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## The Southern and Antarctic Lands in France's Indo-Pacific Strategy

*By Paco Milhiet*

### SYNOPSIS

*By hosting the One Planet – Polar Summit (8-10 November), France sought to establish itself as a major polar actor. The French Southern and Antarctic Lands are an important element of this national ambition. Largely unknown to the public, their inclusion within France's [Indo-Pacific Strategy](#) developed by French President Emmanuel Macron enhances their geopolitical importance.*

### COMMENTARY

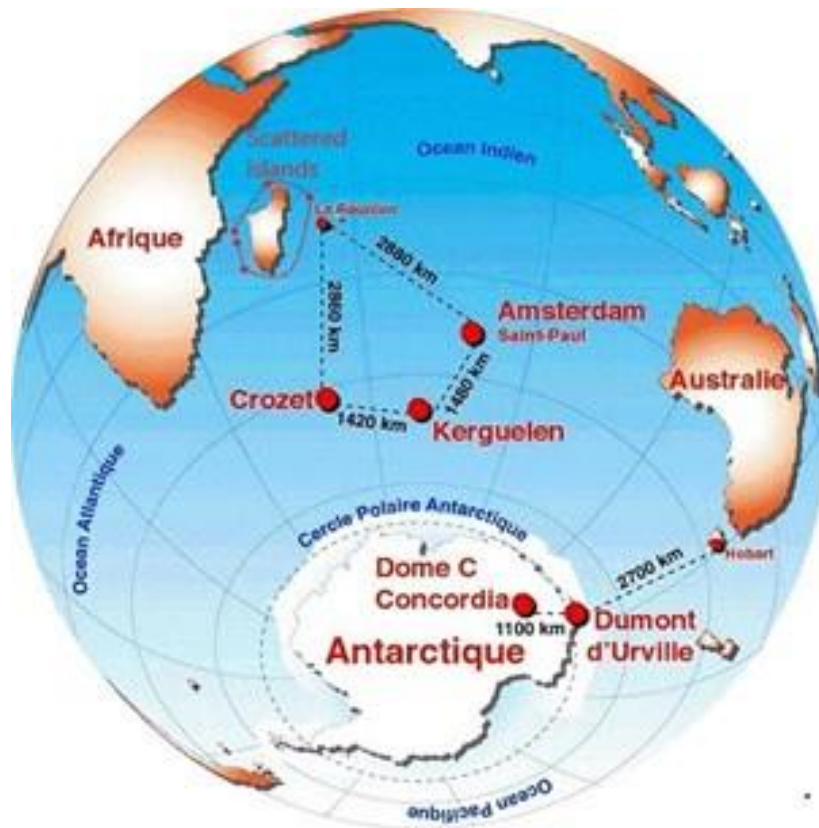
Scientists and political leaders from around the world convened in Paris from 8 to 10 November for an international meeting titled "[One Planet – Polar Summit](#)". This event was significant in that it marked the first global summit dedicated to the health and future of ice floes, glaciers, and permafrost.

The summit concluded with a "[Paris Appeal for Glaciers and Poles](#)" adopted by more than 30 countries, including Singapore, and various organisations. The goal of the summit was to protect glaciers and poles all over the world.

Science diplomacy has become a core aspect of French soft power strategies. Besides this polar summit, French President Emmanuel Macron has also organised summits for [forests](#), [oceans](#), and [biodiversity](#).

Although not a polar country, France asserts historical ambition in polar regions. The French Southern and Antarctic Lands, or *Terres Australes et Antarctiques Françaises* (TAAF) in French, in the Indian Ocean, are a key component of this multimodal strategy.

## Map of the French Southern and Antarctic Lands



Source: IPEV <https://www.senat.fr/rap/r06-230/r06-23032.html>

### TAAF: A Unique Administrative Collectivity

Established in 1955, the TAAF consists of five districts: the Crozet Archipelago, the Kerguelen Islands, Saint-Paul and Amsterdam Islands, the Scattered Islands, and Adélie Land. Despite being among the least known of French overseas collectivities, some of them have been under French sovereignty longer than French cities like Nice or Avignon.

The five districts share common characteristics such as in not being permanently populated and being challenging to access because of geographic isolation. However, their inclusion in the same administrative collectivity is an anomaly as they are scattered geographically besides being discovered and attached to France at different times. The Scattered Islands, which has a tropical climate, are located around Madagascar, while the subantarctic islands lie much further south in latitudes 40° to 50° South. Adélie Land, on the Antarctic continent, is even further south, and separated from the Scattered Islands by nearly 9,000 km.

Despite being labelled a “fictional collectivity” by its former administrator, Francois Garde, the TAAF are at the intersection of real strategic interests, attracting the attention of international actors. Ignored by the government before the Indo-Pacific strategy came about, the many French national and international strategies involving the TAAF now form a new geopolitical chapter for this unique collectivity.

## Three Distinct Geopolitical Regions

The five districts that make up TAAF can be divided into three distinct geopolitical regions. Firstly, the Scattered Islands are mostly coral atolls that formed around Madagascar. They are not linked to French polar strategies because of their tropical climate and face contested sovereignty by several countries including Madagascar and Mauritius. The presence of [gas resources](#) in the Mozambique Channel fuels tensions between France and its Indian Ocean neighbours.

Secondly, the subantarctic islands are territories located between latitudes 40° to 60° South. Many of these islands were discovered by French sailors, as their names – Marion, Bouvet, Charcot, Malouines, and Joinville – remind us. Some of them remain under French sovereignty to this day, including Kerguelen, Crozet, Saint-Paul, and Amsterdam.

The subantarctic islands hold strategic importance: a satellite control station in Kerguelen is essential for the observation and electronic monitoring of military satellites and for tracking Ariane rockets. The Atomic Energy Commission is present in Crozet and Kerguelen, with surveillance stations to track nuclear tests under the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty. The TAAF's Exclusive Economic Zone of 2.5 million sq km (20 per cent of the French EEZ) holds considerable potential in terms of energy, mineral, and biological resources.

Finally, Adélie Land, located on the Antarctic continent, which was discovered in 1840 by French explorer Dumont d'Urville – Adèle was the name of his wife – holds historical significance. Despite having its French sovereignty suspended by the [Antarctic Treaty signed in 1959](#), Adélie Land is home to the French Antarctic base, Dumont d'Urville, and is recognised as one of the TAAF's districts by French law.

## Science Diplomacy

Over the past twenty years, the French government has pursued a proactive policy to preserve the vulnerable spaces of the TAAF. The [TAAF Natural Reserve](#), created in 2006 around the subantarctic islands, is one of the world's largest marine protected areas, and was classified as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2019.

On the Antarctic continent, the Dumont d'Urville base, operational since 1956, and the Franco-Italian Concordia Station contribute to France's leading position [in scientific production](#), focusing on polar environment monitoring, glaciology, human biology, astronomy, and climate history.

## An Indo-Pacific Focal Point?

Since 2018, President Macron has formalised a strategy for the French Indo-Pacific, to legitimise and enhance French assets in the region. The exercise of sovereignty in the overseas collectivities of the Indo-Pacific is a central component of the new narrative implemented by the state. Therefore, the TAAF have frequently been mentioned in national [Indo-Pacific speeches and strategies](#), in line with the French government's ambition to incorporate these strategically important territories into its broader Indo-Pacific vision.

The Antarctic continent is a unique example of international governance dedicated to peace and environmental protection. France aspires to take a leading role, showcasing its science diplomacy in forums like the One Planet – Polar Summit. Consequently, while the TAAF comprises small and remote territories, they have symbolically at least, become a focal point of the French Indo-Pacific Strategy.

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