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Impact of Geopolitical Tensions in the Red Sea on Réunion Island

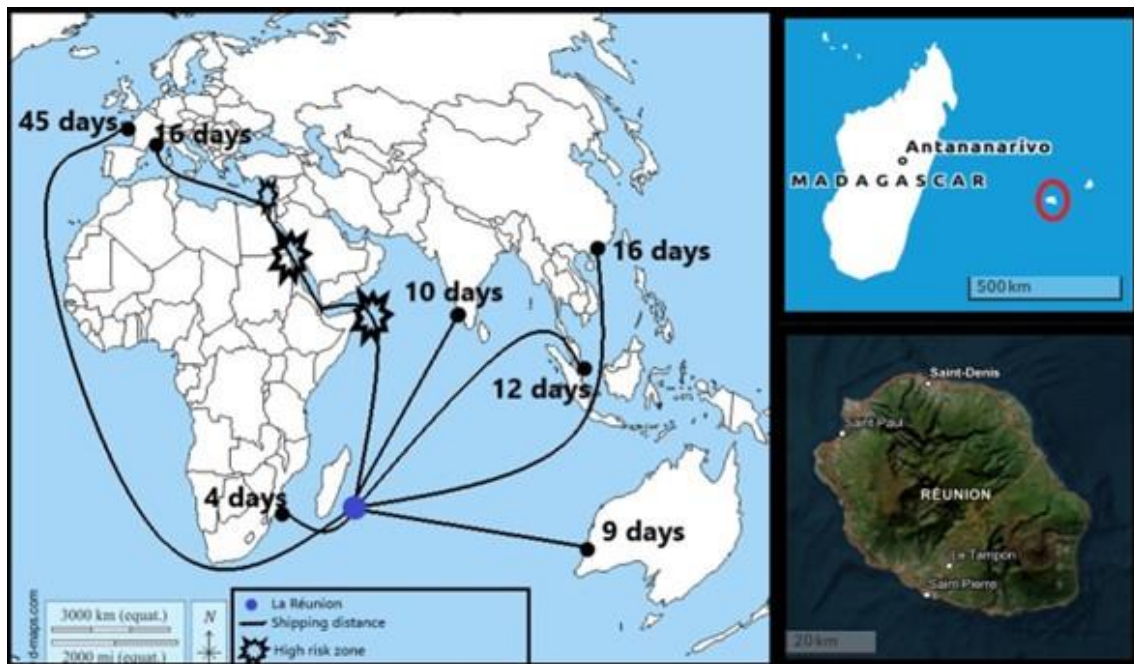
By Paco Milhiet and Jérôme Vellayoudom

SYNOPSIS

As geopolitical tensions escalate in the Red Sea, with Houthi rebels targeting numerous vessels in transit, the imperative of maritime security around the Suez Canal, a key chokepoint of global commerce, comes to the fore. Some maritime companies are already rerouting their ships around the southern tip of Africa and the Cape of Good Hope, a prospect carrying potential geopolitical ramifications, particularly for African port cities and islands surrounding the “renewed” southern maritime sea route. Regarding recent events in the Middle East, this article delves into the specific case of Réunion Island, a territory under French sovereignty located in the western Indian Ocean.

COMMENTARY

Réunion Island (or *La Réunion* in French) is a volcanic island in the western Indian Ocean, east of Africa. It is a constituent of the Mascarene archipelago, located 170 km west-southwest of Mauritius and 680 km east-southeast of Madagascar. Characterised by its interethnic and multiconfessional composition, the island's population of 860,000 are descendants of multiple waves of immigration from Europe, Africa, Madagascar, India, and Asia.



Map by Paco Milhiet, data by Grand Port Maritime de La Reunion

A French Colonial Legacy

Known to Arab navigators since the 10th century, Réunion Island served as a crucial stopover on the maritime route to the East Indies from the 16th century for Portuguese, English, and Dutch ships. Permanent habitation began only in 1646 when twelve disaffected French mutineers, expelled from Madagascar, were marooned on its shores. Over the following decades, these pioneers were joined by additional colonists.

Later, the island gained strategic importance as France pursued colonial endeavours in [the region](#). A colonial society flourished, primarily engaged in the cultivation of coffee, eventually transitioning to sugar cane. The institution of slavery persisted as a societal norm until its abolition in 1848, and foreign labour indenture from India, Africa, and Madagascar continued until the 1930s.

Unlike other southwest Indian Ocean states, which progressively gained independence (Madagascar-1960, Mauritius-1968, Seychelles-1976), Réunion Island is still a territory under French sovereignty, and independence movements are politically marginal.

A Nexus of French Influence and Regional Dynamics

In the present day, Réunion Island stands as a crucial outpost of French influence in the Indian Ocean and the wider Indo-Pacific, emphasised by the deployment of [1,600 military](#) personnel on the island. France actively participates in several interregional organisations, including the Indian Ocean Commission, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium. Additionally, it is from Réunion Island that the [French Southern and Antarctic Lands](#) (TAAF) are administered.

Réunion Island is not impervious to the broader geopolitical developments in the region. A significant aspect of this dynamic involves the competition for influence between China and India within the [island nations of the area](#), a phenomenon also observable to some extent in Réunion.

Ever since France and India signed a [logistical cooperation](#) agreement in 2018, granting access to the island base for Indian forces, Réunion has evolved into a platform for the strategic partnership between the two countries. Concurrently, the Chinese presence has also intensified since 2010, marked by the establishment of a consulate and a Confucius Institute. Additionally, a collective agreement has been signed for economic cooperation with the port city of [Tianjin](#).

Economically, despite its strategic positioning, the island is heavily reliant on trade with the French mainland. Almost 80 per cent of its imports are transported by sea through the Suez Canal and the Bab-el Mandeb Strait. Therefore, any incident impeding navigation through this area would pose significant challenges to this territory, as a core area of French sovereignty and influence in the region.

Geopolitical Tensions in the Red Sea and Their Impact on Maritime Security

Since 2014, a civil war has been devastating Yemen. The Houthi rebels (officially known as *Ansar Allah*), supported by Iran, control the western part of the country, including the capital, Sanaa. They thus command a territory that opens onto the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, contiguous to the Red Sea and its connection to the Suez Canal.

Considered one of the key chokepoints in global maritime routes, the Suez Canal concentrates approximately [12 per cent](#) of global maritime trade and 30 per cent of container traffic. It enables ships to significantly reduce the distance between Europe and Asia by several thousand nautical miles compared to the southern route via the Cape of Good Hope (3,500 nautical miles more for a [Singapore-Rotterdam journey](#)), resulting in a time-saving trip of approximately [15 days](#). Recent events off the coast of Yemen are, therefore, of major importance for worldwide commerce.

In support of the Palestinian people, the Houthis have launched a series of attacks on Israeli ships and on countries considered as Israel's allies, including French vessels. On 24 November 2023, the French container ship *Symi*, owned by CMA-CGM, was [hit by an aerial drone](#) while sailing 350 nautical miles off the shores of the Arabian Peninsula. On 10 December, a French frigate [destroyed two drones](#) in the southern Red Sea. These incidents followed a Houthi-led operation [to seize a merchant](#) ship on 19 November.

Thus, the Red Sea is now considered a "[high-risk area](#)" by the London insurance market and companies, including [Maersk, Hapag Lloyd Group and CMA-CGM](#), have rerouted ships through the southern routes to avoid this area.

Implications for Réunion Island

Circumventing the Suez Canal would reposition Réunion Island at the heart of global trade between Asia and Europe. Consequently, it is essential for local authorities to strategise on how the island's port can position itself to capitalise on these trade routes.

However, as the island is heavily dependent on imports, a prolonged crisis would impact key product supplies, such as fresh food items and certain essential inputs like packaging materials. There is a historical precedent. On 23 March 2021, the container ship Ever Given ran aground in the [Suez Canal for six days](#). Consequently, vessels had to circumnavigate the southern tip of the African continent. The transit time from Europe to Réunion Island increased from 16 days to 45 days, implying significant consequences for local supply.

Therefore, implementing an influential strategy to elevate the port as a regional hub and understanding the dynamics of competition and cooperation with other ports in the region are essential aspects to address. Foreign investments in the region, such as the Japanese endeavours in Tamatave, Madagascar, are expected to rekindle the historical competition for dominance in the maritime port sector of the southwest Indian Ocean, involving ports such as Toamasina, Port Mauritius, and Port Reunion—an economic arena of rivalry that seldom favoured La Réunion in the past.

African Perspectives Rather than Indo-Pacific?

Like other French overseas territories, Réunion Island's economic growth is driven by public transfers from the state, constituting 70 per cent of GDP, and imports from continental France.

The island is currently minimally integrated into its African regional environment. According to [2021 data](#), Africa accounts for only three per cent of the island's commercial exchanges, compared to 70 per cent for France and Europe.

Despite ongoing events in the Middle East, in the long term, the Suez Canal will remain the most straightforward commercial route from Europe to Asia. Nonetheless, the island's primary economic strength in the long run appears to be its geographical proximity to the African continent.

Beyond transient geopolitical crises, the ongoing events in the Middle East present an opportunity for both state and local leaders to reconsider Réunion Island's regional affiliation within its African environment. This intellectual endeavour requires harmonisation of diplomatic strategies between the administration of the state and that of the collectivity. Embracing a systematic approach to territorial intelligence is essential for addressing the complexity of the challenges involved.

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