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France's Indo-Pacific Strategy: Crisis in Mayotte

By Paco Milhiet

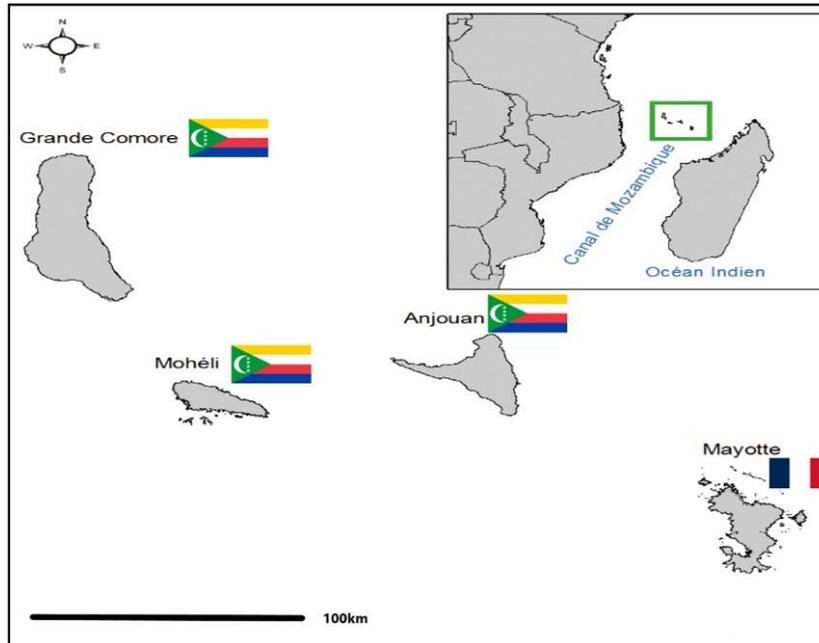
SYNOPSIS

Mayotte is an island under French sovereignty. It is claimed by the Comoros since 1975. Long-standing tensions between the two recently escalated over a police operation aimed at expelling citizens of the Comoros residing illegally in Mayotte. This has precipitated a geopolitical crisis in Mayotte with significant implications for the French Indo-Pacific strategy.

COMMENTARY

Since 2018, France's President Emmanuel Macron has formalized 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.

Mayotte, an island under French administration located 300 km northwest of Madagascar (see map from author's personal drawing), is a key element of this new narrative as it is strategically located in the Indian Ocean, a major sea route of the globalized economy conveying 30 per cent of global trade and 40 per cent of France's exports outside the EU. Furthermore, several scientific studies have identified large [natural gas reserves](#) around the island. The exclusive economic zone of Mayotte therefore attracts the interest of foreign powers. China, for example, has already carried out seismic studies in this area, while Russia [supports](#) the claims of the Comoros over Mayotte.



Mayotte is geographically and culturally attached to the Comoros archipelago, which includes the major islands of Grande Comore, Mohéli, and Anjouan. The whole archipelago was a French overseas territory beginning in 1886, but a self-determination referendum held in 1974 led to independence with 95 per cent voting in favour. However, 63 per cent of Mayotte's population voted to stay within the French Republic.

Thus, independence was proclaimed, and the Comorian state created in July 1975, but Mayotte has remained under French administration. Until today, the Comorian state claims total sovereignty over Mayotte, leading to regular migratory crises. This territorial dispute is a strategic conundrum in France's promotion of an Indo-Pacific strategy.

History of the Comorian Archipelago

Since the arrival of the first Austronesian and African settlers in the 8th century CE, the history of the Comorian archipelago has been at the crossroads of multiple cultures and influences including Swahili, Persian, Arabic, Portuguese and Malagasy. The islands served as major hubs for trade along the Mozambique channel, including slavery. Today, 99 per cent of the population is Muslim, but strong matriarchal African traditions persist resulting in a unique syncretic society.

Rivalries and tensions between the different Comorian islands have always existed. Before the French administration, the archipelago had never been politically unified under a single sultanate. In 1841, to ensure protection from neighbouring islands, the sultan of Mayotte, Andriantsouli, allied with the French and ceded the island to them. The other Comorian islands eventually became French in 1886. This was the first time the Comorian islands became politically associated under French administration.

Since its establishment in 1975, the Comorian state has claimed full sovereignty over Mayotte and is supported in this by the UN General Assembly (Resolution No. 3385 and Resolution 31/4) and the African Union (currently chaired by Comorian President

Assoumani). The Comorian government has based its claim on a UN principle (Resolution 1514), which declared that the national unity and the territorial integrity of a country should be respected once it has gained independence. On the other hand, the French's claim of sovereignty over Mayotte is based on the UN principle of the freedom of peoples to self-determination. Indeed, the Mahoran people, as the people of Mayotte are known as, have several times – in 1974, 1976 and 2009 – expressed their will to remain French.

Social Crises

Mayotte is the poorest department of France, but has remained much richer than its Comorian neighbours (US\$10,000 [per capita GDP](#) in Mayotte versus US\$1,500 for the Comoros). The consequences of the Franco-Comorian territorial dispute are visible everyday as Kwassa-Kwassa (rudimentary boats) disembark thousands of illegal immigrants in Mayotte each year, people who are trying to find a better life on the French island. Nearly one out of two inhabitants in Mayotte (in a total population of 260,000) are a foreign national.

Illegal immigration remains the focal point of disagreements between the Comorian and French governments, and hinders any possible appeasement in the bilateral relationship. In 2019, [more than 27,000 irregular immigrants](#) were deported from Mayotte to the Comorian island of Anjouan, 70 km away.

Illegal immigration has led to serious social instability, with daily inter-ethnic tensions and a growing feeling of insecurity on the part of the Mahorans. Violent clashes between street gangs have become uncontrollable.

Today, the situation in Mayotte is precarious: 84 per cent of the population lives below the French poverty line, unemployment rate is around 35 per cent, 70 per cent of newborns have a Comorian mother, while the population keeps on growing at an unsustainable rate. It is predicted that the island's population will triple to [750,000](#) by 2050.

A Police Operation Triggered Tensions

Amid recent deterioration of the social situation, access to hospitals on Mayotte are now [being blocked](#) by members of public collectives demanding the departure of illegal immigrants. On 20 April 2023, France's Minister of the Interior, Gerald Darmanin, launched "Operation Wuambushu" (meaning "take back" in local language), a police operation aimed at expelling illegal immigrants and destroying slums.

But expelled Comorian nationals are regularly not allowed to dock on Anjouan Island as the French boat *Marie Galanta* is often not granted access by the Comorian authorities. Moreover, the birthright citizenship (*jus soli*) in Mayotte is being reinterpreted such that a person born in Mayotte to undocumented parents does not automatically obtain the French nationality unlike the law in other French territories. Hence, many young people are partially stateless and cannot receive public healthcare or go to school.

The social situation is intractable and Mayotte remains out of any regional and even

sub-regional integration process. Unlike Reunion Island, another French territory in the Indian Ocean, Mayotte does not participate in the Indian Ocean Commission, an intergovernmental organization bringing together the Seychelles, Mauritius, the Comoros, Madagascar and France. Paris is accused of "neo-colonialism" by most of the other member states.

Mauritius and Madagascar also have territorial disputes with Paris regarding *les îles Eparses*, a group of four small uninhabited islands around Madagascar. This situation is problematic for French diplomacy, as it wants to appear as a legitimate actor in the region.

Conclusion

Parliamentarians from Mayotte have long awaited an increased military presence to regulate illegal immigration. But repression politics cannot be the only long-term solution.

An increase in bilateral collaboration between the French and Comorian governments, despite major disagreements, is essential. For Mayotte and Anjouan, separated from each other by only 70 km, permanent control against illegal migration is virtually impossible. If no sustainable solution is found, the internal problems of Mayotte could well undermine the entire French Indo-Pacific strategy.

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