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# What does the future hold for relations between the EU and its islands?

At a time when power struggles and imperialist ambitions are on the rise, the outermost regions are of major geostrategic importance to the European Union. Forced to remilitarise their borders – and, by extension, those of the Union – they are proving to be an integral part of the future of the European project.

In recent years, we have witnessed the return of a conflictual dynamic that had been forgotten since the Cold War. Europe, a peninsula in geographical terms and an island from a geostrategic perspective, possesses numerous assets in the face of the world's new de-centering, which requires it to reclaim its maritime space, the boundaries of which, in total, extend beyond its land borders. For Europe, whose Member States form the world's largest exclusive economic zone (EEZ), is called upon to play a vital role in securing and preserving the world's maritime spaces, a role strengthened by its overseas territories, within the framework of the [Montego Bay Convention](#), which defines its boundaries. New inter-state conflicts now take a hybrid form: all traditional means mobilised – land, sea and air – are matched by a digital and information sphere, such as Viginum in France, for example. Drones fly indiscriminately over both sea and land, whilst information is transmitted via cables laid on the seabed. European naval power, guardian of Neptune's temple, also sees itself as the protector of its global security, as a co-builder of a common strategic identity which it considers indivisible and inalienable. This dimension would be inconceivable without its Overseas Territories, those small corners of the world which contribute, at various levels, to the development of this task of sovereignty. As vectors of influence and outreach in the three main areas of the economy, ecology and culture, the [outermost regions](#) are in a prime position

to navigate all the competition generated by the effects of globalisation, an integral part of multifaceted geopolitical rivalries.

However, as we journey through the islands, it is clear that there are shortcomings in terms of citizenship, due to a lack of genuine equality, which sometimes lead to socio-political and economic tensions that are not always adequately resolved. To better examine the link between the mainland and its overseas territories, and to highlight the synergies, we will often employ comparative analysis, deliberately setting aside certain sensitive issues, such as tax evasion or offshore finance, for reasons of transparency and an ethical approach to the overseas territories, but also to avoid reductive or even erroneous representations.

## I) NEW DANGERS, NEW GEOPOLITICS

### 'Whoever rules the seas rules the world'

In the 15th century, when Prince Henry discovered a different transoceanic route for exploration thanks to the new navigational instruments developed in Sagres, Europe realised that its technological and economic future lay beyond its land borders. Thus, the first great European navigators charted new trade routes, marking their course with as many maritime trading posts as their forefathers had established caravan terminals between Europe and the Far East on

land. The three current global leaders in maritime transport are, moreover, European: Maersk, MSC, CMA-CGM.

Globalisation has been and remains maritime, guided by the compass of the open seas. After 1945, the struggle against communist ideology conferred new geopolitical virtues upon the Overseas Territories. Today, in a new world of unbridled predation, numerous foreign powers are taking an interest in Europe's overseas regions. The European Union must therefore strengthen its military, logistical and economic presence there as part of an approach that requires multidisciplinary scientific expertise (volcanology, hydrology, oceanography, mineralogy, etc.) to support it.

These bases, situated at communication hubs conducive to military and defence activities, within geo-economic or geo-strategic reach, constitute undeniable watchtowers more than ever before – natural relays of power and influence for techno-military deployment and the control of trade routes, as well as for securing European, not to say Euro-insular, communication and supply lines. This helps to offer multiple windows of opportunity for the continents and their islands, across all data types. From a geospatial perspective, the map of military-strategic pre-positioning from the Cold War years remains relevant for space, satellite and nuclear activities, not to mention cyber defence and the projection of conventional forces as close as possible to areas of tension in the event of a breakdown in regional stability. In this regard, Diego Garcia[1] is to the Indian Ocean what Guam is to the Pacific. Just as Hawaii is to NASA what Kourou and Sinnamary are to the European Space Agency (ESA)[2]. French Guiana is, in fact, the only overseas department (DOM) to possess such leverage in terms of its space and cyber defence. As for the role played by the acquisition of raw materials enabling this technological development, the growing dependence of many countries on strategic metals and the targeting of critical infrastructure in recent years have transformed the concept of energy security, the monitoring of which now requires a satellite-based response, and to which the vast

intelligence-gathering capabilities of the outermost regions of Europe contribute a significant part of the solution[3]. In the face of the major empires fuelling this energy-intensive race, China has, in recent years, been building a 'Great Wall of Sand' on artificial islands to challenge the United States for maritime control of supplies in this region; in this sense, this Sino-American rivalry threatens European and Euro-insular sovereignty. Yet, the study of these island entities is sometimes trivialised in international relations; they do not always receive the consideration that the geopolitical, economic, identity-related, climatic and environmental crises currently battering the very foundations of Euro-insularity demand.

## II) TURNING WEAK SIGNALS INTO STRONG ONES

### Nuclear power and the environment: resilience as the solution

For decades, all these overseas territories have served as diverse and pioneering laboratories, entrusted with missions that are often groundbreaking for the European Union: nuclear, medical, military, oceanographic, maritime, tourism, environmental, musical, and so on. This takes place in geographically limited areas where, nevertheless, several worldviews coexist and/or are learning to do so.

With the exception of China, the nuclear powers of the United Nations Security Council have all, in their time and in order to acquire a deterrent, conducted nuclear tests in their outermost regions. But they did so while often underestimating the potential for an environmental crisis in the face of the geostrategic urgency of the situation at the time, one that could also have turned into a health scandal. Under the guise of the national interest and against the backdrop of the Cold War—the full weight of which we still struggle to grasp for the actors of that era—secrecy was maintained for decades, both in France and abroad, not only from indigenous populations but also through disinformation based on a myth of harmlessness, the risks of which were underestimated. In 1996, President Chirac put an end to the nuclear tests at Mururoa. The

**[1]** Diego Garcia: under British sovereignty but leased to the United States, which operates it jointly. The island lies within striking distance of all vital communication routes – including the maritime and trade routes of global commerce – of all key maritime chokepoints (the Straits of Hormuz, Malacca and Bab el-Mandeb), and of Chinese sites in this region.

**[2]** The Guiana Space Centre has thus become Europe's spaceport, effectively symbolising French and European strategic autonomy. Due to its very equatorial latitude, it offers, during launches, additional velocity linked to the Earth's rotation, increasing the payload capacity of launch vehicles whilst reducing fuel costs. The base boasts 27% higher efficiency compared to Cape Canaveral, and 55% higher than Baikonur, and is, moreover, situated away from cyclonic and seismic trajectories.

**[3]** Hurricane Chido in Mayotte had rendered the island's high-tech listening devices inoperable. The DGSE operates five listening and interception stations in the Indo-Pacific region, with its signals intelligence operations extending, in effect, to overseas territories.

legitimate demands of the local populations concern the remediation of the so-called 'contaminated' areas and compensation for all the damage suffered, all compounded by the effects of climate change (rising sea levels).

In France, the law of 5 January 2010 provided for the compensation of victims of radiation-induced diseases, although the outcome remains generally insufficient. At European level, a progressive policy recognising a shared sense of loss for those most exposed is already in place. With the [Caribbean Community](#) (CARICOM) lending its support, negotiations have been initiated with the United Nations to transform the Caribbean Sea into a special status zone, *via* a request for the creation of an international legal instrument to regulate the maritime transport of materials whose routing could potentially cause controversy. Solutions are therefore being provided – or are in the process of being provided – through a framework for joint and shared reflection by all existing institutions. This constitutes, little by little, a gradual path towards the Euro-insular integration of negative externalities produced by policies from an era when the concepts of environmental undesirability and the vulnerability of their fields of application did not yet exist.

### **Island ecosystems: pioneers of a shared environmental future?**

In the French West Indies, despite warnings from the WHO in 1979, organochlorine-based agricultural practices still too often affect the water supply and groundwater, coastal fishing areas, mangroves, farmland and agricultural produce, seafood, etc. A research policy, supported by the ERDF, was launched in 2008 with the [first chlordecone plan](#)[4]. At the same time, the University of Pointe-à-Pitre revealed, a few years ago, the secrets behind, amongst other things, the use of activated carbon to accelerate the breakdown of this molecule. However, the channelling of financial resources towards professionals in the agricultural sector raises many doubts, which may complicate the process.

An equally important battle is being waged in the Dutch islands over Royal Dutch Shell's oil operations

carried out between 1915 and 1985 (Curaçao, Aruba), which released emissions of carbon monoxide, fine particles and other greenhouse gases. The same issue applies to Exxon in Aruba. Environmental organisations in Curaçao, with the tacit approval of their governing metropolis, are now demanding that local authorities include strict environmental standards in operating contracts. Greenland is a pioneer for cold regions[5]: beyond the energy potential the island holds offshore, the melting of its permafrost will soon reveal vast amounts of carbon, compounded by pollution from any concessions that may be granted. Here again, there is no solution without gradual Euro-island integration.

### **III) NEW CHANNELS OF INFLUENCE**

#### **Vulnerability as an environmental and geocultural resource**

Among the factors influencing decision-making, and indeed action, in favour of the Overseas Territories, there is one that is emerging as a distinctive strength: vulnerability. This now serves a cause regarded as just by a European and island community that has become environmentally conscious. Endowed with exceptional geological resources, the overseas territories now represent vectors of influence and outreach in ecology and the culture associated with it[6]. For example, 80% of France's biodiversity is found in its overseas territories, with a quarter of its national parks situated along the coast, including 40,000 km<sup>2</sup> in French Guiana[7]. In Guadeloupe, the Soufrière massif forms a biosphere reserve. The New Caledonian lagoon is the largest in the world, whilst the island's coral reef ranks second only to Australia's, both of which are listed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

The Overseas Territories are, by definition, vulnerable ecosystems, given the specific natural features that define them. The protection of natural island environments, fully understood by all stakeholders, therefore represents a way for indigenous peoples to reclaim, in the future, an ancestral heritage embodied in sculptural traditions (engraved rocks, Guadeloupe).

[4] We are on the 4th

[5] The minister, Mute Egede, has taken the decision to ban offshore drilling in the interests of the territory's fisheries resources – its economic lifeline – and to protect the way of life of its inhabitants

[6] Tourism is also included there, given its essential role in island economies.

[7] 6,000 plant species

This highly attractive tourism asset thus continues to provide a framework for shared prosperity, serving a Euro-insular culture that is more widely shared on the international stage.

#### The case of Greenland

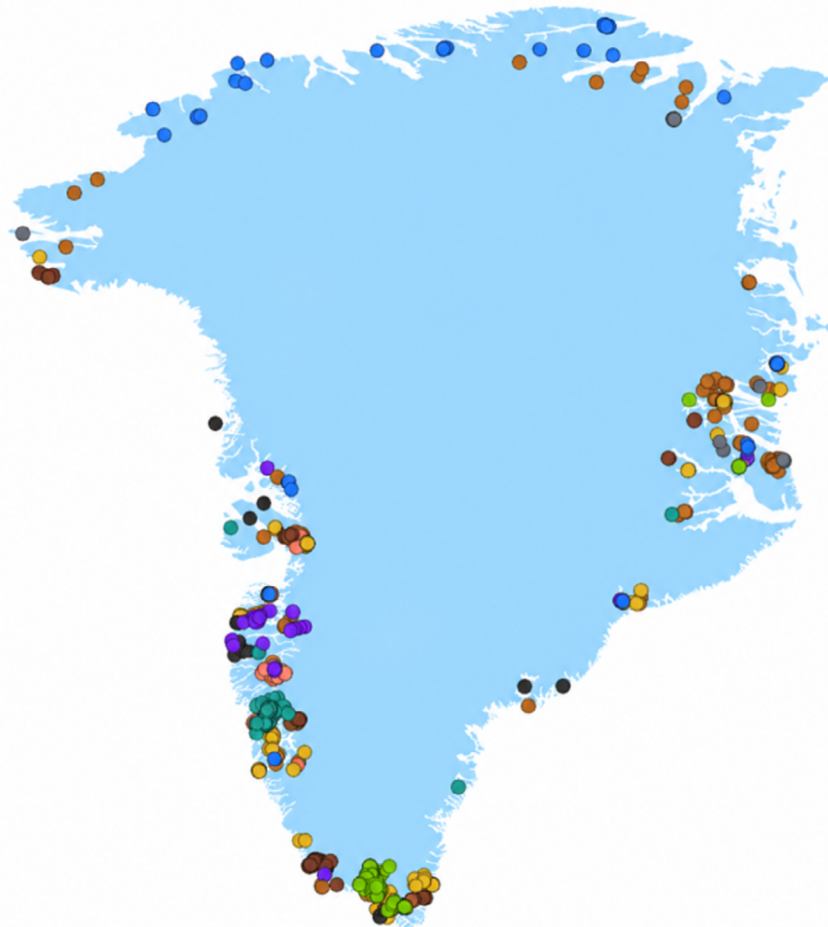
For the Inuit, this may translate into a dilemma between economic autonomy and the preservation of their way of life, alongside a national government that seeks to retain control in the name of mutual strategic interests. For the ice-covered island, with an area of 1,726,000 km<sup>2</sup>, is the second largest in the world after the

Antarctic continent, whilst also constituting the largest existing nature reserve (1 million km<sup>2</sup>). Both a reserve and a natural air conditioner for the planet, and beyond the energy issue, it is the growing importance of Arctic regions in the global strategic imagination that is being highlighted. Once a cryospheric wilderness, now and in the future increasingly a monitored contact and transit zone, the 'white paradise' is set to serve as an Arctic hub between continents, eager for the new prospects it offers: access to mining routes, shorter maritime routes, offshore opportunities and an energy storehouse at the disposal of an eponymous transition. Hence the interest shown in it by US President Donald Trump.

### Greenland's Mineral Resources

Main known deposits of selected minerals, rocks and rare earth elements

■ Copper 
 ■ Diamond 
 ■ Gold 
 ■ Graphite 
 ■ Iron 
 ■ Lead 
 ■ Nickel 
 ■ Rare earths 
 ■ Uranium 
 ■ Zinc



Source: [Geological Survey of Denmark and Greenland](#)  
By clicking on the map above, a selection of the main deposits of certain minerals, rocks and rare earth elements is shown.

### The battle to protect the oceans (Mare Nostrum)

In the face of all these challenges and the explosion of information in recent years, the growing politicisation of climate issues and the capacity of the outermost regions – and their governing bodies – call for joint and tailored responses. The battle to protect the oceans has become a springboard for the overseas territories, which pollute little but are nonetheless degraded by the Anthropocene, and which also lie at the liquid frontier of a terrestrial space that forms part of a pan-European island network, and indeed a global one. The dual resonance of environmental and climate emergencies transforms the vulnerability of the overseas territories into a political, even geopolitical, lever which, in turn, benefits the relevant metropolitan authorities. The animist peoples of the Pacific are at the forefront of this ecological struggle. Thus, French Polynesia, as part of its green diplomacy aimed at safeguarding the ‘blue heart of the planet’, transformed its EEZ into a marine protected area as early as 2018, coupled with a sanctuary for cetaceans. In the [Caribbean](#), half of these thirty areas fall under initiatives defined by the framework of the 1983 [Cartagena Convention](#), which serves as a benchmark for “maritime diplomacy”, combined with regional, national and international institutional affiliations.

## IV) ARTICLES OF ASSOCIATION REVIEWED ON A REGULAR BASIS

### A world of possibilities

Following 1945 and the break-up of the colonial empires, European overseas territories adopted three different statuses:

- Full incorporation into the political and administrative structures of the former colonial power.
- Partial incorporation.
- Direct administration by the central authorities.

In summary, there is either the application of ordinary law, specific derogatory statuses, or direct management by the central government. For a small

territory, affiliation with a larger political entity remains, in principle, more attractive than gaining sovereignty; however, this depends on political and administrative traditions and their geopolitical considerations, represented by two variables: its strategic interest and its overall cost. In general, the indirect strategic cost of islands is low relative to the strategic benefits they provide. And the lower this cost, the more likely the chosen option is integration under a common law status (French Antilles[8]). The higher it is, the more likely the chosen option will be that of partial integration with special status. Independence, if it is to be considered, is only necessary when the overall cost rules out these two alternatives. Since 1995, Ceuta and Melilla have been autonomous Spanish cities forming the external borders of the European Union but benefiting from a derogation in the application of the Schengen Agreements, particularly regarding local cross-border movement. Other specific models characterise statuses of internal autonomy corresponding to a policy of partial integration; such as the *British Crown colonies*, with limited resources and small areas, and whose ‘*Self Government*’ is the cardinal principle[9]. Norway administers its islands of Bouvet, Jan Mayen and Svalbard through an administrative framework, just as France does with its Southern and Antarctic Territories (TAAF). There are almost as many different statuses as there are specific local circumstances, all of which are subject to ongoing review within the context of the constant renegotiation of European treaties and the finalisation of the relevant overseas policies.

## V) DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

### Working towards a form of para-diplomatic territoriality

The emancipation of the islands – or archipelagos, to be precise – also requires the recognition of the role of territory and borders – including fluid ones, as in ancient Venice – as essential cornerstones and facilitators of international relations. Despite policies implemented at both national and European level in support of the Overseas Territories, the local community, sometimes wrongly, still harbours fears of being trapped in an asymmetrical relationship[10].

[8] As part of a process of decolonisation through integration, 1946 saw the establishment of Guadeloupe, French Guiana, Martinique and Réunion as French overseas departments. Special statuses – under ordinary law – may apply to certain islands, such as Saint Pierre and Miquelon, which in 1985 adopted a sui generis status shielding it from European Community law in relation to its trade with Canada. In contrast to Mayotte, which voted in favour of departmentalisation in the traditional sense.

[9] Not eligible for national public policies, and governed by specific legislation: constitution, parliament, government, chief minister, governor representing King Charles III.

[10] Unless the identification of strategic resources suggests a bargaining chip that could shift the balance of power and make it more even.

On the islands, there is indeed sometimes a prevailing sense of being citizens who have been relegated to a lower status (Césaire), akin to a form of 'social death' that epitomises the most extreme manifestations of Afro-pessimism, particularly in the Caribbean. Based on this premise, most European sub-national island entities have therefore been very active in recent years, particularly in foreign policy: under the General Code of Local Authorities (C.G.C.T.) or the statutes applicable to them, they may undertake certain international actions with the State's consent. We are thus witnessing the tolerated development of communication channels for these overseas territories in non-sovereign areas (culture, sport), alongside issues such as natural risks, territorial interconnectivity, energy transition, environmental protection and climate change. Taken together, this broadens, or even amplifies, the scope of all-encompassing diplomatic influence across Europe and the islands, whilst remaining under the control of the respective national administrations. The power granted to islanders in terms of delegation (bilateral or even multilateral) varies and can, as in the case of the Cook Islands and Niue, extend to the parallel conduct of their own foreign policy and thus the signing of agreements. The Faroe Islands, French Polynesia, Curaçao and Puerto Rico participate in shaping the foreign policy of their parent country, either complementing that driven by the flagship state or, more rarely, competing with it if the latter's objectives do not coincide with the former's territorial aspirations.

### **Working towards an increasingly fair representation**

Because, 'between Europe and America, there is nothing but dust, and states are not built on dust' (De Gaulle), the European Union has, over the past few decades, established differentiated partnerships with twenty-two outermost regions belonging to five of its Member States (Spain, Portugal, France, Denmark, the Netherlands) with a view to strengthening ties. Under European Union law, a distinction must be made between the outermost regions (ORs) and the overseas countries and territories (OCTs).

The former (the Azores, the Canary Islands, French Guiana, Martinique, Guadeloupe, Mayotte, Saint Martin, Madeira and Réunion) form an integral part of the Union and European law applies there. The latter (Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, Greenland, French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Saint Barthélemy, Sint Maarten, Saint Pierre and Miquelon, Wallis and Futuna) are not part of the Union's territories, so European law does not apply there, even though some of their residents hold European citizenship allowing them to travel and work within the Schengen area, whilst also benefiting from development aid. However, the governments concerned, aware of the synergy with their overseas territories in deploying a common strategy of influence there, see to it that overseas policies as a whole are periodically updated during the renegotiation of existing European treaties. In New Caledonia, there are projects to decarbonise the mining industry; in Polynesia, to provide access to drinking water and sanitation; in Saint Barthélemy, to prevent natural hazards; and in Saint Pierre and Miquelon, to promote heritage tourism. Under the 2021–2027 European Multiannual Financial Framework, the outermost regions receive an ERDF allocation of €250 million under European territorial cooperation, divided across four geographical areas (the Amazon, the Caribbean, the Mozambique Channel and the Indian Ocean), and certain OCTs have been able to benefit from a portion of the €30 million allocated to the Caribbean region. In recent years, a new narrative of co-construction has emerged regarding the link between one and the other, or rather of mutual enhancement. The overseas territories are an indispensable asset for Europe<sup>[11]</sup>. Independence therefore no longer appears to be a viable solution for the overseas territories, giving way instead to various forms of autonomy and co-management. This is without denying, however, their interconnected ties to the mother country, a certain degree of which remains necessary to facilitate innovation and development. Moreover, power-sharing models vary across the overseas territories, all of which are calling for greater local autonomy, with a dual democratic demand: the co-management of their own territorial development and full recognition of their identity. The success of this alchemy combines political will and technical know-how, enhanced by the quality of expertise within

<sup>[11]</sup> « Putting citizens first, securing sustainable and inclusive growth, unlocking the potential of the EU's outermost regions » - communication dated 3/05/2022, European Commission.

an administrative governance system that must be ethical. In short, all European countries and their overseas territories would thus benefit, indirectly, from the ripple effects of joint initiatives, now establishing themselves as the chorus of a philharmonic orchestra serving a Euro-insular space<sup>[12]</sup>.

## VI) EMPTY PROMISES AND CHEQUE DIPLOMACY: THE LIMITATIONS OF THE MODEL

### Mixed opinions

For some, the Overseas Territories derive a more than respectable benefit-risk ratio from their Euro-insular relationship. For others, it is the metropolis that is pulling the strings backstage. The crux of the matter arises when national – or even European, and therefore Euro-insular – security is at stake. In such cases, no compromise is possible, even if arrangements can still be made. Operating on multiple levels, this ‘paradiploacy’ ranges from macro-multilateralism to micro-regionalism, based on a carefully calculated risk-benefit ratio. The growing presence of the Overseas Territories in regional and multilateral organisations is now emerging as a rapidly expanding trend, particularly in the Pacific Ocean, a priority from a military-strategic perspective. Symmetrical developments, of lesser geopolitical significance and varying scale, are taking place in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. The British Overseas Territories (Bermuda, the Virgin Islands, Montserrat) were the first to join CARICOM, the main regional forum for the interests of some twenty independent countries and non-self-governing territories, and the only one to have established a free trade area in 1973, followed by a single market in 2006. Martinique (2015) – already part of CARICOM – and Guadeloupe (2019) are associate members of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS). Established in 1981, its aim is to promote the interests of the nine least developed countries and territories within CARICOM. The economic and monetary area is shared, with a network of joint institutions (central bank, supreme court). The OECS is one of the few regional organisations of which France is not a member. It has its own ambassador, responsible for cooperation policy and overseeing interactions with its overseas

territories. Summits are therefore prepared in advance by the relevant stakeholders to avoid double standards.

Within the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC), Réunion, representing France, is present. In Eastern and Southern Africa, COMESA, a vehicle for economic integration, is the second potential sphere of exchange between Réunion and Mayotte. There is also the IORA association and the AOSIS alliance, whose efforts, championed by the Global South, led to the creation of a fund to compensate for losses and damage caused by climate change at COP 27, marking a key moment of the summit. Certain islands (Cook Islands, Niue) are members of several specialised UN agencies, constantly seeking new partners for their development as a strategy for sustaining growth. However, China continues to seek to exert influence there under the guise of bilateral and regional development aid – whether economic (particularly infrastructure-related), cultural or environmental – relying notably on its diaspora. This influence is perceived as intrusive when compared to that of the United States, which has a long-standing presence in the Indo-Pacific region. The West is closely monitoring this quest for allegiance, which is as self-serving as a Trojan horse. As with Greenland, these ‘areas of vulnerability’ often provide the ideal breeding ground for negotiating contracts which, in return for supposed foreign aid<sup>[13]</sup>, reveals a lack of clarity in cooperation agreements, coupled with a lack of transparency and ethical standards in business practices. In New Caledonia, the nickel industry is seeking a new economic model. Within the company Framet, which is facing difficulties, a minority is conducting offshore negotiations with China, its main customer, leading to various changes in its governance. Thus, it is the future of a critical strategic raw material, listed by the EU, that is under threat. Chinese consular offices are established in Nouméa and Papeete. At the same time, China supports separatists in their demands and against their central governments, via Sino-island friendships under the covert influence of the CCP.

Indeed, the Indo-Pacific region has become strategically important, and the European Union is seeking to strengthen its presence and visibility

<sup>[12]</sup> Articles 349 and 355 of the TFEU.

<sup>[13]</sup> China, which has declared itself a quasi-Arctic state since 2018, is thus pushing for a role in regional governance.

## What does the future hold for relations between the EU and its islands?

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there in order to address the challenges. Polynesia is home to the [new Inter-Parliamentary Assembly of the Pacific Islands](#).

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Yet another wave of globalisation emerged some thirty years ago. It has been driven by the liberalisation of trade, investment and capital flows, and by the shrinking of space and time brought about by new means of communication and logistics, coupled with a global reduction in their costs. This has caused a shift in the global geopolitical epicentre towards the Indo-Pacific, the new theatre of confrontation between China and the United States, like a *remake* of the Cold War where each side must redraw its red lines, and in a context where access to strategic materials is once again becoming a global geopolitical priority.

For the European Union, this has led to a renewed focus on its outermost regions in the Pacific and the Indian Ocean, but also on its Atlantic coastline, albeit with some nuances. Consequently, these regions are being assigned new geopolitical roles and responsibilities. Whether serving as military observation posts or sanctuaries of biodiversity, or as hubs for sustainable and cultural tourism, the Overseas Territories retain their status as levers of maritime power and influence – and thus of sovereignty – across the entire Euro-insular map. The diversification, or even

dematerialisation, of influence processes in relation to their multiple affiliations – *via soft power* (often tailored to their scale – grants them, day by day, further advantages in a three-card hand they play and develop energetically, with the tacit support of their European guardian nations. The power of the archipelago contributes further to the projection of the hybrid transnational power of their coalition of guardian states, which must address new international challenges and contemporary changes. Because these islands dream of being on an equal footing with the European continent, whilst cultivating an enclave of singularity for themselves, even if this sometimes leads to a schizophrenic approach in their statutory attempts at self-determination. Our history will continue to be written not in isolation from one another, but together. Sovereignty and dependency are two partly misleading concepts, whose complexity circulates within a network of local, regional, national and international hybridisations. It is here that interactions between public and private actors must continue to constantly push back the boundaries of compromises that are always proposed but never definitive, and where the scope of Euro-insular democratic possibilities must remain perpetually open and creative by combining “*Think global, act local*”.

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