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Clipperton in France's Indo-Pacific Strategy

By Paco Milhiet

SYNOPSIS

Lost in the maritime immensity of the eastern Pacific Ocean, Clipperton is an uninhabited atoll under French sovereignty. Often forgotten by the French administration, and widely unknown to the majority of its citizens, this territory may become an important strategic asset amid the development of France's Indo-Pacific Strategy.

COMMENTARY

Since 2018, France's President Emmanuel Macron has formalised a French Indo-Pacific strategy to enhance French assets in the region. The exercise of sovereignty in the overseas collectivities of the Indo-Pacific (Reunion Island, Mayotte, the French Southern and Antarctic Lands, Wallis-et-Futuna, New Caledonia, and French Polynesia) is a major component of the new narrative implemented by the French state.

However, a French territory seems to have been left aside – Clipperton, an unpopulated 12-km round coral atoll of 8.9 sq km in the East Pacific, located more than 1,000 km west of the Mexican coast and 5,400 km northeast of Tahiti in French Polynesia.



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How Clipperton Became a French Territory

Clipperton was supposedly discovered in 1706 by a British privateer, John Clipperton. Five years later, [Michel-Joseph Dubocage](#) (1676-1727), a French navigator en route to China, explored the atoll and named it “*île de la Passion*”. To this day, it is still called *La passion-Clipperton* in French.

In 1858, [Victor le Coat de Kergueven](#), a French naval officer, took official possession of Clipperton in the name of Napoleon III. Although claimed as French territory, American and British companies exploited Clipperton's phosphate resources throughout the 19th century.

In 1897, Mexico expressed national sovereignty claims over Clipperton. A lighthouse was built in 1906, followed by the installation of a small Mexican military division of 10 men, with their wives and children. Political turmoil in Mexico and the beginning of World War I plunged the small colony into oblivion, and supplies were no longer assured.

After a series of [sordid events](#), the last man alive proclaimed himself “King of Clipperton”, enslaved the remaining women and children, and established a terror regime. After two years of sexual and moral abuses, an American warship eventually showed up, and the dictator was assassinated by his victims just before the American captain landed on the atoll. The three women and seven children who survived were

finally repatriated to Salina Cruz, Mexico, in 1917, and Clipperton has never been permanently inhabited ever since.

In 1931, an arbitration presided by the King of Italy, Victor Emmanuel III, confirmed French sovereignty over Clipperton. Still, in 1944, the US Navy occupied the atoll during the Pacific war, drilling a reef pass in the corals, and building an airstrip.

After World War II, the US government agreed to return Clipperton to France. From 1966 to 1968, the French Army deployed military detachments on Clipperton during nuclear test campaigns in French Polynesia to assess the progression of radioactive clouds. Since then, international scientific missions visit Clipperton sporadically, and ships of the French Navy carry out sovereignty missions regularly.

Tiny but Strategic

The geographical location of Clipperton (10°18' North, 109°13' West), its proximity to the Equator and remoteness from major air routes, makes it an ideal location for space observation, in particular for the European Space Agency's heavy-lift space vehicle, Ariane 5, launched from Kourou in French Guiana.

In terms of marine biology, Clipperton and its immense maritime surrounds offer numerous opportunities for scientific observation of marine [fauna and flora](#), including the behaviour of certain species of sharks and the study of corals, as well as climatic phenomena such as the El Niño current.

The atoll is also of significant ornithological interest, as it is a nesting refuge for many species of birds such as brown and masked boobies, sooty terns, great frigatebirds, American coots, and moorhens. The area is also rich in tuna, which is currently exploited by foreigners with no possible control by the French authorities.

Furthermore, various studies have shown that there are useful minerals (including some still being formed) in the seabed around Clipperton, for example, polymetallic nodules, hydrothermal sulfides, and cobalt-rich encrustation. A study conducted around [Clipperton in 1997](#) detected the presence of mineral nodules in varying quantities.

These mineral resources are particularly strategic because they contain rare earth elements, a group of seventeen minerals used mainly in high-tech products. While French authorities are constantly insisting on the need to achieve a degree of energy sustainability, the lack of interest in a French territory potentially rich in raw materials raises questions.

But more important than these assets, ever since the adoption in 1982 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), France has the potential to

have the second largest exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the world with over 10 million sq km. Clipperton offers France the possibility of controlling and exploiting 435,612 sq km of EEZ in the Pacific Ocean, which is more than the metropolitan EEZ.

In 2010, France made an [official claim](#) to the EEZ around Clipperton island, [and deposited the geographical coordinates](#) at the United Nations. At the French national level, the EEZ of Clipperton was earlier officially created by a government decree in 1978.

The EEZ around Clipperton island is close to the so-called Clarion-Clipperton Zone, an abyssal plain of 5,000 km across the central Pacific Ocean. As the EEZ does not overlap the zone, it is therefore outside French national jurisdiction. This vast Clarion-Clipperton Zone contains polymetallic nodule fields and is regulated by the International Seabed Authority, a UN Agency. Deep sea exploration companies, Ocean Mineral Singapore and the French Institute for Exploitation of the Sea, have been awarded licenses to explore the zone for polymetallic nodules.

Rock or Island: Consequences for the French EEZ

Unlike other [French territories in the Indo-Pacific](#), French sovereignty over Clipperton is no longer officially contested. In 1959, the Mexican parliament acknowledged that Clipperton was no longer part of its territorial possessions.

With sovereignty settled, the possibility of an EEZ around Clipperton can be a reality. According to Article 121(3) of UNCLOS, "Rocks which cannot sustain human habitation or economic life of their own shall have no exclusive economic zone or continental shelf". The definition of a rock is therefore [fundamental](#) as it does not necessarily confer, unlike an island, the right to an EEZ.

A [2016 ruling](#) of the International Tribunal in The Hague provides an extensive definition of a rock. An atoll that does not have the capacity to host an economic activity or human habitation is categorised as a rock, not an island. These two conditions are not fulfilled in the case of Clipperton. An international court could therefore legitimately qualify it as a "rock". In this case, Clipperton would only be entitled to a 12 nautical-mile territorial sea, and subsequently lose its strategic assets.

An Indo-Pacific Moment for Clipperton?

For now, Clipperton seems abandoned. The atoll of Clipperton today offers a dramatic landscape. There is accumulation of waste [of all kinds](#), carcasses of military vehicles, proliferation of rats, looting of fisheries resources, and drug trafficking activities. But Clipperton's current situation is not hopeless, and the actual political moment to enhance the strategic value of Clipperton may be on the horizon.

Since 2018, the French government has implemented a dynamic and multimodal policy to highlight its new Indo-Pacific narrative, which is a priority strategy of the Macron government. This might be a unique opportunity to raise political awareness of the Clipperton case.

University professors Christian Jost, **Anthony** Tchékémian and Senator [Philippe Folliot](#) have long been lobbying for the establishment of a permanent scientific mission on Clipperton. This future platform with a scientific vocation could also fulfill the two conditions stipulated by the Hague Tribunal. Similar structures already exist in the French Southern and Antarctic Lands, sustained by the French Army and civilian organisations, which have the experience of supplying remote islands.

Clipperton, a small obscure place at one remote part of the Pacific Ocean would thus become a cardinal point of the French Indo-Pacific Strategy.

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