

France and its borders: a singular geopolitical situation

France's national borders and other boundaries

Borders are natural or virtual lines marking the boundaries between two different nations and comprising sections known as dyads. These lines mark the limits of the jurisdictions of the individual sovereign States according to international public law and are governed, as a general rule, by treaties registered with the UN.

France, like the other 26 members of the European Union (EU), has two types of border, namely national and European. Its European borders are several in type and number:

- those of the Union as a whole;
- those of the 'euro' zone (the 20 countries sharing the same currency);
- the Schengen Area, which includes four non-EU Member States (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland) but excludes Ireland, Bulgaria, Romania and Cyprus.

Although the European Union is not a State, its members share the common objective of ensuring that the Union is "an area of freedom, security, and justice without internal borders", which as such has its own 'external borders', as set out in Article 3 of the Treaty on European Union¹. With its Member States, the Union is required to police these borders and thereby control migratory flows (through the joint border and coastguard agency Frontex, a dedicated information system, etc.).

In France, a country with its own nuclear deterrent, external security is linked with a military alliance (NATO) that has 28 European members (Finland and Sweden are candidates). France co-guarantees the automatic intervention system as stipulated in Article 5 of the NATO Treaty².

France is also one of the ten founding members of the Council of Europe established in 1949. This organisation today comprises 47 members, two of which – Russia and Turkey – are Eurasian (though Russia was excluded in March 2022). Its institutions include a European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) and are tasked with guaranteeing fundamental rights and freedoms in member countries.

In keeping with its commitment to collective security in Europe, France launched a **European Political Community** initiative in 2022. This is open to all States on the continent³, and its 44 members (Russia and Belarus were not

¹ In 2023, the EU had a surface area of 4.2 million km² (the equivalent of that of the Indian subcontinent) and 450 million inhabitants (compared with 750 million for Europe as a whole, and 340 million for the United States). The EU, which post-Brexit now counts 27 Member States, remains one of the world's three largest economic and trading powers. It has 12,640 km of external land borders with 20 non-EU countries, 10 of which are landlocked. Its maritime borders represent a total of 67,600 km of coastline. The EU accounts for 3% of the world's landmass, but 30% of the world's dyads.

² **Latest developments regarding borders in Europe** are naturally linked with the war in Ukraine and other Russian threats. The conflict has prompted close collaboration between NATO, the European Union and France, all non-belligerent parties who stand united with Ukraine, providing it with arms, equipment, training for military personnel, and intelligence. Issues in the Balkans remain unresolved. There also maritime issues with post-Brexit United Kingdom. From the French perspective, the main problems are fishing in the Channel and the North Sea and the situation regarding transiting migrants embarking from places on the French coast, a problem again discussed by the two countries in March 2023. From the EU perspective (shared largely by France), there is the complex and sensitive issue of Northern Ireland.

³ **Borders in times of crisis**. Borders are fundamental to issues such as individual freedoms and rights, national sovereignty, social equilibrium, economic dynamism and the protection of both migrants and residents. Since the mid-1970s, debate has been raging over whether borders should be protected or left open and even over whether they should exist. Some criticise border controls on the grounds that they are inadequate, others consider them outdated. Since the 2000s, under the effects of globalisation, societies in France and elsewhere in Europe have been plagued by endless crises and challenges affecting borders and their purpose (opening, protection, policing, bans): stagnation, inflation, competitiveness, the pandemic, other health issues and pollution, the environment, climate, energy, migration, digital transition and scientific change, disruptions

invited) met for a second time in Chisinau (Moldova) in June 2023. France is in favour of a **Union** of “security and foreign affairs” as a step towards a **common defence capability**. But the prospect of further enlargement and closer relations between States is met with reluctance, particularly in eastern and northern parts of the EU

A. French borders and how they were established: an unusual tale

From national identity to European ambition; from colonial empires to French overseas territories

1. France is among the globe’s oldest nations. Its European land and sea borders were established over a period of 1,000 years, from the Treaty of Verdun in 843 to the annexation of Savoy and Nice in 1860, and involved a mixture of wars, negotiations, monetary transactions, marriages or plebiscites. From the West Francia of the Carolingians, the conquests of the Capetian kings, mainly in northern, eastern and southern parts of the Empire, were instrumental in constructing the nation and its national identity. The long years spent bitterly awaiting the chance to reclaim the Alsace-Moselle region lost to Germany in 1871 only served to strengthen the link between borders and identity. The concept of the nation was most marked at the country’s borders in times of war, starting with the Battle of Bouvines (near Lille in northern France) in 1214, when Capetian king Philip Augustus marshalled feudal knights and vassals to fight off Emperor Otto IV, or the Battle of Valmy in 1792 against the Austro-Prussian army which wanted to restore the French monarchy and where the French rallied to cries of “*Vive la Nation!*” (Long live the nation).
2. Apart from minor adjustments to the boundary between France and Italy in 1947⁴, France’s borders have remained unchanged since 1919 and are therefore the same as in 1860. **The notions of Nation, people, fatherland, territorial unity and borders became irrevocably linked during the French Revolution.** France’s national boundaries are ancient and have long remained stable in contrast to those of its Western European neighbours and of Central and Eastern European countries.
3. After the Second World War, this stability was combined with **new French ambitions**, with the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951, and the European Economic Community in 1957, which naturally equated with **new borders**, namely those of the **European Union**, the name officially adopted in 1992. Since then, the Union has expanded in size and scope. In scope, in the form of free movement, common policies, for example customs and monetary policies, a resolute commitment to democracy and the rule of law. In size in that the European Union has gone from six to 27 countries (post-Brexit), expanding essentially to the East following the fall of the USSR in 1991. Europe was always the symbol of the dividends of peace in the West. Today, applications for EU membership from countries such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova are indicative of the threat to peace represented by Russia.
4. **The borders of the EU coexist with those of its Member States**, in configurations depending on the powers conferred on the Union by successive treaties. Border controls in the individual States may be tightened or re-established in the event of emergencies (e.g. migrant flows or the Covid pandemic), under the supervision of the Council of State for France plus that of the European Court of Justice for the EU. Migrants and asylum-seekers can defend their rights at the European Court of Human Rights.

to major public services, dysfunctional democracies, violence, armed conflicts in Europe and at borders with Asia. The threat to authority is very real, a factor that undermines the efforts of the national and EU authorities. In France, there is distinct lack of confidence in the European Union, the country even rejecting the proposed European constitution in 2005. That said, according to some polls, confidence levels would seem to be rising, reaching 50% in 2022. Many people still worry about security, the extent of border protection, its purpose and methods (shades of the Maginot Line, perhaps?). War returned to Europe in 2022, while 2015 saw renewed fears of African exodus and a mass influx of refugees from the Middle East. In February 2023, eight States reported details of the installation of walls, fences, and cameras to the Commission. In Europe and in the individual States, borders are a matter for the Executive: in 2023, the acuteness of border issues begged questions about the role of parliaments and the courts.

⁴ following a plebiscite, the communes of Tende and La Brigue became part of France and the borders between France and Italy moved to follow the ridgeline of the Alps.

5. Two colonial empires, largely though not entirely successive, that emerged during the 16th and 19th centuries extended France's borders to other continents. **Decolonisation**, essentially between 1954 and 1962, and which coincided with the birth of Europe, left France with 12 overseas territories scattered across the world.
6. Both in Europe and in its relations with its colonies, **France's borders** were initially designed not as areas for interaction, cooperation and development, but as means of **protecting** national goods and products, including agricultural produce. The Anglo-French free-trade agreements signed in 1783 and 1860 were exceptions attesting to this state of affairs. France has never been an emigrant country.

B. Extensive maritime borders and French territories worldwide

7. While France may be the world's seventh-largest economy, considered solely in relation to its land borders that total 4,150 km in length (2,900 km in Europe), the country has all the appearance of a middle-sized State and, as such, ranks as in 43rd position worldwide.
8. **France shares borders with 35 States, more than any other country, and controls the second-largest maritime area in the world**, with an EEZ (Exclusive Economic Zone) spanning 10.2 million km² under the game-changing 1982 Montego Bay Convention. Including extensions to the continental shelf beyond the 200 nautical-mile limit⁵, French waters cover nearly 11 million km². Its surface area is therefore 95% maritime, with most of these waters located in the Pacific Ocean (5 million km² in Polynesia, 1.45 million in New Caledonia). It has another 2 million km² in the Antarctic Ocean (the French Southern and Antarctic Lands, TAAF), and 11 of its 12 overseas territories are islands or archipelagos⁶.
9. Oceans constitute some 71% of the Earth's surface. **Maritime sovereignty** extends to the surface and volumes of national waters, the seabed and the sub-bottom layers. Oceans offer a wealth of potential future animal, plant, mineral, and hydrocarbon **resources**. The sea's surface and its depths offer the potential for new sustainable solutions to meet energy needs. Aside from the substantial cost and ecological implications of these solutions, France has high hopes with regard to the economic possibilities of a "**new underwater frontier**". In March 2023 international negotiations were completed in the United Nations on the draft of a treaty governing high-seas resources, which only represent 60% of the total surface area of all the earth's waters, the agreement then being adopted by consensus in June 2023.
10. **France is the only country with territories in the three main oceans**, Atlantic, Indian and Pacific and therefore has neighbours in countries in Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, and Oceania. France also has a foothold in Antarctica through the TAAF and the claimed territory of Adélie Land. It is the only

⁵ Territorial waters, over which a coastal state exercises full sovereignty, have been extended from 3 to 6, and then to 12 nautical miles. These lie beyond internal waters: lagoons, deltas, river mouths, etc. The contiguous zone, which falls under the coastal state's police powers, extends a further 12 nautical miles beyond the territorial waters. The EEZs (Exclusive Economic Zones) can stretch up to 200 nautical miles from the coast, and are in fact not just economic, but also strategic and geopolitical. Extensions to an EEZ can go as far as 350 nautical miles, but only for seabed and sub-bottom layers. There are no restrictions on shipping movements, including in territorial waters, albeit under the authority of the adjacent country. The continental shelf is a submarine extension of the adjacent continent, and is the shallow margin of the deep ocean basin linking the upper continental slope with the shoreline and terminating, on the ocean side, by the so-called shelf break. Since the United States has not subscribed to the Montego Bay Convention, it does not benefit from the territorial extension clauses, with the result that France has the largest maritime domain of all the signatories.

⁶ French Guiana, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Saint Barts (in the Atlantic Ocean), and Réunion and Mayotte (in the Indian Ocean) form the outermost regions of the EU. Saint Pierre-et-Miquelon and Saint-Martin in the Atlantic Ocean; the French Southern and Antarctic Lands (TAAF) in the north of Antarctica; New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and Wallis & Futuna in the Pacific are Overseas Countries and Territories (OCTs) all associated with the European Union. The term "outermost territories" is not ideal, since it suggests that these territories are situated at the furthest limit of continental identity and solidarity, when in fact they could be key symbols of the global reality that is Europe. Dissociating part of French overseas territories from Europe would not go unnoticed. Instead, Europe could embrace all the distinctive features of each overseas territory, the citizens of these "countries" also being EU citizens.

European country that shares a border—through Brazil and Suriname — with countries in the Americas. The political and economic focus point is moving towards the Pacific and the Indian Ocean. France has a foothold in the Indo-Asian Southern Hemisphere through Réunion, French Polynesia, New Caledonia, and Wallis & Futuna, thereby interfacing with both global (United States, China, India) and emerging (Indonesia, South Africa) powers. It is also well-established in the Northern Hemisphere, at the Atlantic maritime boundaries of the United States and Canada, transatlantic links being the strongest, as evidenced by the war in Ukraine.

11. **The French Navy roams the world's oceans.** In theory, oceans are freely accessible to allcomers; in practice, they are frequented by only a handful of fleets able to operate in all corners of the globe, including with nuclear-powered submarines, in the case of France. **Nuclear deterrence should not be hamstrung by borders.**
12. **Physical and virtual borders.** Like all other nations, France has to contend with the growing virtual reality of cyberspace developments. Internet extends well beyond physical boundaries. Some virtual barriers can be established to exert control over cyberspace (digital borders, technopolicing). For France, the target is that of **featuring among the world's the leading cyber-defence proponents.**

C. French expansionism and use of the French language around the world.

13. Today's **French overseas territories** are what remains of the two successive only partially dismantled colonial empires. They are a combination of the **post-1945 and 1958** desire to pursue the process of **French expansionism**, thousands of miles from mainland Europe, a desire rooted in the French concept of the Nation ascribable to the French Revolution and Ernest Renan and a determination **to unite the French people and to foster a single French society**, regardless of individual differences. In this spirit, the **French overseas territories** are keen to offer their neighbours borders conducive to interaction and cooperation.
Overseas territories are generally small in size, but French Guiana is actually the largest of all the French regions (83,000 km²). Population numbers tend to be low, but Réunion has 900,000 inhabitants for 2,500 km², and the French West Indies 800,000 inhabitants. Some borders are under threat. On three successive occasions, New Caledonia has staged referendums regarding independence but the country has each time voted to remain part of the French Republic. In April 2023, the pro-independence party that emerged victorious in the territorial elections in French Polynesia. At the time of writing, the developments planned by the newly elected President and his government remained an unknown quantity, particularly over maritime issues and the seabed, and an analysis had yet to be made of the reasons for this victory following a campaign focussed on social issues. The Comoros are claiming sovereignty over Mayotte, while Madagascar has staked a claim to a number of smaller Islands scattered across the Indian Ocean.
14. Constitutionally, the Republic has one official language, French, which is shared by its nationals around the world. While **there are no French-speaking borders as such, there is a large French-speaking community**, estimated to be the world's fourth largest, after English, Mandarin and Hindi. 540 million people live in countries in which French is the official or a commonly spoken language. This figure is expected to rise to over one billion by 2050.

D. Metropolitan France and its substantial assets

15. **In Europe, France has the largest territory of the 27 EU States:** 550,000 km² (or 638,000 km² including the overseas territories), making it bigger than Ukraine. It is also the only **State with four maritime boundaries:** one pointing towards coastal trading ports on the North and the Baltic Seas, one facing the Americas and Africa, and another with Mediterranean countries, North Africa and the Middle East.

France shares land borders with eight other countries. Five belong to the European Union, the eurozone and NATO: Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, and Italy (all founding members of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951) and Spain. Six (these five plus Switzerland) are part of the Schengen Area. Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, and France are officially home to various of the European institutions. The remaining two neighbouring countries, the Principality of Monaco, and the Principality of Andorra, are microstates that have a special relationship with France and agreements with the EU. All eight are members of the Council of Europe. France shares maritime boundaries with Belgium, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom. With Spain, it has two boundaries, Morocco and Spain being the only States, along with France, which border both on the Atlantic and the Mediterranean.

16. **Europe's geographical centre of gravity has moved eastwards. France's most important immediate neighbours (Germany, Italy, Spain, and Great Britain) are still the most heavily populated and wealthiest on the continent.** Close ties have been established with the first three of these mainland countries and consigned to ambitious treaties. Despite Brexit, communications channels with the United Kingdom, France's European alter ego in the UN Security Council, remain open over global diplomacy and defence.
17. **Through its many borders, France has several overlapping European cultures.** It shares common languages with Flanders (Dutch-speaking), Germanic countries, Catalonia, the Spanish Basque Country, and Celtic nations such as Brittany. The 'regional' languages identified in the French Constitution fall into four categories, one of which is non-Indo-European; a unique situation in itself.

E. Numerous internal borders and plentiful cross-border cooperation

18. The **internal borders of metropolitan France** are many in number, with around 30 international airports. The Paris airport hub is the largest in Europe after London. International railway lines and stations and cross-border tunnel portals (with Great Britain or Italy) also have national border status.
19. The borders between two States (referred to as dyads) form a line. However, France's land borders are not just lines but areas where **cross-border cooperation is rife**. Built-up areas merge to form a continuum at the borders with Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, and Monaco. Bilateral or multilateral treaties exist to govern **regional cooperation** involving the local authorities, in various areas, types and scales. There are treaties that reflect the policies of the European Council and the European Union, which largely eliminate border constraints.

F. Air, space, and underground

20. **French airspace** (the space immediately above its land and maritime territories) is **one of the biggest in the world** (Australia being the largest). Astronauts at NASA consider the border between air and space (which cannot be appropriated) to be located at an altitude of 80 or 100 km where orbital dynamic and aerodynamic forces are in balance. National airspace is controlled by the armed forces.
21. **France and, by extension, Europe, are space powers.** French Guiana, close to the equator in South America, has a rocket-launching facility from a dedicated pad, modernised in 2021, the like of which only exist in a handful of places in the world (notably in China, the United States and Russia).
22. **In civil law, landowners also own what lies above and beneath their property.** Ownership rights extend downwards in a cone shape towards the centre of the Earth. However, in France, the Mining Code specifies a number of cases governed by national policies, geothermal energy and mineral or hydrocarbon deposits being good examples. This explains why, unlike in the United States, shale gas fracking is generally forbidden.

G. A legacy⁷ and a responsibility for the future

France's borders are not those of a medium-sized continental power, unaffected by the political affairs of other continents and untrammelled by the past. They shape a nation with a worldwide influence that cares about the planet, its prosperity and its conservation, that is keen to pursue cooperation and trade exchanges across the globe and fully familiar with best practices and the profiles of its partners. French national borders are one of the assets of a country that has managed to maintain its diplomatic and military power, with nuclear deterrent capabilities and a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. These borders are a challenge, not only for France but also for Europe.

France has to distribute its limited resources, in particular those of its armed forces, police and customs authorities wisely in order to protect large areas and strategic maritime routes. A lucid approach needs to be adopted to actions in its overseas territories. These territories tend to be small in size and with modest populations. They may be isolated or appear to be relatively insignificant in thriving areas. They are demanding. A winning socio-economic model still needs to be found in some cases and tweaked in others for each of the French overseas territories. France's influence in the world will be contingent on striking a proper societal balance in these countries. **“Development boundaries”** are the borders of French territory considered within its economic environment, and which is usually eligible for European aid. Its geopolitical situation forces France to be enterprising in Europe, active in the world and in all important diplomatic, economic and commercial negotiations, especially those on peace, the climate, space, the seabed, and, although now contested, the development of mutually profitable intercontinental free trade areas. France must play an exemplary part in the fight against ocean and sea pollution.

Can France still be expected to extend its influence beyond its borders, as in the era of Enlightenment, in the name of the universalism it still claims to embody and defend, a universalism that should be given due recognition by the United Nations? Perhaps. Culture is one area that immediately springs to mind, since it is vital to combine the striking qualities of individual countries with that of humankind in general. UNESCO has its headquarters in Paris and its Director General is a Frenchwoman. Of the EU countries, Italy, Spain, France and Germany rank among the top five in the UNESCO World Heritage List.

⁷ Legacies are a two-way street. While France may have “evolved”, it has also been on the “receiving end” and has been enriched and shaped by those who have ventured across its borders. Leaving aside periods of occupation (those after 1815, 1871 and 1914 in the north-east, and the Nazi occupation that lasted for several years), a number of different groups have settled within its national borders, not least the Bretons (from Great Britain), the Saracens (particularly in the 8th and 9th centuries), the Normans (from the 9th to the 11th centuries), and the English, all of which invaded a territory peopled by Celtic tribes that had moved into the area from places beyond the Rhine and the Danube a few centuries before the Common Era (CE) and which were to come up against the Ligurians and Iberians to the south.

After the Celts and, in some localities, the Greeks, and after the Romans came the Germanic peoples, more particularly the Franks, who forced their way across the Rhine and infiltrated Gaul. Borders were pushed south and eastwards by invaders mainly from the east. France lies at the western extremity of a subcontinent extending from the great Russian Plain, the Urals, the Caspian Sea and the Carpathians. The migrations of workers and their families, at times whole villages, during the 19th and 20th centuries were prompted by France's decision to open its boundaries, although no specific policy as such existed until after Liberation. These migratory flows were designed to offset long-standing chronic population shrinkages. Migrants came from the east (Poland) and south (Spain, Portugal) of Europe, and after 1975, mainly from French or formerly French countries in north and sub-Saharan Africa. France is located at one of Europe's western borders but also at one of its southern borders.

Today, migrants despatched the Mediterranean by people smugglers unfazed by the risks to their victims' lives rarely arrive in French ports. They tend first to head for mainland Italy or the Italian islands²², especially those fleeing Libya, Tunisia, and the Mashriq, or for ports in Greece, Malta, Cyprus and Bulgaria. All this begs the issue of solidarity among EU Member States. Repatriation of irregular migrants is particularly relevant in the case of North and other African countries.

Net migration across French borders is around 200,000 people per year, which is 0.3% of France's mainland population (arguably less, given the number of deaths). This, in itself, is a major demographic factor in a country where a mere 700,000 births were recorded in 2022. The number of irregular migrants expelled from the country varies between 20,000 and 30,000, in other words 3% of all irregular immigrants, of which there are an estimated 900,000.

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