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Geopolitics of the French Language

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SYNOPSIS

French is the fifth most widely spoken language in the world. Over 320 million speakers globally and expected to double in the next 30 years due to Africa's growing population. In this context, l'Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, a multilateral institution centred around the use of French language, plays a key role, bringing together 93 member states and governments, which meet every two years to discuss shared goals and cooperation.

COMMENTARY

Following the 19th Francophonie Summit held in France on October 4 and 5, 2024, this article takes a closer look at the purpose and significance of this unique organisation. Often viewed as a remnant of French colonialism and criticised for its ambiguous membership criteria, the OIF still manages to unite dozens of political head of states members from across five continents. Far from being solely a cultural forum, this year's summit brought to light several political issues, underscoring the organisation's relevance to the international stage.

With the next summit set to take place in Asia, there is a growing case for Singapore to engage with the organisation.



Image from Organisation internationale de la Francophonie

Once a prominent diplomatic language spoken by the elites throughout the world in the 18th and 19th centuries, the French language has since lost some of its influence to English. However, the use of French is steadily increasing worldwide, growing from 106 million speakers in 1985 to [330 million](#) in 2024. By 2050, the number of French speakers could exceed [700 million](#), potentially making it the third most spoken international language after English and Mandarin, ahead of Spanish and Hindi. Notably, 85% of these speakers are expected to be Africans.

French remains a working language in major international organisations like the UN, NATO, and the Olympic committee. The language even has its own multilateral organisation, the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF), which today consists of 93 states and governments (54 full members, 7 associate members, and 33 observers).

Francophonie is not France, but a mini-United Nations

Founded in 1970, the OIF's mission is to promote the French language, enhance cultural and linguistic diversity, foster peace, democracy and human rights, support education and research, and develop economic cooperation within the French-speaking community. The OIF functions as a "[mini-UN General Assembly](#)," with its political bodies (the Summit of Heads of State and Government, the Ministerial Conference, and the Permanent Council), its Secretariat general, its parliamentary body, and its university (Université Senghor in Alexandria, Egypt).

The Francophonie serves as a soft power tool with international reach, particularly for France, whose influence in Africa has been [declining](#) following the end of Operation Barkhane and diplomatic rifts with several Francophone Sahel countries. The OIF remains one of the few platforms where French diplomacy can still engage with African leaders and maintain its influence. It is also a strategic platform for Canada, which is represented in the OIF at both the federal level and by four provinces: Quebec, New Brunswick, Ontario, and Nova Scotia. OIF is also a strategic organisation for African

countries, representing the largest contingent of member countries with 29 African nations in the OIF, including some that are [not Francophone](#), such as Angola and Ghana, underscoring the institution's attractiveness.

Beyond soft power, the political role of OIF

The summits of the Francophonie, held every two years, offer a unique platform that brings together numerous world leaders to tackle regional and international issues, sometimes highlighting political tensions.

Within the Francophonie, three Sahel states—Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso—have recently been [suspended](#) from the OIF due to human rights violations. This year, President Emmanuel Macron had also [hoped](#) the OIF would serve as "a space for mediation" to resolve political disputes between the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda.

Membership in the OIF also carries political significance. Algeria, despite being a major Francophone country, is still not part of the OIF due to long-standing tensions with France. Israel, even though it has half a million Francophone speakers (5% of the population), is not a member of the OIF due to tumultuous relations with a significant portion of Francophone Africa. During this year's summit in France, several leaders [condemned](#) Israel's policy and military intervention in Gaza, and a joint declaration was published where the OIF called for a [ceasefire](#) in Lebanon.

Lastly, European countries bordering France (Italy, Spain, Portugal, Germany, England), where a [significant part](#) of the population speaks French, do not participate in the OIF due to international rivalries in the quest for cultural influence. For some European countries, the OIF is still too closely identified as a solely French political association.

Indo-Pacific Component

Although French is a minority language in the Indo-Pacific region, it holds an important position. It is notably a *lingua franca* in the southwest of the Indian Ocean in Réunion island, Seychelles, Madagascar, Comoros, Mauritius, and Djibouti. In the Pacific, French is an official language in Wallis and Futuna, New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and Vanuatu.

In Asia, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam are members of the OIF for historical reasons as former French colonies. Additionally, the Indian territory of [Pondicherry](#), where the French language holds an official status, joined the Parliamentary Assembly of the Francophonie in 2023. As the next summit will be held in [Cambodia in 2026](#), contributing to the promotion of Francophonie in the Asia-Pacific region, 29 years after the last summit held in this area in Hanoi in 1997, a state like Singapore should take an interest in this organisation and even apply for observer status, as an ASEAN country like [Thailand](#) did in the past.

Avenues for Singapore

The French language is indeed very dynamic in Singapore. Over [10,000 people](#) are learning French, making it one of the most studied foreign languages in Singapore outside the four official languages. Additionally, the Francophone expatriate community in the city-state is estimated to be around 30,000 people. Several schools teach French (Alliance Française, Canadian international school, Swiss school, International French school), and three French universities have campuses (EDHEC, ESSEC, INSEAD).

Beyond language and culture implantation, the Francophone world represents a space for economic and scientific exchanges where Singapore could carve out a role. For example, one of the themes discussed at the Paris summit was [artificial intelligence](#), a field in which Singapore is a pioneer. An engagement with the OIF could help Singapore strengthen its diplomatic ties with Francophone countries, particularly in Africa, a continent where Singapore has [had a growing and productive presence](#) over the past decade, with Singaporean companies actively seeking business opportunities.

Applying for an observer's statute at the OIF could enrich Singapore's international visibility and provide new economic perspective.

Amis Singapouriens, au travail!

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