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« The Coast Guard Function in France »

The sea does not merely operate as a space dedicated to the macro-economy of transport shipping, resource exploitation, and recreational coastal activities. For sovereign nations, it represents a core theater of sovereignty. It is as much a matter of safety as it is of security. The former governs the smooth performance of operations at sea and the deployment of structural assets to guarantee both the preservation of life and the protection of coastlines (encompassing 18,000 kilometers of coasts, of which 12,000 kilometers are located across Overseas Territories). Security focuses on suppressing all maritime threats, driven over recent years by a sharp escalation in transnational illicit activities. Consequently, the State—within its sovereign, regalian functions to shield its maritime spaces, coastlines, and gateways—has engineered a proprietary, multi-agency model baptized the Coast Guard Function (FGC — Fonction Garde-Côte).

Operational Architecture of the FGC

Conversely to the centralized structure of the *U.S. Coast Guard* in the United States, multiple distinct French administrations operate concurrently at sea, commanding a shared statutory capacity to detect and prosecute infractions across a vast palette of maritime missions. Responding to the European Union's Integrated Maritime Policy published in October 2007—which requested a single maritime interlocutor within each Member State—France endowed itself with an original organizational model. This architecture relies fundamentally on the General Secretariat for the Sea (SGMer — *Secrétariat Général de la Mer*) and on government administrations fitted with maritime and aerial surveillance assets, complemented by the volunteer lifesavers of the SNSM (*Société Nationale de Sauvetage en Mer*). These constituent administrations encompass the French Navy (*Marine Nationale*), the Maritime Gendarmerie, the National Gendarmerie, the Customs Coast Guard (*Douanes*), the Maritime Affairs (*Affaires Maritimes*), the Civil Security, the Border Police, and the Directorate General for Overseas Territories.

The FGC, officially established in 2009, outlines the regulatory framework for a tighter synchronization between these diverse administrations. Collectively, they function as the operational "armed arm" executing State Action at Sea. These administrative and operational frameworks are tasked with enforcing sovereignty across waters under French jurisdiction, surgically divided into 10 separate maritime zones: English Channel / North Sea, Atlantic, Mediterranean, Antilles, French Guiana, French Polynesia, New Caledonia, and the Southern Indian Ocean Maritime Zone.

Beyond the baseline territorial sea, within the legally codified "contiguous zone" (stretching from 12 to 24 nautical miles off the coast), France has claimed specific statutory powers to "*prevent and punish infringements of its customs, fiscal, sanitary, and immigration laws and regulations when they are liable to be committed or have been committed on French territory or within the territorial sea.*" Furthermore, the waters of the French Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), stretching up to 200 nautical miles from baseline shores, represent waters under strict sovereign rights and national jurisdiction, aggregating a monumental surface footprint of 10.2 million square kilometers.

On the high seas, France is legally authorized to exercise selected policing powers, either toward its own flagged merchant vessels or toward foreign crafts pursuant to international treaties. Under these frameworks, naval interventions require zero flag State consent when suppressing universal crimes such as high-seas piracy, whereas bilateral flag State agreement remains mandatory when interdicting narcotics trafficking and illegal maritime immigration.

The multi-mission polyvalence and complementarity characterising the distinct assets of the AEM administrations—whose operational spectrum scales seamlessly from the immediate shoreline to the high seas—must successfully contribute to safeguarding sovereign national interests by granting a concrete effectiveness to normative maritime law.

Because a vast matrix of ministries commands specific missions and portfolios at sea, the AEM is placed under the direct constitutional responsibility of the Prime Minister. To assist the executive head of government in this mission, the Premier relies on the SGMer, tasked with formulating the Government's maritime policy and monitoring its rigorous execution. Accordingly, the SGMer animates and coordinates the workflow of State representatives at sea, operating in close alignment with the Maritime Prefects (*Préfets maritimes*) in metropolitan France and the Government Delegates across Overseas Territories, issuing binding strategic directives to guide their mandates.

The Maritime Prefects—headquartered across three naval strategic bases: Brest, Cherbourg, and Toulon—operate as the undisputed operational cornerstone (*clef de voûte*) of State Action at Sea, which they centrally coordinate. They concurrently hold the supreme mandate for administrative policing at sea (*police administrative en mer*). They enact general police decrees and regulations mandatory to preserve public order across the maritime public domain. To achieve this, they command a powerful regulatory authority, which they deploy, for instance, to regulate navigation tracks or issue formal injunctions (*mises en demeure*) when the marine environment is critically threatened. They furthermore administer numerous specialized policing sectors, spanning environmental protection, marine boundary safety, and the salvage of life and property.

Adjoined to the Navy General Staff, the Operational Centre of the Coast Guard Function is composed of liaison officers originating from all administrations operating at sea, placed under the direct administrative responsibility of the SGMer. The CoFGC executes permanent monitoring, compiles maritime situational awareness analytics, shares intelligence across political and administrative authorities, triggers emergency alerts, and manages live maritime crises.

The diverse entities composing the FGC complement each other through highly specialized vocational know-how, whose human and material assets can be fully pooled and mutualized under a zonal coordination framework piloted by the Maritime Prefects in Europe and the Government Delegates overseas. Today, the French FGC inventory aggregates 145 aerial surveillance assets, ten regional operational centers for surveillance and rescue, 59 coastal signal stations, and 229 maritime nautical units. In December 2019, the Interministerial Committee for the Sea officially adopted the nautical segment of the master blueprint, outlining a fleet of more than 125 high-speed launches, offshore patrol vessels (OPVs), and emergency support ships, crewed by complements ranging from 8 to 25 personnel. The 2020–2030 Master Fleet Plan relies on a forward-looking analysis of structural requirements projected over time and customized by individual maritime zones. A comprehensive modernization and rejuvenation of the state fleet is currently underway, secured by a firm order book of nearly 70 greenfield vessels scheduled for delivery over the coming decade.

Core Mandates and Strategic Missions of the FGC

The Ministerial Decree of March 22, 2007, formalizes a comprehensive matrix of 45 distinct statutory missions legally incumbent upon the State at sea. Among these, the most emblematic structural pillars encompass:

- The salvage of life and dedicated marine salvage assistance to vessels in distress.
- The suppression of transnational illicit trafficking (narcotics interdiction, migrant smuggling, etc.).
- The fight against illegal polluter discharges and the mitigation of catastrophic, large-scale marine pollutions.
- The suppression of Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing.
- The permanent monitoring and surveillance of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs).

The secondary and cross-cutting operational mandates comprise:

- Maritime safety: focused on shipboard accident prevention, traffic separation monitoring, and seaworthiness enforcement.
- Maritime security: dedicated to suppressing intentional unlawful acts, including maritime terrorism, high-seas piracy, and coastal armed robbery (*brigandage*).
- The preservation of marine heritage: protecting both natural capital (environmental and ecosystem quality) and underwater cultural heritage (historic shipwrecks, archaeological artifacts, amphorae, etc.).
- The execution of customs, fiscal, and macroeconomic policing across waters under national jurisdiction.

The FGC faced with maritime search, rescue, and vessel assistance

From shoreside, permanent monitoring is secured by a comprehensive network of coastal signal stations and the operational command centers of the FGC constituent administrations. They are centrally interconnected via SPATIONAV, a high-performance maritime approaches surveillance system that successfully fuses data streams originating from a diverse matrix of sensors. Terrestrial patrols deployed by departmental or maritime gendarmerie units, alongside the national police and the customs coast guard within their respective spatial zones and portfolios, complement the grid.

The CROSS directorates directly receive distress alerts from sea users (via emergency phone number 196 or VHF Channel 16), ensuring a permanent watch of the radio frequencies tied to the Global Maritime Distress and Safety System (GMDSS). Legally, the salvage and rescue of any person in distress at sea is mandatory and entirely free of charge. Conversely, providing maritime assistance to a disabled vessel is optional and can give rise to the payment of a specialized salvage reward (*rémunération d'assistance*) to the salvor, regardless of whether the responding rescue vessel is a public state asset or a privately owned tug.

The CROSS units centrally direct search and rescue (SAR) operations by mobilizing:

- Nautical and aerial assets belonging to the State.
- Nautical units operated by the volunteer lifesavers of the SNSM.
- Local collectivities' nautical means (beach lifeguard stations, fire and rescue services, etc.).
- Any private vessel or commercial merchant craft operating in the immediate vicinity of the casualty.

The FGC confronting globalized narcotics trafficking

While the ocean stands as a space of freedom, exchange, communication, and legitimate commerce, it concurrently operates as a theater for all forms of illicit trades (weapons smuggling, narcotics trafficking, wildlife trafficking, counterfeit goods trade, and human trafficking). According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the global illicit trade represented 7% of total world commodity exports. The maritime vector remains overwhelmingly predominant across these trafficking pipelines.

Macro-globalization, the structural rise of containerization, the extreme *gigantisme* of mega-vessels, and the commercial imperative for supply chain fluidity are highly favorable to criminal activities, offering a logistics solution that is highly profitable, secure, discreet, flexible, and low-cost. The inherently international nature of maritime transport (the law of the flag State, high-seas status) renders the active boarding and interdiction of suspect vessels highly complex, and at times legally impossible under the doctrines of non-interference and flag sovereignty.

The sea functions as the preferred conduit for large-scale narcotics smuggling. It operates as a discreet and hyper-massified vector: 90% of the cocaine reaching the European continent is smuggled via container ships. Generally, narcotics networks fit seamlessly into contemporary globalization loops, routing flows from upstream manufacturing zones (*Afghanistan, Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, Morocco...*) toward the high-consumption marketplaces of Europe and the United States. However, traffickers permanently adapt their supply chain logistics (altering routes, vectors, and operational *modi operandi*), expanding or engineering greenfield production and consumption areas to scale up their businesses.

According to a benchmark report published by the UNODC, the global supply of cocaine has reached record-breaking zeniths. This sharp expansion in supply moved hand in hand with a booming explosion in demand over the past decade, while market prices remained stable, demonstrating that traffic flows are continuously expanding. Cocaine stands as the second most popular illicit drug after cannabis, counting approximately 5.2 million active European consumers. The contraband transits under diverse chemical forms and is deeply concealed within containerized freight or on board specific maritime vectors, before being chemically processed and distributed across Europe. Over a ten-year timeline, the volumes of cocaine interdicted in Europe have been multiplied by five, and 70% of drug seizures executed by customs authorities take place inside port gateways.

The absolute bulk of these illicit flows transits via Rotterdam (the Netherlands) and Antwerp (Belgium), alongside major German and Italian hubs. Port installations and terminal logistics infrastructures are increasingly penetrated and corrupted by transnational criminal organizations. The absolute commercial imperative for logistical fluidity, combined with the massification of traffic, renders physical container inspections exceptionally difficult.

Nevertheless, seizures of cocaine shipments by law enforcement agencies worldwide have concurrently increased. Global interdictions hit a record pinnacle of nearly 2,000 tonnes, while within the French

Hexagon, a record of 26.5 tonnes was interdicted by law enforcement, highlighting a severe escalation in drug trafficking volumes that deeply concerns the government.

The ports of Le Havre, Dunkirk, and Marseille have emerged as the primary entry points for cocaine smuggling into France. Systemic tactics of intimidation, coercion, and corruption are aggressively weaponized by organized crime syndicates against all maritime professionals commanding access to restricted port security zones, container terminals, merchant vessels, and the wider port logistics chain.

To counter this threat, the French Minister Delegate for Public Accounts announced a comprehensive national master plan in December 2023 to combat this scourge. Within this strategic framework, Dunkirk will be reinforced with a dedicated brigade of 24 customs officers exclusively specialized in suppressing narcotics trafficking. Identical elite brigades are being progressively deployed across the gateways of Le Havre, Marseille, Montoir-de-Bretagne, and Gennevilliers, among alternative hubs. The Minister concurrently locked in the structural reinforcement of customs intelligence services, backed by a €25 million capital investment earmarked for a dozen advanced mobile scanners to optimize container non-intrusive inspections. Furthermore, an intensified effort will focus on data and threat-intelligence sharing protocols connecting State law enforcement services and ocean carriers to dismantle smuggling pipelines.

Concurrently, a rigorous anti-corruption prevention framework is being deployed. Implementing a mandatory rotation schedule for personnel occupying the most sensitive operational nodes represents a premier avenue of action. Dockworkers and customs agents will receive specialized training to identify and resist the recruitment approaches and grooming techniques utilized by traffickers, while internal compliance controls will be heavily tightened. In the event of suspected corruption, the public administration is mandated to react instantly and enforce severe statutory sanctions.

The primary over-riding fear confronting French law enforcement authorities centers on seeing Dutch-based syndicates infiltrate the nation's port infrastructure. In the Netherlands and Belgium, the so-called "Mocromafia" has masterminded dozens of targeted assassinations, even plotting a thwarted kidnapping attempt against the Belgian Minister of Justice. This acute criminal penetration has driven experts to question whether Belgium faces the risk of transforming into a "narco-State." Indeed, the nation has ascended as the undisputed premier hub for European cocaine trafficking: 116 tonnes of cocaine—commanding an estimated street value of €6 billion—were officially interdicted inside Belgian jurisdictions in 2023. This metric marks a 15% surge compared to 2022, which stood as a previous record-breaking calendar year¹, yet analysts estimate that these historic interdictions represent a mere 10% of the absolute volume transiting through the gateway

A mere 1% to 2% of the 12 million TEUs transiting through Antwerp are physically inspected by Belgian customs. Consequently, detecting illicit flows as far upstream as possible, optimizing threat-intelligence sharing², and deepening transnational law enforcement cooperation remain absolutely paramount to counter organized crime. It is precisely within this spirit that the European Commission officially launched the "European Ports Alliance Public-Private Partnership" in January 2024³. This strategic framework was engineered to tighten institutional bonds connecting port authorities, customs administrations, police forces, and global shipping lines to actively suppress drug trafficking and dismantle the criminal penetration of European port gateways

The FGC confronting human trafficking and irregular migration

Armed conflicts and systemic poverty compel thousands of individuals to migrate toward safer global regions, a structural phenomenon highly destined to expand over time with the emerging influx of climate refugees. National authorities tasked with border security across land, maritime, and sometimes aerial grids (border guards, coast guards, police services, customs, and Navies), alongside the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), are legally empowered to intervene based on the projected impact of a tactical situation, such as irregular migrant movements detected near external borders. The operational objectives are multi-layered: contracting irregular immigration into Europe, suppressing cross-border organized crime, preventing shoreside maritime departures toward the United Kingdom, or, failing that, guaranteeing the search, rescue, and protection of migrants at sea.

¹ By way of comparison, a mere 4.5 tonnes of cocaine were seized in 2013.

² There are specialized platforms dedicated to intelligence sharing and the coordination of the anti-drug fight, such as JIATF-S, MAOC-N, and CECLAD-M, alongside the MARINFO and YACHTINFO networks.

³ This initiative follows the EU Roadmap to fight Drug Trafficking and Organised Crime, which was officially adopted in 2023.

North Africa remains a paramount transit hub and a primary departure point for regional and sub-Saharan migrants attempting to reach Europe by crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Net flows have contracted annually since their peak in 2015; between 2016 and 2017, irregular entries regressed by 60%, dropping from 511,000 down to 205,000. The active enforcement operations executed by the Libyan Coast Guard successfully stemmed this phenomenon across the Central Mediterranean corridor. However, the cumulative death toll remains deeply alarming. Between 2014 and 2020, the Mediterranean Sea recorded the highest volume of maritime fatalities worldwide, with more than 21,200 individuals losing their lives. In 2021, fatalities peaked near 3,000 deaths—doubling the metrics logged in 2020.

Within the French landscape, the crisis is predominantly concentrated across the English Channel corridor (*la Manche*) toward Great Britain. According to official datasets published by the French Ministry of the Interior, nearly 30,000 migrants illegally crossed the Channel in 2023 via small boats (*small straits*). While this annual review reflects a sharp contraction compared to the historical record-breaking pinnacle of 2022, the 2023 metric nonetheless stands as the second-highest volume ever recorded, outstripping the 28,526 crossings logged in 2021.

Furthermore, according to a benchmark report released by the French Court of Auditors on January 4, 2024, the structural distribution of migratory flows has shifted radically: irregular transit via overland road networks (notably concealed within freight trucks transiting through the Channel Tunnel) plummeted from 62,051 incidents in 2015 down to a mere 20 cases in 2022. This drastic drop highlights a complete displacement of smuggling methods toward the hazardous maritime vector, placing an unprecedented operational burden on the search and rescue assets of the French Coast Guard Function.

Conversely, the British Ministry of Defence (MoD) estimates that irregular maritime crossings of the English Channel expanded by at least 58% between 2021 and 2022, registering 45,111 irregular migrants interdicted directly on the British coastlines in 2022.

Alternative severe migration crises confront France across its Overseas territories, most notably the intense influx of Comorian migrants into Mayotte, where an estimated 60% of the local population subsists under an irregular administrative status. In French Guiana, while explicit baseline metrics remain structurally unestablished, the volume of asylum applications lodged by citizens originating from Caribbean nations expands continuously. Permanent monitoring and situational awareness along the external borders of the Schengen area rely fundamentally on threat-intelligence exchanges connecting European partners through the European Border Surveillance System (Eurosur) since 2013, tracking the evolution of flows regardless of the specific nature of the border breach (whether irregular migration pipelines or diverse illicit trafficking grids). Technical surveillance assets predominantly encompass unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs / drones), maritime reconnaissance aircraft, satellite imagery, and high-performance coastal sensor networks.

The FGC as the safeguard for marine environmental protection

A substantial share of pollution prevention relies fundamentally on standard maritime safety engineering, which has successfully reduced the frequency of vessel collisions and marine casualties. The aerial and maritime assets commanded by the FGC, including the daily long-range patrol sorties executed by Customs airplanes and helicopters, complement the overarching grid by scanning for illegal maritime discharges and identifying the specific vessels originating them.

Furthermore, satellite-based assets, such as the European Commission's CleanSeaNet service managed by the European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA), can instantly detect, map, and track petroleum pollution oil spills at the sea surface, monitor accidental pollution trends during live emergency casualties, and directly contribute to the legal identification of polluters.

The significant decline in the volume of illicit operational discharges recorded near French coastlines—which underscores the structural success of the deployed architecture—is identically driven by the aggressive prosecution guaranteed by specialized judicial tribunals across metropolitan and overseas territories, combined with the highly deterrent financial fines imposed on the shipowners of interdicted and diverted polluting vessels. The Specialized Coastal Jurisdictions were born in the early 2000s against a dark backdrop of successive catastrophic oil spills battering the French coast. Today, a highly efficient operational tandem connecting the Maritime Prefect and the Republic's Public Prosecutor has been firmly locked in, injecting immense effectiveness into environmental law enforcement. However, technical progress remains mandatory to better confirm intentional operational discharges (*dégazages*) and optimize land-sea inter-agency coordination.

Ultimately, the fight against accidental marine pollution relies on deploying specialized physical dispersion or oil spill recovery assets, sourced from national or European inventories, adapted to the specific chemical

nature and volume of the pollutants, and mobilized under the statutory framework of the maritime ORSEC (*Organisation de la Réponse de Sécurité Civile*) contingency plan. This master emergency response framework encompasses general provisions alongside highly specialized operational sub-plans, notably:

- SAR (*Search and Rescue*): the maritime search and rescue of persons in distress at sea.
- ANED: marine salvage assistance to disabled vessels in distress.
- POLMAR Marine: the mitigation and suppression of marine pollution oil spills.
- CIRC: management of disrupted or hazardous maritime navigation tracks.
- NUCMAR (*Incidents Nucléaires*): emergency response to shipboard nuclear incidents or radiological hazards.

Since the historical 1967 disaster of the tanker *Torrey Canyon*, bilateral and regional cooperation agreements designed to shield the marine environment have expanded extensively. Because French waters are subject to robust, relevant monitoring and management measures codified at both national and European community tiers, they remain rich in high-value commercial fish stocks, consequently fueling intense external covetousness. The core objective of the European Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) focuses on guaranteeing the long-term conservation of marine biological resources, alongside the technical management of fisheries and fleets exploiting these assets. It applies strictly to all fishing vessels flying the flag of an EU Member State and encompasses all EU waters, across both metropolitan façades and Overseas Territories.

Consequently, Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU / INN) fishing is by no means the exclusive act of fishing fleets flying third-party flags; the fight against IUU fishing targets the entirety of the supply chain, scaling from initial high-seas capture to final retail sale to consumers. Pursuant to EU community regulations and France's international commitments within Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs / *ORGP*), the Directorate General for Maritime Affairs, Fisheries and Aquaculture (DGAMPA) defines and orchestrates the national fisheries control policy. The applicable legal framework remains strictly uniform across all maritime sectors and applies to all fleets operating within the French EEZ. The entire asset matrix of the FGC administrations actively participates in fisheries surveillance and enforcement missions at sea under the umbrella of State Action at Sea (AEM). Beyond a unilateral national response to maritime safety and security challenges, a transnational, unified European vision remains absolutely indispensable to successfully fulfill the missions of the Coast Guard Function.

The European Coast Guard Functions Forum (ECGFF) secures a collaborative framework for high-level institutional reflection on these matters, serving as a primary vector to reinforce the sharing of international best practices. The steady rise of European community regulations and specialized sector agencies—whether across fisheries control (EFCA), maritime safety (EMSA), or EU external border protection (Frontex)—contributes to forging a unifying, federated vision among European States, at times translating into the structural pooling of naval assets or bridging technical capability gaps. Across Overseas territories, regional cooperation frameworks are dynamically emerging based on localized threats (such as narcotics interdiction, IUU fishing suppression, and maritime search and rescue). The Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) and the Pacific Community (SPC) operate as major development frameworks for these geopolitical cooperations. Flawless synchronization interconnecting diverse government administrations across national, European, and international echelons stands as the ultimate guarantee to ensure the effective maintenance of public order at sea.

Camille VALERO

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