 12th of February 2025).

¹² Maya Davies, "Violent protests force Martinique airport to close", *BBC News*, 11 October 2024. [Violent protests in Martinique prompt airport closure and curfew](#)

¹³ « Avenir institutionnel de la Nouvelle Calédonie : reprises des rencontres bilatérales à paris », *France Info*, 3 February 2025. [Avenir institutionnel de la Nouvelle-Calédonie : reprise des rencontres bilatérales à Paris](#)

with other countries (Mayotte and the Comoros for example), France would be hard put to refuse a democratic, organised push for secession. As a result, one realises that much like our first example purporting to the United Kingdom and the Chagos Islands, the question of separatism is more prevalent than the legal framework would have one think and as a result the military installations that are so valuable in our current geopolitical context may in fact be under threat.

As to how these challenges may be faced, the question remains a delicate one. All sorts of possible solutions, from a more social economic policy to more cultural recognition could be pitched as ideas to face and better the current situations. These questions, that must be addressed sooner rather than later by the French authorities, will need to balance on compromise: ethnic and social inclusion and historical recognition to appease the aggrieved factions, and perhaps new constitutional and legal mechanisms to modernise the structures that regulate the DROM-COM.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we have established that, far from being a recent evolution, the constitution of the DROM-COM can be seen as the most recent chapter in the long history of France's colonial past, reaching back until the 16th century. As a result, and as opposed to some other countries, an element of national sentiment attaches itself to the utilitarian nature of overseas territories as military bases. They are, at least in theory if not in practice, fully fledged parts of the French Republic and, to some extent, the European Union. This alone justifies interest in their political status. However, they are also, and perhaps more obviously to outside eyes, political and diplomatic assets. As locations for military installations, dotted around the world, in areas that often play host to regional tensions or other types of challenges: insurgency, terrorism, piracy, etc. they permit a show of force and near-constant readiness for intervention, disaster relief or other types of operations. Additionally, they permit France to fortify its own as well as its allies' influence in certain regions and ensure its position as an attractive ally. However, due to contention from neighbouring powers, and moreover due to domestic political issues, their status is less certain than it once was. Constant altercations at the heart of these territories, fuelled by economic factors and subjects concerning (de-)colonisation cause instability, sap resources and manpower.

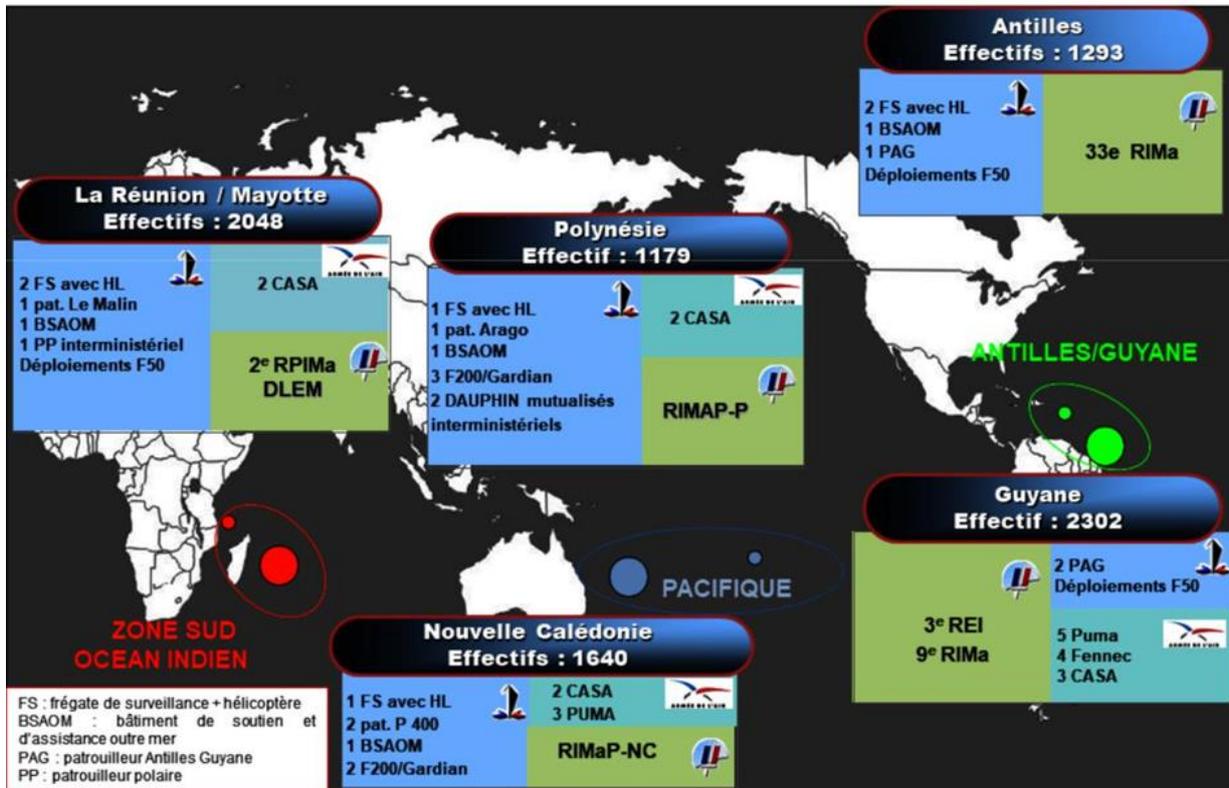
All in all, the DROM-COM remain a considerable asset to the French Republic, and their status is unlikely to change. One cannot, however, ignore the reality that internal and external threats pose, be they claims on sovereignty, natural disasters, political violence or terrorism.

The question as to France’s maintained possession of these territories seems stable, and yet their evolution will remain of interest as the importance of a naval presence along maritime trade routes and worldwide placement of military bases becomes ever-more important and politically valuable.

APPENDIX

Full list of DROM-COM overseas territories:

Name of Territory	Status	Presence of military base
Guadeloupe	Overseas Department /Region	NO
Martinique		NO
French West Indies (French Antilles)		YES Army & Navy
French Guiana		YES Army, Navy & Airforce
Mayotte		YES Army
La Réunion		YES Army, Navy & Airforce
French Polynesia	Overseas collectivity	YES Army, Navy & Airforce
Saint Barthélemy		NO
Saint Martin		NO
Saint Pierre and Miquelon		NO
Wallis and Futuna		NO
New Caledonia	Particular Status	YES Army, Navy & Airforce
Clipperton Island	State property (Uninhabited)	NO
French Southern and Antarctic Lands	Overseas Territory (Uninhabited)	NO



Effectif total : 8462 militaires et civils (2021)

Source: Ministère des Armées in "La présence militaire dans les outre-mer : un enjeu de souveraineté et de protection des populations". La présence militaire dans les outre-mer : un enjeu de souveraineté et de protection des populations - Sénat

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