FRANCE IN THE ISLANDS
OF THE SOUTH-WEST INDIAN OCEAN

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France in the Indian Ocean

France provides an original variant of decolonization and présence in the Indian Ocean. Unlike the other Great Powers with interests in the region France does not see herself as an external power but as belonging to the Indian Ocean on the same footing as the indigenous states. The Indian Ocean however is the ocean of non-alignment searching for its identity as a zone of peace in the world. What moves France a great capitalist power to regard herself as a full internal member of the Indian Ocean World? How successful is France in getting the indigenous non-aligned states of the region to accept her as one of them? Does the French presence contribute to or detract from the Indian Ocean's quest for a pacific identity?

The French présence in the Indian Ocean is centered on the islands of its South West sector: Réunion - on which France primarily bases the legitimacy of its claim to belong to the region - and its neighbors: Mauritius, the Seychelles, Madagascar and the Comoros archipelago. The paper therefore deals mainly with these islands. France's présence in the islands however is affected by developments in the Indian Ocean as a whole and France's claim to belong to the region cannot be understood outside her vindication of a special role in global politics. These general considerations therefore cannot be left out although a full analysis would demand a much longer paper.
Part One: Decolonization and Départementalisation

France in the "British Lake"

A distinction must be made in the islands between, on the one hand, Madagascar and Comoros, which France annexed in the Nineteenth Century but which had been populated by migrants brought across the ocean by seafarers from Indonesia, Arabia, and Africa, and had developed their own variants of the indianoceanic civilization before the arrival of Europeans in the Indian Ocean and, on the other hand, Réunion, Mauritius and Seychelles, which had no pre-colonial history and whose creole societies and cultures have been entirely created under European rule. In the first category the result of French contact has been what may be called the orthodox colonial situation: the articulation of pre-colonial social formations with European capitalism which reinforced and displaced them at the same time.

This type of colonization was far less important in establishing a permanent French présence in the Indian Ocean than the second category where colonization started with a clean state. The capitalist mode of production, originally with the slave labor imported from Madagascar and Africa, developed Réunion, Mauritius, and Seychelles under European rule. In the creole Islands then in contrast to Madagascar and the Comoros the European dimension was not superimposed on indigenous societies from the outside but was an intrinsic part of their whole genesis and has remained an integral element of their economic, social, and cultural structures.

France played the dominant part in the uninhabited islands, where Réunion was the original centre of her presence almost from the first arrival of Europeans in the Indian Ocean. It is fairly certain that Arab and possibly Indian navigators had sighted the Mascareignes islands before the arrival of Europeans but there is no evidence of any settlement having taken place in Réunion before Richelieu "took possession" in 1642. With the exception of two brief British occupations Réunion has been continuously French since then. From Réunion the French moved into Mauritius in 1715 after the Dutch, who had occupied it on and off since 1638 had abandoned the island definitively five years earlier, possibly leaving behind a few runaway slaves in the forests. From Mauritius France established herself in the uninhabited Seychelles in 1770.

The original purpose of occupying the uninhabited islands was the
colonial trade between Asia and Europe and the control of that trade through the dominance of the Indian Ocean. Réunion and particularly Mauritius acquired great strategic significance for France when during the long Franco-British duel of the eighteenth century the fortunes of war turned against the French East Indian company in the sub-continent. The culmination of the French downfall occurred with the British conquest of the islands in 1809-10. Réunion was returned to France at the end of the Napoleonic wars but Mauritius, which then included the Seychelles, became a British crown colony.

From then on the Indian Ocean became a "British Lake" with the land masses around its shores more or less in British control - thus adding an anglo-saxon dimension to indoceanic civilization. France, nevertheless, thanks to the creole islands, was never completely absent from the ocean. In spite of a century and a half of British rule the creole "Frenchness" which marked the origins of Mauritius and Seychelles was retained. The British occupation of Mauritius and Seychelles was not followed by Britons coming to settle in the islands in any numbers. From Réunion France maintained contacts with the other creole islands. In periods of stress within the partnerships of British administrators and the plantocracies a kind of nationalism developed which spread to all classes of creoles, strengthening their allegiance to French culture. Variants of the same French-based Kreol language is spoken in Mauritius and Seychelles as in Réunion. The sense of belonging to the "sister islands" is very real among the peoples of what has been referred to as "Franconesia".1

The Sea in Decolonization

Decolonization was a policy of the West as well as a process reflecting the drastic alteration of the configuration of power in the world. As a policy, decolonization was the complement of "Containment". It was a form of appeasement of nationalism intended to retain the ex-colonies within the western world. The colonial powers groomed indigenous state-bourgeoisies to whom they transferred sovereignty. With decolonization the newly independent states would be encouraged on the one hand to join western military pacts "to contain" the Soviet Union as far inland within the Eurasian land mass as possible and, on the other hand, the state-bourgeoisies would not need much prompting by their western mentors to keep more radical elements at bay and "contain communism" internally.
On the Northern shores of the Indian Ocean the West was the more confident of the success of this decolonization policy in that the geo-strategic as well as the political factors were very promising. Enormous mountain ranges and deserts separated the colonies from "the soviet threat". The shape of the Indian sub-continent: a gigantic peninsula projecting into an ocean where the thalasocratic hegemony of the West would remain after decolonization was a further guarantee. The state-bourgeoisies of the Indian sub-continent were well entrenched; the capitalist mode of production had "taken off" and would stay in orbit the more surely as the economies of the newly independent states would remain part of the capitalist world market. Britain, the dominant colonial power of the Indian Ocean region, sharing the language and culture of the leading power of the Western block and remaining a centre of transnational capital, felt confident that the transfer of power to the state-bourgeoisies of its colonies would be the most effective form of "containment" in the changed world configuration of power.

Decolonization never meant relinquishing Western power at sea. On the contrary, the withdrawal of direct control from the rimland of Asia increased the importance of sea power for the West. With hegemony as sea the West could provide security to the state-bourgeoisies in power in the newly decolonized countries on the shores of the ocean, and when "containment" failed in the mainland of Asia sea power provided a fallback position. Well located in relation to the sea routes, the islands regained considerable strategic significance with the geopolitical shift of power to the Ocean as "containment" was breached in Eurasia.

It was much easier for the West to retain direct control of the islands than of the colonies on the mainland. While on the continents - when decolonization was delayed for too long - the frustrated would-be-state-bourgeoisies could adopt a radical posture, mobilize the peasants, and resort to guerilla warfare with good prospects of winning politically against the military more powerful forces of the colonial powers, this was not possible in the islands so long as the hegemony of the West at sea remained unchallenged.

At sea there are no guerillas. Small and scattered over a wide area of the Indian Ocean, the islands were very vulnerable to sea and air power where the superior technology of the West was really telling. Dependent on external economic exchanges the islands could also be starved into submission by western sea power. France and Britain between them - but seldom together - effectively isolated the islands long after the first wave of decolonization had swept through the northern rim of the Indian
Ocean. France had ruthlessly and successfully crushed a widespread but ill-organized nationalist uprising in Madagascar. In Réunion however France was to experiment with an original form of "decolonization" by making the island an integral part of herself as a département.

The State in Capitalist Development

Réunion, a creole island, was given the status of département to substantiate her variant of "decolonization" as the creation of Greater France. Ironically, it was the Communists who spearheaded the movement to integrate the island with France. The intentions of the left then was to use the institutions of metropolitan France to break the power of the local plantocracy and bring about a social and economic revolution in the island as part of a progressive France. Decolonization through integration with France however could only be revolutionary if the Communists were in power in Paris. The Cold War in Europe and the hot war in Vietnam isolated the Communists in French politics turning the integration of Réunion with France into a form of "decolonization" which benefitted the right in the island.

The collapse of the Fourth Republic and the return of General De Gaulle to office led to the winding up of the decolonization war in Algeria and the rapid independence of Black Africa. In changing course over decolonization however it was never the intention of De Gaulle to abandon the will for a French presence overseas. Grandeur delinked from colonial domination was reinterpreted to mean independence for France and a French présence everywhere in the world: a French présence in particular in those regions with which France had historical connections and which are receptive to her language and culture.

In the context of decolonization in the Indian Ocean the policy of the Fifth Republic was to take the form of, on the one hand, the cultivation of state-bourgeoisies in power in the newly independent states with a generous policy of co-opération in the military, economic, and cultural fields. On the other hand, France was to accelerate the départémentalisation of Réunion, making a sustained effort to transform the island into the showcase and hub of the French présence in the region.

The Fifth Republic stepped up départémentalisation by the massive transfer of the political, administrative, social, and economic institutions of France to Réunion. With the gathering strength of the Third World's voice at the United Nations, France had to demonstrate that départe-
mentalisation was a real and not a fictitious alternative to decolonization. Paris wanted to provide its numerous friends among the state-bourgeoisies of decolonization with evidence that Réunion remained French not because of any form of imposition from outside but because the islanders themselves wanted it through their self-determination freely expressed at elections and by their life style and standard of living.\(^3\)

Départementalisation however has been far more successful in making Réunion into a part of France in those dimensions which fall into the domain of the state than in others which the government do not control directly. The airport, the network of modern highways, the public buildings, the supply of electricity and of water, the hospitals, the schools, the university, are as good if not better than in France. The achievements are the more remarkable in that the physical geography of the island is harsh and forbidding. The Réunionais vote and are represented in parliament and the other institutions of the state on the same footing as the rest of the people of France. At the level of the state if there are discriminations they are more in favor of rather than against Réunion.

More than 60 per cent of the population of Réunion however are less than twenty years old. Départementalisation has provided schools and playgrounds but not the jobs when the youths reach working age. Every year more than twelve thousand new job-seekers come onto the labor market. The prospects of their ever finding work in Réunion is bleak. Already almost half of the active population is unemployed; of those unemployed 70 per cent are school leavers.

Unable to create productive employment in the island, départementalisation gives social security and unemployment benefits, drafts the males into the army for national service, provides civil service jobs for some; but the real policy devised to deal with unemployment and ease the political tension growing out of the large number of frustrated young adults – all have the vote at 18 – is systematic emigration to France.

Emigration to France is not without social problems. More males than females tend to go. The upset in the balance of the sexes this had produced in Réunion is not unconnected with the high rate of illegitimate births. Nor at the other end of the chain is it always easy for the young from a tropical island to adjust to a factory in the outskirts of Paris or Bordeaux. Some of the young migrants end up as delinquents.

The continuing economic crisis in the capitalist world, creating large scale unemployment in France, has led the Socialist government to slow
down the immigration from Réunion. The spectacular rise of the extreme right in France advocating the return of all “guest workers” to their countries of origins has further restricted the possibilities for the government to deal with the unemployment problem in Réunion through emigration. The bully boys of Le Pen do not distinguish between migrants from Réunion and foreigners. The closing of the migration doors makes the creation of jobs in the island the more urgent but to date départementalisation has been a complete failure on that front.

Départementalisation has modernized the sugar industry of Réunion but mechanization and centralization have meant a reduction in the number of people earning a living in this sector of the economy which has fallen steadily with improvements in production. Today the primary sector as a whole provides employment to less than 15 per cent of the active population. Sugar had to be further mechanized as government forced up wages by initially paying workers four to five times more than the private sector.

Outside of sugar there is little scope for productive employment. The massive investments in the infrastructure provided jobs in constructions for a time but have not led to development of manufacturing industries. In spite of all the incentives from the government, including subsidies, tax holidays, the superb infrastructure, cheap electricity, “assured political stability”, no new industry of any importance has been tempted to settle in Réunion.

A number of factors account for this failure of départementalisation to create productive employment. The size of the market is too small for industrialization of the import-substituting kind to go far. The lack of natural resources in the island and the high cost of transport to bring them in from outside are serious handicaps. The high salaries of the civil servants – double those in France – create demands for the kind of luxury French goods which it is cheaper to produce in France and export to Réunion than to produce in the island. The monopolies of the import firms and the transport companies also act against local production. Réunion, as a part of France, is within the common custom barrier of the E.E.C. The island cannot protect itself adequately – assuming that it would want to – from competition of goods produced in Europe.

Export-based industrialization on the Hong Kong model is at a disadvantage because of lack of natural resources, distance from the market in Europe, the monopoly of Air France and the high shipping charges of the Conference lines serving Réunion. But by far the biggest handicap for Réunion is the high cost of its unskilled labor. And that is a
function of *départementalisation*. For although there is a large surplus of labor on the island French legislation and wages paid by the government keep its price very high by the standard of the region. Wages in Réunion are aligned with those paid in France. The lowest wage which an employed person gets by law in Réunion for one hour's work is more than what a factory worker makes in an eight hour day in Mauritius. When the numerous obligations which firms have towards their employees under French legislation are taken into account as well, it is not surprising that the multinationals, beginning with the French based ones, do not set up shop in Réunion but go to Mauritius next door.4

The return of the left to power in France reflected a deep seated structural change in French society which made the Socialists stronger than the Communists for the first time. The strategy of the Socialists dominating the government has been to further weaken the right while digging the grave of the Communists. Over Réunion this strategy called for decentralization without appearing to weaken the *départemental* status. *Départementalisation* had given Réunion a much higher standard of living than that which prevails in the neighboring islands. Yet total dependence on France, unemployment, and living on state assistance engendered frustrations which provided the Communists with the continued basis of their strength in the island while they were on the way out in France. To weaken the Communists therefore the government had to reduce the dependence of the island, create productive employment and give the Réunionais a greater share in their own local government. To weaken the right likewise the government had to erode the basis of its electoral strength as guardian of *départementalisation*.

The government started with reforms of the political institutions which in turn, it argued, would make it possible to create productive employment on the island. In order not to give the right ground to argue that the reforms threatened the *départemental* status of Réunion however the changes were put in the framework of a long overdue reform of local government in France as a whole. The reforms went some way in the direction of the *Autonomie* program of the Communists.

The *automatic* program of the P.C.R. called for a local Assembly elected under a proportional representation system just as the government was now proposing. The fundamental difference between the Communists' program and the reforms proposed by the government, however, was that the *Autonomie* of the P.C.R. went with a *démocratique et populaire* Réunion. That is the island would eventually be transformed into a popular democracy under the Communists. It is difficult to see how
such a Réunion could remain a part of capitalist France. The autonomie which the Communists wanted with a popular democratic base would have created a crisis leading to separation from France and what is more independence under such circumstances would have been very different from that which obtains in the newly independent states of the region with state-bourgeoisies in power.

The right systematically and effectively opposed the government reforms in the local and national institutions. Opposition also came from the Socialists in Réunion who were split, with some going along, all be it with reservations, with the government line in the alliance with the Communists, while others would have nothing to do with anything which smacked of weakening the départementsal status, and especially not in the company of the P.C.R.

When the Assembly was finally elected the result was a stalemate with the right winning one seat more than the left but due to an accident the Presidency of the Assembly went to a Communist. The government however would not be able to use an Assembly with such an internal balance of power to push through its reforms. In any case the powers which the Assembly were to have under the original plan of the government were curtailed by the Constitutional Council in Paris on the ground that they would have made Réunion different from the other départements of France.

Even if the government had been more successful in getting its institutional reforms accepted it is doubtful that changes in public institutions would have led to economic development and the creation of productive employment in Réunion. The structural constraints flowing from the integration of an underdeveloped island of the Indian Ocean with the state of an advanced industrial society of the capitalist world at best could have been modified by the government reforms. It is not because the state has not had the will that Réunion has failed to “catch up” industrially. It is because there are limits to what the state can do about economics within the capitalist system. Indeed by putting more emphasis on social equality and by accelerating the alignment of social benefits in Réunion with those in France the government of the left made it even less likely that private capital would be attracted to the island.

Paradoxically Réunion’s failure to develop in spite of — indeed because of — the efforts of the state suits the interests of the neighboring islands. The generosity of the French state towards its départements gives the Réunionais the standard of living and the purchasing power of the citizens of an advanced industrial society. This rich market
is open under the EEC – ACP agreement to the competitive goods based on cheap labor in the surrounding islands contributing to their capitalist development. Economic interests thus reinforces cultural and security considerations in the islands willingness to accept départementalisation.

Part Two: Non-Alignment and Départementalisation

End of Western Thalassocracy

Unlike "containment" and decolonization the doctrine of non-alignment was not elaborated in the West but was an authentic contribution of the Indian Ocean region to international politics. Indeed the founding fathers of non-alignment pursued it in the teeth of oppositions from West and East alike. Non-alignment was not detrimental to the interests of the capitalist world. The West was disappointed that the decolonized states adopted non-alignment rather than joining western "containment" pacts but so long as its supremacy at sea was unchallenged the West could rely on economic forces and trust the state-bourgeoisies to "contain communism" within their own frontiers.

Admiral Gorchakof's "blue water" fleet has put an end to a thalassocratic hegemony unbroken since Vasco da Gamma and given a new significance to non-alignment. The Indian Ocean is now very much a stake of the Cold War. This new configuration of power at sea enhances the French position in the islands strengthening her resolve to pursue an Indian Ocean policy independent of the blocs.

The reaction of the littoral states to the entry of the Cold War in the Indian Ocean has been to object to the military presence of the Great Powers and to put forward projects to make the Ocean a Peace Zone. France however argues that she is not like any of the other Great Powers for through her département of Réunion she belongs to the Indian Ocean on the same ground as other littoral states. Furthermore, France argues, her présence in the Indian Ocean does not contribute to the Cold War for although she is a capitalist state she is not a member of either of the two military blocs and would not be automatically involved in any military confrontation in the region. Like the non-aligned states, the argument goes, France is against the bipolarization of the world into blocs and attaches great importance to national sovereignty and independence. The French présence in the Indian Ocean does not threaten any of the
littoral states and what is more France is ready and able to help the regional states maintain their independence and stay out of the blocs.

France was not involved in the redeployment of Western sea power in the Indian Ocean whereby London transferred her role to Washington. Paris was not even consulted in spite of her traditional interest in the region because the Anglo-saxons arrangements involved a "secret" deal in which Britain bought nuclear missiles at cut price from the United States in return for the dismemberment of the territory of Mauritius and the forceful displacement of some of its population to make way for an American base.

London was anxious that Paris should not know about the American missile deal at the time because De Gaulle felt strongly that the test of British sincerity over "Europe" would be her willingness to delink her nuclear force from the United States and bring it as a dowry in her wedding to the Continent. The loud "NO" of the French President to British entry into the Common Market was not unconnected with the revelation of the Anglo-American missile-for-island deal.

The American administration for its part was afraid that if Paris was told of the sordid deal whereby the British government was paid to remove the creole inhabitants of the Chagos from their home islands in order to militarize Diego Garcia she might object and then broadcast the news to Congress and the world's press. The Pentagon was the more nervous about the news leaking out in that the White House had been told that the islands were uninhabited. While the British government had used the American money to buy off a copra company and get the collaboration of the Mauritian politicians rather than alleviate the circumstances of the displaced islanders in the slums of Mauritius.8

France, as a Great Power, but outside the blocs, with the veto in the Security Council of the U.N., a leading state in the European Common Market, is well situated it is argued, to support the non-aligned states of the Indian Ocean in diplomatic forums and, with the economic crisis, to stand-by them in the international financial institutions. The non-aligned states can accept French support in the new configuration of power in the Indian Ocean with the knowledge that there are no alignment strings attached for it is in France's own interest that they remain outside of the blocs.7

France's arms exports, unlike those of the two Super Powers, go mainly to the non-aligned states, which are glad to find a supplier which does not commit them to either of the two world's blocs. France argues that her arms sales to the non-aligned states are conducive to stability
and peace in the world for they increase the national security of these states without drawing them into the Cold War between the Super Powers.  

The states of the Indian Ocean, with the Arab states in the forefront, get the lion’s share of French arms sales to the non-aligned and as most of this is transported by sea the buyers are keen that France’s presence on the routeways of the ocean ensures the safe conduct and deliveries of the cargoes. This is why the Arab states were anxious that France should keep a strong military presence in Djibouti after independence.

Djibouti stands on the African shore of the strait of Bab-el-Mandeb facing the island of Perim belonging to the Soviet-supported South-Yemen. The Arab states subsidize Djibouti where France retains her largest base in Africa. France uses Djibouti to keep watch over the back door of the Suez route and also as a staging post for flying reinforcements to Réunion. Long distance planes based in Djibouti patrol the Mozambique channel while the French navy go back and forth between Réunion – Mayotte – and Bab-el-Mandeb keeping a watchful eye on the arms routes while guarding the oil life line of Europe.

Europe remains heavily dependent on oil from the Arab states, the bulk of which is now transported on the Indian Ocean route through the Mozambique channel. The irreversible shift of the oil route from Suez to the Cape since the Six Days war has further enhanced the traditional French présence in the islands. Pending the day when “Europe” would have an oil policy distinct from that of America, France, in pursuing her own interests, safeguards the european oil route in the Indian Ocean.

Conflicts and Cooperation

I Réunion and the O.A.U.
Decolonization left France with the problem of reconciling départementalisation in Réunion with independence for its neighbors among islands on the oil route which have regained considerable significance for the Great Powers with the geostrategic shift to the ocean.

Two issues in particular have brought Paris into conflict with the island states: the status of Réunion which bears on the claim of France to belong to a decolonized, non-aligned, Indian Ocean and conflicts of a territorial nature which are the sequels of decolonization in the islands.

On the issue of principle regarding the status of Réunion, Paris very
early on took the position that the island is an integral part of France in the same sense that, for instance, Hawai is a part of the United States, through self-determination. The Réunion – as-an-integral-part-of-France position has never been challenged at the United Nations. Even with the radicalization of the General Assembly over decolonization with the entry of numerous newly independent states, with the passing of Resolution 1514 and with the formation of the Committee of 24, the status of Réunion has not been questioned.¹¹

Recently however France has had some difficulties over the status of Réunion in the African context. Since the foundation of the Organization of African Unity (O.A.U.) there has been a latent conflict between the objectives of that body which purports to "liberate" the whole of Africa including the islands from European rule and the status of Réunion as part of France. This came out into the open when Colonel Gadafi raised the issue at a meeting of the Organization. The French representatives in the African states were instructed to make clear the position of France in Réunion. Paris did not have to resort explicitly to threats of cutting off aid: the diplomatic "clarifications" were sufficient to persuade the overwhelming majority of the O.A.U. to reject the initiative of Tripoli. The only outcome of Libya's move was the setting up of an Ad-hoc-committee to monitor and report on developments in Réunion. In the years the Ad-hoc-committee has been in existence it has not been able to find sufficient material to make a case for the "liberation" of Réunion which could be taken up by the full Committee of Liberation, let alone at an O.A.U. Summit.

The difficulty for the O.A.U. is that the Communist party in Réunion is ambiguous on the issue of the status of the island, and the immediate neighbors of the département have no objections to the position of France in their midst. The Communists are in tune with the Moscow line that independence is a progressive step even when under a state-bourgeoisie, but the P.C.R. has not adopted a clear stand on the "liberation" of Réunion from "French colonialism". Autonomie can be interpreted as a départementaliste position even though démocratique et populaire implies an eventual break with capitalist France. In any case the P.C.R. has never asked to be recognized by the O.A.U. as a Liberation movement campaigning for the independence of Réunion.¹²

The P.C.R. has cultivated good relations with the radical parties and régimes in the islands, not because it wants to adopt their variants of decolonization in Réunion but in order to break out of the isolation in which it was kept by the government before the left returned to power in
France. The P.C.R. also uses its contacts in the other islands to explain the ambiguity of its position on independence, thus preempting the support which the radical régimes might otherwise give to the small *Mouvement Indépendantiste Réunionais* (M.I.R.) - and electorally insignificant movement.

The radical régimes and parties in the islands take their cue from the P.C.R. for the position they adopt over the status of Réunion. Madagascar and Seychelles have at times said that the presence of France in Réunion was a "historical anachronism". But this was always qualified by adding that it was not for Madagascar or for the Seychelles but for the people of Réunion to decide which status was good for their island. As France has always stressed that the status of Réunion rests on the self-determination of the islanders there was no real conflict so long as the Réunionais continue to vote to remain part of France.

In any case the radical régimes of the islands were delighted with the arrival of the left to power in France for it has enabled them to reconcile their sympathies for the P.C.R. with their interests in being on good terms with France. Even the more radical régimes now acknowledge openly the legitimacy of the status of Réunion as a part of France.13

Another reason - which of course remains unavowed - for the satisfaction of the radical régimes with the status of Réunion is that, notwithstanding the rhetoric, a Peoples Democracy in Réunion breaking off from capitalist France would not be in their interests. Réunion as a *département* leads France to do far more for the islands than she would otherwise do. The *départemental* status condemns Réunion to non-development and institutionalized dependence but it also provides the other islands with a rich local market for their products and tourists for their hotels.

**Il Madagascar and the islets of the Mozambique channel**

Decolonization has left a number of territorial issues which intermittently cause tensions between France and one or other of the island states. Four small uninhabited islets in the Mozambique Channel: Juan de Nova, Europa, Glorieuse, and Bassa de India were retained under French sovereignty and are claimed by Madagascar. Mauritius has inherited a long-standing claim against France for the islet of Tromlin to the east of Madagascar and the more substantial question of Mayotte opposes the Comoros state and Paris.

France kept the islets of the Mozambique Channel after a verbal agreement reached with the Government of Madagascar on the eve of
independence. The islets had not been part of Madagascar in pre-colonial times although it is possible that they may have been visited by fishermen from the coasts of the Great Island. The state-bourgeoisie remained very dependent on France throughout the duration of the First Malagassy Republic with practically all the modern sector of the economy in French hands. But following the revolution of May 1972 relations with France were put on a new footing with practically all foreign owned firms, banks, plantations, being taken over by the state. More significantly the French navy has had to evacuate its base at Diego Suarez and the paratroopers have had to leave Ivato.14

France has allowed the storm to pass and gradually has mended its bridges with the new rulers. Cultural relations have improved with co-opérents returning to the schools and the university of a country where the bourgeoisie remains bilingual in Malgache and French. French remains an indispensable tool for administration, technology, external relations, and access to modern culture. France has repatriated the unwanted settlers from Réunion and has written off for the most part the nationalized French properties. France has remained the principal source of external aid and with the world crisis Paris has been particularly generous to Madagascar in rescheduling the repayments of its heavy debt and supporting the island for grants from the E.E.C., the I.M.F. and the World Bank.

In keeping with her position over non-alignment France has shown benign understanding for the Tous Azimuts foreign policy of the new régime. The radicalization of Madagascar however coincided with the entry of the Soviet Navy in the Indian Ocean ending Western hegemony over the sea routes at the same time as the questions of territorial waters and Exclusive Economic Zones at sea acquired new significance in international politics. As Diego-Garcia has shown, small depopulated oceanic islands could have great strategic importance in the new world context. The Mozambique Channel islets which France had kept became more valuable as French strategic experts argued that small bases ricochets with air strips and stockpiles of equipment for rapid deployment forces would become increasingly useful in international crises.15

Two further considerations were involved in France's reluctance to transfer the islets to Madagascar. France felt that Madagascar would not be able either to prevent a foreign power such as the Soviet Union or South Africa from occupying the islets by force or resist pressures to hand them over peacefully. With the extension of Exclusive Economic Zones to two hundred miles it would be possible for the two radically non-
aligned states of Madagascar and Mozambique between them to close the Mozambique Channel to Western shipping on the ground of the ships causing pollution of their economic zones or on the ground of wanting to observe a strict neutrality in a crisis between the Super Powers. By retaining the islets under her sovereignty and extending her exclusive economic zones around them France denies them to other Great Powers, which might be tempted to take them over, and ensures at the same time that the Mozambique Channel remains open to European shipping.

To date the islets have not been militarized but France keeps a dozen paratroopers and Gendarmes on them as a trip-wire to deter invasions. Interestingly the islets have not been integrated with Réunion despite pressures to do so from politicians in the département. This possibly indicates that France intends to hand over the islets to Madagascar in the future and does not want to complicate the issue by making them a part of Réunion. The government of the left in France has better rapport with the radical régime in Madagascar which might pave the way for a solution of the dispute.\textsuperscript{16} France was the only Great Power which responded positively to Madagascar’s own variant of proposals for a Peace Zone in the region.

\textit{III The Comoros and Mayotte}

Mayotte is a much more important and pressing issue for France than the islets. Strategically located in the Mozambique Channel, the Comoros archipelago was decolonized at a time when the seaways and islands of the Indian Ocean had regained considerable importance in international politics. The splendid natural harbor of Dzaoudzi in Mayotte offered good possibilities for a naval base. It does not seem however that pressures from the admirals played a significant role in the decolonization moves which led to the separation of Mayotte from the rest of the archipelago. The French government in its decolonization policy for the Comoros had been anxious that the new state remained friendly with France after independence. Not least of the considerations was that a French naval base in the archipelago would not be very useful without the consent and collaboration of the new state. In the last stage of the decolonization process however the French government revised its policy of leading the archipelago into independence as one state by deciding that each one of the four islands would vote separately in the referendum for the independence constitution. Whereupon three of the islands declared themselves independent unilaterally before the
referendum and formed the Comoros state, while the fourth island, Mayotte, voted to remain with France.

The about-turn of the government in the decolonization of the Comoros was determined by considerations of French internal politics. The National Assembly in Paris was unwilling to support the government policy of overriding local opinion in Mayotte which had grown increasingly opposed to becoming independent as a part of a Comoros state. The government gave way, not wanting to go on confronting parliament on an issue of self-determination. Powerful groups in the National Assembly had taken position on self-determination being the rock base of France's decolonization standing and that without it the legitimacy of the status of Réunion would be questionable.

The French government exerts itself to bring Mayotte and the Comoros state together but so far all its efforts have foundered on the intransigence of the leaders in Dzaoudzi who have the overwhelming majority of the population with them in refusing to give up their French status. The people of Mayotte would like the island to be a département like Réunion but to date France has refused a status which would foreclose the unification of the archipelago and perpetuate the conflict with the Comoros state.¹⁷

As long as France stands by the principle of self-determination however the people of Mayotte have in fact a veto on her policy regarding their future - not unlike that which the people of the Falklands have on British policy. The problem of translating the principle of self-determination into decolonization policy is that the “self” once established determines subsequent policies. France, through considerations of internal politics, has allowed herself to become committed to the island of Mayotte as the unit of self-determination not unlike Britain which under parliamentary pressure became committed to the Falkland islands.

France has put off creating a naval base in Mayotte pending a solution of the status question. Ideally France would like to see Mayotte join a pro-French Comoros state collaborating in the construction of a naval base. French strategists however now argue that while a military base in the Comoros is desirable it is not essential for the defense of the oil route. In a crisis the giant tankers could take the route to the east of Madagascar thus avoiding the “choke point” of Mozambique and rejoining the Cape route off South Africa. Such a deviation would only add some four hundred kilometers to the total distance from the Gulf to the Cape with the advantage of keeping the super ships on the high seas
well outside the exclusive economic zones of local states. Military considerations in France's policies over the Comoros issue as in the case of the islets of the Mozambique Channel have the objective of denying the islands to other Great Powers as much as their necessity for her own strategic purposes. Were the islands to fall in the control of the Soviet Union they would provide Moscow with bases on the Cape route as well as jumping off points for the penetration of Africa. The policy of denying the islands to other Great Powers however demands the collaboration of the regional states which France is intent on maintaining.

The island states, although by no means enamored with the mercenary backed "feudalist" régime of Abdalah in Moroni, are anxious that France should rapidly bring Mayotte to join the Comoros state. The nondismemberment of colonial territories in decolonization is one of the axioms of the new states legitimized by the United Nations. The Mayotte precedent presents a threat to the territorial integrity of the new states for it is an attractive option for the peoples of the islands. Were France to give encouragement to secessionists movements the Mayotte's option could easily snowball and lead to the break up of archipelago states which have their territories separated by hundreds of miles of the Indian Ocean.

IV Mauritius, Rodrigues and Tromelin
Mauritius is a case in point. A creole society like Réunion originally created by France, the demographic and ethnic composition of the main island of Mauritius was drastically altered by the massive immigration of indentured Indians in the Nineteenth Century. This did not significantly affect the social and political structures of Mauritius, where the dominant creoles remained francophone and francophile. With decolonization however, Britain groomed a new, relatively anglophone, state-bourgeoisie, drawn from the descendants of the indentured Indians, to whom she transferred political power. The "dependencies" of Mauritius however, of which Rodrigues 560 kilometers away is the principal, remained very homogeneously creole and like the creoles of the main island are sentimentally attached to France. Rodrigues voted unanimously against independence as part of what the Roman Catholic islanders saw as a Hindu dominated Mauritius. A request by the representative of the islanders for Rodrigues to have the right to secede from the state of Mauritius possibly with the encouragement of départemental circles in Réunion, have continued to talk of Rodrigues breaking off from the state of Mauritius. France sends co-opérants to Rodrigues; French warships
call there and in the other "dependencies". If France were to encourage the creole politicians in their belief that she would underwrite the secession of Rodrigues the state of Mauritius could be in trouble.

Mauritius is conscious that it would not be difficult for France to step up her beet-sugar production and pressurize her European partners to buy E.E.C. produced sugar exclusively. Port-Louis also knows that France could easily instigate trouble with the creoles of Rodrigues. Mauritius however has responded very positively to French overtures since independence, replacing Madagascar as France’s "good Friend" in the region.20

Mauritius has been very careful in its handling of the dispute with France over the islet of Tromlin. Mauritius would probably not have quarreled with France over the small uninhabited distant Tromlin but for the question of the "dependencies" becoming salient in internal politics because of the role of the government in the loss of Diego Garcia and the deported Chagos islanders. Pressed by the M.M.M. opposition to regain all the territories of Mauritius, the Government has felt obliged to make a gesture over Tromlin, but not to go beyond what the Prime Minister has termed a "friendly dispute" with France.21

V Seychelles and a Community of the Indian Ocean Islands
The Seychelles were decolonized as part the redeployment of western strategic military power in the Indian Ocean. Britain had hesitated over the Seychelles as economic consideration led to several revisions of military plans in the process of handing over her role to the United States. Consequently the decolonization of the Seychelles was badly prepared and the archipelago was launched into independence with a Presidential régime resting on a unlikely coalition of left and right parties hastily put together by the British who, once the Americans were well entrenched in Diego Garcia, were anxious to cast the islands off. The British sponsored régime was overthrown in a bloodless coup a year later. The political instability of rushed decolonization had been further aggravated by the rapid transformation of the economy with the opening of an international airport and the arrival of large numbers of rich european tourists.

France was not surprised nor displeased that the francophile Prime Minister Rene had toppled "Jimmy" the playboy President who had been pressurized into independence by his British patrons. The Seychelles have no territorial disputes with France. Unlike Mauritius the people of the archipelago are homogeneously creole with a lot of af-
finities with Réunion and Rodrigues. France has cultivated the new radical régime by providing aid with the construction of a long distance tuna fishing fleet, the financing and staffing of a hotel school, the setting up of model farms. French co-opérants help in the schools, with planning economic and social developments, with the press and the radio. Air France brings tourists from France and from Réunion.

The radical régime felt threatened by possible foreign interventions on behalf of the deposed President Mancham and some of his supporters who have taken refuge in Britain and South Africa. The widely spread islands are vulnerable to attack by sea. The large number of flights landing at the international airport exposes the régime to a coup by mercenaries disguised as tourists. The régime at first hesitated to turn to France for security because of events in the Comoros. There Abdallah had been brought back and kept in power by the mercenaries of Bob Denard, well connected in South Africa. Since the attack on the Seychelles by mercenaries from South Africa, however, the radical régime has turned increasingly to France for arms and for experts to train the local forces. France also helps with policing the extensive exclusive economic zone of Seychelles.

France is eager to enhance her presence in the Seychelles. The radical non-aligned little state can be a useful asset in the region. If Mahé does not positively praise départemantalisation at least it can be depended upon to minimize its own and others criticisms of the status of Réunion. In this context the Seychelles playing host to the first Conference of Progressive Parties and Movements of the Islands of the Indian Ocean helped to take the edge off the more anti-French discourse of some of the delegations. Likewise Seychelles’ membership of the Ad-hoc sub-committee of the Liberation committee of the O.A.U. on Réunion can help to contain the anti-French thrust of the African Organization.

France does not object to the islands of the region drawing closer together and has welcomed the arrival of the Indian Ocean Commission. The more of an entity distinct from Africa the islands are the stronger is the French position that Réunion does not fall under the O.A.U. category of a parcel of Africa yet to be liberated. France is particularly keen to bring the creole islands together with Réunion to form a solid core of the French cultural presence which can then be linked with Madagascar and the Comoros in a larger Franceonesia. Such an entity would have the demographic potentiality and the complimentarity of resources to provide a more viable framework for economic development with the
help of France. It could also possibly ease the solution of the territorial disputes between France and the islands.24

France is what the islands in their different ways have in common. She created the creole societies where the French language has remained an integral part of creole culture. Unlike Madagascar and the Comoros the creoles have no precolonial living culture, their indigenous roots are more French than African or Asiatic. Without France the chances of the fragile creole dimension of the indianoceanic world surviving would be much reduced. In Madagascar and the Comoros Frenchness has been articulated with pre-colonial indigenous cultures. The presence of France in Réunion enhances the cultural hegemony of the French speaking state-bourgeoisies in Madagascar and the Comoros and links them with the creole islands.

France encourages Réunion to participate in regional inter-islands co­
operations. Paris however is not prepared to see Réunion becoming a member of the Indian Ocean Commission or any other similar bodies on the same basis as the other islands which are Sovereign states. Beyond the legal issue of sovereignty, however, is the political claim of France to belong to the Indian Ocean. France is very keen on regional co­
operations in which Réunion participates but as a part of France.25 When the regional states accept Réunion as France they accept France in their midst. The recognition of France as an Indian Ocean state by the non­
aligned radical states of the region strengthens her vindication of a special role in wider international politics.

Some Conclusions
France created the creole societies of the islands of the Indian Ocean but only Réunion remained French while Britain decolonized Mauritius and Seychelles which have retained their “Frenchness” in spite of a century and a half of British colonial rule. The option of decolonization in the form of transferring power to a state bourgeoisie was never seriously considered in the case of Réunion. Without a pre-colonial history there was no indigenous bourgeoisie to lead a nationalist movement and press for independence while the exploited classes sought integration with a progressive France to bring about social changes in Réunion. Thus historical, ethnic, social and political considerations led France to “decolonize” Réunion through the integration of the island in the Republic. Departementalisation has succeeded in making Réunion into an integral part of France at the social and political levels giving the
Réunionais the purchasing power of citizens of an advanced industrial society but at the price of the non-development of capitalism in the island. Paradoxically this strengthens départmentalisation while it contributes to the capitalist growth of the neighboring creole island states. These are the more willing to accept the départmental status of Réunion as France is led to do a great deal for them within the French-speaking world in an ocean where English remains the dominant European language. France defuses her territorial disputes with the islands and encourages them to come together with Réunion to form a viable Indian Ocean community.

The breach of “containment” in the rim land of Eurasia and the ending of the thalasocratic supremacy of the West have given a new significance to non-alignment while renewing the importance of oceanic islands in international politics. The Indian Ocean is now a stake of the Cold War across which flows the oil life line of Europe. France is not involved in the western deployment of strategic nuclear weapons in the Indian Ocean aimed at the heartland of the Soviet Union but as a capitalist state she is committed to the “containment” of communism and the safeguarding of Europe’s oil route. These commitments however are not necessarily in contradiction with support for the non-aligned states of the Indian Ocean, which are themselves keen on the free flow of oil, the purchase of arms from Europe, and are often the more merciless in repressing communists at home when cultivating good relations with the Soviet Union.

France is of the West but with a difference: she wants to have a special role in international politics independent of the two military blocs and she sees her relationship with the non-aligned states of the Indian Ocean as contributing to her rank in the world. The island states recognition of France not as an external power but as a littoral state of the Indian Ocean through her département of Réunion adds to the legitimacy of her position in the region.

It can be argued that the Indian Ocean would be more peaceful without the presence of the Great Powers. But the Cold War has now penetrated the Indian Ocean and the strategically located islands can no longer escape the ambitions of the Great Powers. France because of Réunion provides the islands states with the possibility of not being further drawn into the Cold War. To that extent the presence of France in the Indian Ocean does not detract from the region’s search for its identity as a zone of peace.
Notes


2. On the early stage of *départementalisation* in Réunion see the first part of M. Robert *La Réunion, combats pour l'autonomie* (Paris, 1976).

3. Gaullist policy for Réunion was dominated by Monsieur Debré. One of the “grave diggers” of the Fourth Republic and the “brain” behind De Gaulle’s return to power, Michel Debré was the first Prime Minister of the Fifth Republic, then Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister of Defence. Elected First deputy for Réunion in a by-election in 1963, M. Debré has been continuously re-elected with large majorities over the communist opposition ever since. M. Debré has done more than anyone to bring Réunion to the attention of the French ruling élite. An outspoken nationalist M. Debré is an *enragé* of *départementalisation* for Réunion. He has written a number of articles and a book making a strong plea for a vigorous French policy in the islands region of the Indian Ocean. See Michael Debré, *Une politique pour la Réunion* (Paris, 1974) and among the articles especially Michael Debré, “Ocean Indien 1976, présence de la France gage de la paix et de l’espérance” in the special number of *La Pensée Nationale* (Paris, 1975). Under the Presidency of Valéry Giscard d’Estaing the Gaullists led by Debré retained influence in Réunion and the island received the further attention of the Prime Minister, Monsieur Barre, himself a native of Réunion. Against these high powered personalities on the right the Communists had Paul Vergès, a formidable politician with a long family record of struggles for the underdogs of the island, well connected in the international communist movement and a French representative in the European Economic Community.


5. In the elections for the new Regional Assembly the left wing parties got 50.72% of the votes cast and 22 seats, while the right got 49.26% of the votes and 23 seats. The right got one more seat than the left because of the split votes of the socialists. See *Le Monde* 22 February 1983 for the breakdown of the results. The President of the new Assembly, M. Hoarau, is the owner of a cinema chain specialising in pornographic films *Le Monde* 1st March 1983. For the curtailment of the powers of the Regional Assembly see *Le Monde* 27 August 1984.


7. See the article of French minister of Cooperation J.-P. Cot, "Winning East-West in North-South" in Foreign Policy, 46 Spring 1982. On Mitterand's support for non-alignment see Le Monde 9 March 1983. For interview with Mrs Ghandi and the article by A. Fontaine on India see Le Monde 24 March 1983 on the occasion of the Non-Aligned summit in New Delhi.


11. Réunion was made a département of France shortly after the birth of the United Nations and in one of the rare communications with the international organisation concerning the island the Government argued that: "It would be no more possible in this case to speak of dependence than it would be in the use of a province in relation to the state of which it formed part" UN, General Assembly, 915, 4th June 1949.

12. *Journal officiel de l’Assemblée Nationale* (Paris) Nos. 34, 25 May 1978, p. 2041; 53, 26 June, 1978, p. 3502; and 79, 30 July 1978, p. 5330. At the beginning of 1982 a delegation of the M.I.R. was received by the Ad hoc Sub-Committee which acknowledged that its file on Réunion was very thin and took note that the M.I.R. was the only grouping in Réunion which militates for Independence. L.O.I. (24) 10 April 1982 and L.O.I. (25) 17 April 1982.

13. For the view of Seychelles see interview with President Rene during a visit to Paris in *Le Monde* 18 February 1982. Ratsiraka during a recent visit to Paris seeking a reshuffling of Madagascar’s debt of $1.4 millions has reaffirmed his sympathy for the government. *Le Monde* 24 February 1984. During the M.M.M. period in office which coincided with the arrival of the left to power in France Mauritius became the favourite destination of French cabinet ministers L.O.I. (17) February 1982. Contrary to mainland Africa, where the régimes which the French right have supported were well entrenched, and M.S.-P. Cot in particular found them difficult, the new Socialist ministers found themselves in tune with Third World radicals who were in power in all the island states except the Comoros. Abdalah with his mercenaries felt left out but hastened to declare that, in spite of Mayotte, the Comoros were wedded to France. *Le Monde* 15–16 May 1983. L.O.I. (20) March 1983. L.O.I. (36) 3 July 1982.


Declaration of Minister Lemoine in Le Monde 17 February 1984. The Minister had stressed the rivalry from South Africa as well as the Soviet Union which France faces in the Mozambique channel.


Le Militant (Mauritius) 16 November 1977. Tromlin was originally claimed by Madagascar but following discussion with the M.M.M. the Great Island has agreed to let Mauritius try to persuade France to return the islet. For the respective positions of France and Mauritius see: A. Oraison and F. Millo, ‘A qui appartient le recif de Tromlin?’ in Annaire des Pays de l’Ocean Indien Vol. 5, (Aix-en-Provence, 1980) and P.R. Chon-Leung, ‘L’ile Tromlin, territoire mauricien’ in the same volume of the Annuaire.


23. Bod Denard is also known as Colonel Mustafa Mhadjoub and has ‘served’ in the Yemen and Katanga before his appointment in the Comoros. Denard is a friend of Mike Hoare the British mercenary who led the attack on the Seychelles from South Africa. There are indications that at some point Denard as well as Hoare may have been connected with a scheme, in which a well known Saudi Arabian arms buyer was involved, to make the Seychelles a centre of the international arms trade. The radical government in the Seychelles has done its utmost to raise the level of consciousness of the people to the danger of a mercenary-led invasion of the islands, but the President is reported to have been very disappointed by the performance of the defence forces during the attack on the airport later followed by a mutiny of part of the army. See L.O.I. (28) 8 May 1982, (31) 29 May 1982, (18) February 1982, (43) 21 August 1982. The French government has denied any involvement with the mercenary-led coup in the Comoros: Assemblée Nationale, 22 June 1978. In an interview to the press Abdallah said: “They are not mercenaries but coopérents”. Le Quotidien de la Réunion, 5 March 1981. Recently Abdallah, fearing that with the left in power France might turn against him, has been cultivating contacts with South Africa L.O.I. (48) 25 September 1982.

24. The Indian Ocean Commission is supported by the E.E.C. with French backing. M. Cot has confirmed France’s willingness to participate in regional organisations and has suggested that India as well as France should join with Mauritius for oceanographic research with a view to exploiting in common the reserves of polymetalic nodules on the sea bed around the islands. L.O.I. (45) 4 Sept. 1982. Important quantities of nodules have been found by the French research ship “Marion-Dufresne” off Reunion and the Indian ship “Gaveshani” also found quantities off Rodrigues. France and India have both signed the treaty on the new Law of the Sea providing for an Authority to control the exploitation of the sea bed of the High Seas. L.O.I. (37) 10 and 17 July 1982.