

Maritime Summary Note n°282 – June 2026

« French maritimity on a global scale »

Maritime France on a global scale is the direct product of the history of exploration, imperial expansions, and what the Republic has preserved as Overseas territories. While alternative European nations and even the United States command expanded maritime dimensions, France's positioning possesses distinct singularities: including structural economic integration, highly autonomous legal statuses, cultural diversity, and deep regional anchors. French maritimity stems in very large part from this political reality structured by the Overseas territories across the three major oceans through their respective maritime spaces.

A significant share of their wealth relies on the value chains of the blue economy, driven by the exceptionally vast expanses of the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs). These blue sectors each possess specific intrinsic value, critical socio-economic roles, and targeted development capacities. They align concurrently with national blue economy ambitions and the local expectations of the territories, whether operating as administrative Departments or Overseas Collectivities. The ultra-marine maritime domains function as a shared asset balancing the Nation and its Overseas territories, whose structural specificities and singular destinies must continuously be brought to light.

A Massively Expanded Vision via the EEZ Matrix

When analyzing what establishes France as a prominent European nation commanding a world-class international rank, academics systematically advance a tight matrix of political, strategic, and macroeconomic facts. The structural importance of our blue economy relies unambiguously on our industrial corporate leaders driving global shipping (**CMA CGM**), naval defense and commercial shipbuilding (Naval Group, Chantiers de l'Atlantique), and energy grids (TotalEnergies, Engie). Beyond these giants, it encompasses the sprawling ecosystems of civil engineering, port terminal handling operations, seaborne logistics, and maritime services.

Within the cataloging of national maritime assets, it is business as usual to highlight the immense dimension of the French EEZ across the three great oceans. In raw factual terms, France commands—with 10.2 million square kilometers—the second largest EEZ in the world, trailing immediately behind the United States, yet standing ahead of Australia, Russia, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand. The Republic finds itself bound to no fewer than 31 maritime neighbors, with a small residual layer of boundary delimitations not yet definitively settled (see *Maritime Summary Note No. 275*).

The absolute bulk of our sovereign maritime space is anchored within the Outre-Mer. The Overseas territories generate 18% of the national landmass and pool barely 4% of the global French population, yet they mastermind 78% of the total EEZ (with French Polynesia pooling 47%, New Caledonia capturing 13%, and alternative ultra-island territories aggregating 18%). To this matrix must be added a 19% fractional share generated by the isolated islands flanking Madagascar and the Southern Indian Ocean, directly administered by the State through the singular administrative entity of the French Southern and Antarctic Lands (TAAF). The residual share maps out as metropolitan mainland France and Corsica, tracking at a narrow 3.6%. Crucially, these calculations do not incorporate the extended continental shelf claims currently being audited under the UNCLOS guidelines via the interministerial Extraplac program (see *Maritime Summary Note No. 275*).

In a macro-sense, the French international trade body must maintain a highly positive, offensive, and voluntarist vision of this sovereign maritime empire, endowing it with distinct political, geostrategic, economic, and ecological value. Nevertheless, first and foremost stands the raw enforcement of sovereign jurisdiction over these spaces, raising acute questions regarding the deployment of the armed forces—encompassing a baseline of approximately 7,150 Ministry of Defense personnel permanently garrisoned

across the different Overseas theaters, including a small detachment of fifteen soldiers holding fortresses across the Scattered Islands inside the Mozambique Channel.

This architecture does not translate into massive naval bases tailored for global geostrategic warfare, as these islands sit relatively remote from the primary hot flashpoints of the planet (the sovereign hubs in Djibouti and the UAE are custom-engineered for that purpose). Rather, the primary objective of the French Navy focuses on securing French sovereign jurisdiction over its waters, executing the inter-agency to combat transnational illicit activities—predominantly containerized narcotrafficking corridors and Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing.

Drug trafficking directly impacts these territories, which are systematically weaponized as high-velocity transit networks piercing French waters (see *Maritime Summary Note No. 276*). Symmetrically, fisheries protection surveillance targets both immediate coastal neighbors and long-haul distant-water fishing nations, defining the architecture of halieutic sovereignty.

Consequently, a persistent strategic debate queries whether the available surface assets of the French Navy are not excessively light to effectively police such titanesque oceanic expanses. Currently, the ultra-marine surface fleet is structured around surveillance frigates, multi-mission offshore patrol craft, and support vessels, supplemented within subantarctic ranges by the polar patrol and research vessel *L'Astrolabe*. Notably, the legacy, aging fleet of light patrol crafts (the P400 class) has been comprehensively decommissioned and replaced by a next-generation class of purpose-built Overseas Patrol Vessels, baptized the Félix Éboué class, whose industrial deployment spans a rigid 2020–2028 timeline.

The Overseas Territories and Statutory Architecture

The vast spaces of the EEZ underwrite France's global dual-ocean dimension. This planetary footprint is directly inherited from our two historical waves of colonial expansion. The First Empire, engineered by the monarchical France of Cardinal Richelieu, virtually vanished following the geopolitical collapse of the Seven Years' War. Throughout the 19th century, successive French regimes applied themselves to reconstructing a new imperial domain across Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific. Subsequently, the legitimate decolonization movements of the mid-20th century severely contracted French possessions worldwide.

Mirroring Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States, France preserved remote territories detached from its historical European heartland. While each global power defined its own levels of administrative centralization or regional autonomy, the hallmark of the French model remains the persistence of exceptionally strong institutional links, notwithstanding the advanced political autonomy granted to Pacific territories.

Each state possessing an ultra-marine dimension has engineered the legal statuses of its dependencies according to its own constitutional history. France enforces its proprietary "overseas administrative order," characterized today by a highly nuanced variation of statuses tailored around multiple local specificities¹:

- Overseas Departments and Regions (DROM): Guadeloupe and La Réunion.
- Single Territorial Collectivities (CTU): Martinique, French Guiana, and Mayotte (since 2011).
- Overseas Collectivities (COM): Saint Pierre and Miquelon (since 2003), Saint Barthélemy (2007), Saint Martin (2007), Wallis and Futuna (2003), and French Polynesia (2003).
- Overseas Collectivity with Special Status (*Sui Generis*): New Caledonia (since 2003).

Returning to the maritime domain, it is precisely upon these Overseas departments and communities that France's famous "XXL maritimity" structurally relies. It must therefore be resoundingly acknowledged that the EEZ functions as a shared geographical heritage balancing the central Nation and its ultra-marine components, most acutely as the latter command expansive degrees of political legislative autonomy throughout the South Pacific range.

The central State rigidly retains exclusive jurisdiction over regalian competencies—most distinctively national security, defense, and maritime safety—whereas the organic laws defining the political statutes of the territories formally transfer the exclusive rights of exploration and exploitation of natural resources (both biological and non-biological) to the local collectivities, encompassing fisheries management, deep-sea subsea mineral resources, and regional environmental protection.

¹ Maritime Summary Notes n°262 The French Polynesia, n°274 New Caledonia, n°270 French Guiana, n°263 Saint Pierre and Miquelon, n°281 Reunion Island. Coming soon Guadeloupe and Martinique.

Ultra-Marine Geopolitics and the Indo-Pacific Paradigm

France does not operate merely as a European nation seeking international relevance; rather, through its Overseas territories, it asserts a tangible political and maritime reality across three oceans. The French presence in the Americas dates back to the 17th century and successfully resisted the expulsive pressure of the British Empire, establishing itself as an integral component of the West Indian and Guianese geopolitical space. On the other side of the world, the strategic concept of the "Indo-Pacific" directly resonates with France because the nation is structurally affected by its territories in the Southwest Indian Ocean and the South Pacific. As forcefully affirmed within a milestone 2019 Ministry of Armed Forces defense document, *"France is an Indo-Pacific power,"* deeply committed to the territorial integrity of its dependencies and the strategic challenges unfolding across these ranges.

The Indo-Pacific represents a massive section of our planet where an intricate entanglement of multilateralism, multipolarity, and high-intensity strategic competitions is played out. It is, literally, a highly complex bi-oceanic Orient. The recent conflict tearing through the Persian Gulf operates as a renewed, powerful evidence of this friction. While the practical utility of French ultra-marine territories within hot Indo-Pacific military conflicts remains relative, they provide Paris with unassailable legitimacy to sit at regional diplomatic tables.

This political and geostrategic dimension concurrently underwrites France's "global depth," driven by its direct interactions with "major neighbors" encompassing Canada, Brazil, South Africa, and Australia, stretching beyond to India and Indonesia. Within a globalized world that is increasingly fragmenting, every major power now deploys its own geopolitical and geoeconomic score; it is incumbent upon France to fully capitalize on these neighborhood relations, as evidenced by the high-profile state visits executed by the President of the Republic.

Consequently, two distinct visions of geopolitics emerge rattachées to these worldwide French spaces:

- The macro-diplomatic axis: which allows Paris to integrate into the famous Indo-Pacific theater or navigate its strategic Amazonian neighborhood with Brazil.
- The regional integration axis: embedded directly within localized environments alongside numerous adjacent neighbors.

Indeed, France gains immense leverage from these cooperations, channeled through bilateral relations and multi-state organizations. This entire diplomatic choreography is played out at the level of our Overseas territories, leveraging the unique cultural specificities defining the Lesser Antilles, the Mascarene Islands, and the South Pacific.

The regional integration of French territories—executed without paternalistic interference from Paris—functions as one of the ultimate keys driving our global soft power. Within this matrix, the regional dimensions of the *Outre-Mer* are necessarily expressed across maritime spaces and their associated dossiers, encompassing liner connectivity, fisheries protection, and environmental monitoring. One of the greatest values defining our Overseas territories is precisely their capacity to render the relational fabrics binding the three oceans "alive" with numerous independent States and highly autonomous dependencies.

Global ultra-marine France is only conceptually viable when analyzed through the specific geographical dimensions native to each territory, whether charting the Canadian East Coast, the Lesser Antilles, the Guiana Shield, the Mascarenes, the Comoros Archipelago, Melanesia, or Polynesia.

Nevertheless, it remains structurally intricate to seamlessly bind these Overseas territories into shared destinies with their regional environments. This friction is primarily fueled by the massive economic and social gaps separating affluent French territories from smaller developing island nations. Yet, it operates as a strict public policy obligation to formulate concrete axes of regional economic progress; failing to bridge these development asymmetries risks acutely exacerbating structural neighborhood crises, most distinctively uncontrolled illegal immigration, widespread IUU poaching, containerized narcotrafficking, and sharp gray-zone strategic rivalries with competing global superpowers.

The Macroeconomics of Ultra-Marine Port Gateways

By virtue of their insular nature—comprehensively encompassing French Guiana, which operates as an enclave nested deep within the Amazonian shield—the Overseas territories nourish an inescapable port economy sustaining approximately 13,000 highly specialized jobs across the different maritime communities.

The four ultra-marine Grands Ports Maritimes (GPM) collectively handle 13.5 million tonnes (Mt) of commercial cargo, while the Autonomous Ports of Nouméa and Papeete each mastermind an annual throughput hovering around 1.5 Mt. Cumulatively, this fragmented port network processes 1 million TEUs per year.

The operational mandate of these hubs focuses on securing inbound imports of containerized consumer products, automotive vehicles, capital goods, construction materials, heavy industrial inputs, and bulk energy commodities. Symmetrically and conversely, outbound exports remain exceptionally rare, with the near-sole structural exception of unrefined Caledonian nickel ore and metallurgical products.

Maritime transport operates as the absolute lifeline connecting these outposts to the French metropolitan mainland as well as driving integration inside localized regional spaces. The liner connectivity of ultra-marine territories is fundamentally vital; the supply disruptions of the public health crisis and the geopolitical closing of the Red Sea transit lane have forcefully demonstrated the immense vulnerability of these supply chains.

Within this framework, the continuous lines operated by the two premier French ocean carriers—CMA CGM and Marfret—wield a paramount strategic importance across both short-sea regional feeding loops and long-haul intercontinental loops. To this oceanic architecture must be added high-frequency domestic maritime cabotage networks linking the internal islands of the individual archipelagos.

To this logistics panorama must be comprehensively added the economics of the cruise industry and superyachting, which function as major structural segments of the tourism economy across numerous ultra-marine dependencies. In 2023, the cruise sector generated 1.6 million passengers distributed across 1,700 port-of-calls for all Overseas territories combined. Concurrently, artisanal yachting, superyachting charters, and the bareboat catamaran industry operate as primary pillars of the local blue economy, most distinctively across the French West Indies and the South Pacific range.

Outside the critical requirement for high efficiency during the port-transit stage—a paramount factor directly piloting the highly sensitive political and social dossier of the cost of living across the islands—infrastructure modernization requirements are generalized, most acutely if selected ports intend to successfully act as transshipment hubs.

Finally, the sustainability of these networks forces the deployment of advanced, domestic naval repair solutions, highlighted by the industrial engagements of French shipyard primes Piriou and the Sud Moteurs Group. The legacy drydock of Martinique paired with the next-generation floating dry dock commissioned at La Réunion operate as ultra-strategic military and civil assets, securing the operational readiness of commercial fleets and French Navy surface combatants concurrently across the Antilles and the Indian Ocean.

Conversely, throughout the Pacific theater, the requirement for a larger-tonnage repair infrastructure is heavily demanded in New Caledonia, while the French Navy's proprietary floating dock in Tahiti has henceforth reached 41 years of operational age in 2026. French global maritime sovereignty is unassailably conditioned upon the capacity to maintain independent, sovereign industrial capabilities to execute the technical maintenance and naval repair workflows of all ultra-marine fleets on site.

The Economic Valuation Matrix of the Exclusive Economic Zone

For numerous global coastal States, the economic exploitation of territorial seas and attached EEZs is primarily structured around offshore oil and gas drilling. However, despite extensive deepwater exploration campaigns historically executed off the coastline of French Guiana, the French maritime domain remains completely denuded of fossil fuel resources.

Furthermore, the Hulot Law of 2017 strictly prohibits any greenfield exploration and industrial exploitation of hydrocarbons across the absolute entirety of national territory, a binding ecological restriction that the Guianese citizenry nonetheless observes with intense envy face to the massive, multi-billion-dollar offshore oil booms currently transforming neighboring Guyana and Suriname. Symmetrically, the potential underwater resources surrounding the Scattered Islands (*Îles Éparses*) inside the strategic Mozambique Channel will remain completely unmapped and unknown for the foreseeable future.

In raw geological reality, subsea mineral wealth remains highly theoretical. Deep-sea research expeditions masterminded by Ifremer off the coastlines of Wallis and Futuna have, at the very least, successfully identified localized mineralized deposits; yet, France officially announced in 2022 its absolute diplomatic support for a global, comprehensive ban on any industrial exploitation of the deep seabed. Accelerating this conservationist alignment, the local congress of New Caledonia formally voted a binding 50-year moratorium on the mining exploration and extraction of any subsea mineral resources within its waters.

Ultimately, the unassailable, primary real wealth generated by the French global EEZ resides exclusively in its halieutic and fisheries resources. Several ultra-marine territories are operationally structured around artisanal coastal fishing, most distinctively Saint Pierre and Miquelon, the French West Indies, and French Guiana.

Conversely, industrial deep-sea high-seas fishing—predominantly targeting migratory pelagic tuna loops—is actively deployed across New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and La Réunion, the latter concurrently processing high-value Patagonian toothfish extractions harvested throughout the subantarctic waters of the TAAF.

Crucially, only La Réunion and French Polynesia successfully extract structural macroeconomic export revenues from these fisheries channels. Pursuant to unified datasets compiled by *Ifremer*, the seaborne fishing sector sustains 3,500 direct jobs across the Overseas Departments, supplemented by approximately 2,000 workers across alternate ultra-marine collectivities, deploying a combined fleet of 3,000 fishing crafts.

To this extractivist panorama must be added the specialized blue aquaculture networks: encompassing tropical prawn farming inside French Guiana and New Caledonia, alongside high-yield aquaculture grids and the world-class black pearl culture industries driving the outermost archipelagos of French Polynesia. The vastness of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) must never be reduced to a mere rhetorical formula celebrating a national maritime empire upon which the sun never sets. France's maritime space is, first and foremost, the everyday reality of the coastal economies driving its 14 Overseas territories, structured around port infrastructures that serve commercial freight, passenger transits, yachting, and artisanal fisheries.

This proximity matrix was meticulously audited within the comprehensive 2022 French Senate report, titled *"The Overseas Territories at the Heart of Maritime Strategy."* While it is necessary to structure and scale up large-scale ultra-marine industrial sectors, a massive share of the local wealth stems directly from "proximity blue economies", anchored around small-scale harbors, artisanal fishing, and marine recreational services. This proximity blue economy is frequently the least visible on macro-financial charts, yet it structurally sustains the daily lifelines of both large and small islands. Illustrating this integration, the blue economy in French Polynesia single-handedly accounts for 4.5% of local commercial employment and 5.2% of its total GDP.

The EEZ also operates as a highly specific ecological asset simply by virtue of what it is: a planetary sanctuary rich in world-class marine biodiversity. By 2020, fully one-third of French sovereign waters were officially classified as Marine Protected Areas, a conservationist dynamic heavily concentrated across the Overseas territories (absorbing 65% of the total MPA zones) and the subantarctic TAAF grid (23%).

Today, the entirety or near-totality of the waters flanking the French West Indies, Mayotte, and New Caledonia are locked within protective marine sanctuaries. While French Polynesia long represented a major structural gap in this ecological grid, the collectivity officially enacted in 2025 the greenfield classification of an additional 1 million square kilometers of protected waters. Consequently, unable to extract heavy industrial revenues from its deepwater subsoil, France successfully garners a highly valorizing international brand image, transforming its vast waters into an unassailable engine of global environmental diplomacy and large-scale ocean governance.

The Political Value of Global France: Energy Innovations and Regional Asymmetries

Formed by the rugged coastlines of the European mainland and Corsica, the subarctic waters of Saint Pierre and Miquelon, the tropical currents of three great oceans, and the Roaring Forties of the Far South, maritime France stands as an exceptionally remarkable construct. Beyond the macro-metric of its 11 million square kilometers of cumulative maritime space, it encapsulates highly diverse, living fragments of the blue economy. Driven by intense requirements for ocean liner connectivity, cruise tourism attractiveness, and halieutic asset valuation, French waters confront paramount strategic challenges. To date, our EEZs remain entirely deprived of the fossil fuel gold extracted from deep subsea beds—establishing one of the premier paradoxes of our titanesque maritime dimension.

Symmetrically, Marine Renewable Energies must steadily carve out their operational place across the dependencies. This transition materializes through light-engineered Sea Water Air Conditioning (SWAC) systems utilizing the cold thermal energy of deep ocean waters to air-condition public buildings (a mature technology deployed in French Polynesia), alongside advanced pilot studies auditing floating offshore wind capacities in Martinique and La Réunion to determine whether utility-scale offshore wind farms can

be successfully deployed. These technical vectors drive the strategic battle for ultra-marine energy autonomy.

Ultimately, the comprehensive balance sheet of the French ultra-marine blue economy—with its intrinsic structural qualities and chronic infrastructure deficits—is embedded within a socio-economic particularity that must never be forgotten: the Overseas territories operate as distinct "islands of prosperity" directly sustained by their economic and financial integration into the national French Republic.

With the sole exception of Saint Pierre and Miquelon, these outposts are geographically surrounded by developing regional environments, frequently generating flagrant, extreme economic and social disparities (*décalages*). Maximizing the expanded dimensions of the blue economy is vital for the survival of the territories; occasionally, these matrices translate into fierce regional competition (port transshipment hubs, naval repair shipyards), at times manifesting as complex regalian crises (IUU poaching, border incursions), and frequently structuring into collaborative architectures (inter-island liner connectivity, cruise port networks).

In a wider sense, France's XXL maritime power is deeply embedded within distinct regional blocks (the Caribbean, the Mascarenes, the South Pacific) comprising numerous sovereign small island developing states confronting their own existential bottlenecks. France does not operate as an artificial archipelago of remote territories proudly belonging to an outsourced, detached Republic; these are living territorial communities profoundly enmeshed within specialized geographical realities at diverse coordinates of the planet.

As the custodian of the second largest maritime space on Earth by virtue of its EEZ, France stands as the legal trustee of one of the ultimate common heritages of mankind: its seas and oceans. Preserving these marine environments—whose extreme vulnerability is unassailably demonstrated by rapid climate change and anthropogenic marine pollution (mass plastics, destructive overfishing)—is a central regalian priority. Crucially, the strategic objective must not be to convert our sovereign maritime territories into frozen, sterile conservatories through ostentatious environmental gestures deployed by central governments seeking to score easy international diplomatic points at minimal domestic cost. The ultimate goal is to successfully merge the singular destiny of each ultra-marine territory with its practical integration inside its specific regional environment, while simultaneously offering the French Republic an extensive palette of neighboring friends or sovereign allies—all deeply committed to sustainable economic development within fragile ecosystems subjected to the harsh realism of climate change.

Through its diverse network of Overseas territories and its sprawling maritime spaces, France stands as a first-rate European nation, viscerally and unassailably oceanic, permanently nourished by its formidable ultra-marine cultural and social diversity.

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